A WOMAN MARTYR

Title: A Woman Martyr

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Release Date: December 26, 2012 [eBook #41711]

Language: English

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"She turned a white set face upon her self-elected escort." A Woman Martyr. Page 10.

A WOMAN MARTYR

BY
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LONDON
WARD, LOCK AND CO. LIMITED
NEW YORK AND MELBOURNE
1903

Contents

CHAPTER I

A sharp shower pattering on the foliage of the sycamores and elms was scattering the equestrians in the Row. Fair girls urged their hacks into a canter and trotted swiftly homewards. Other riders, glancing upwards, and deciding that the clouds had done their worst, drew up under the trees. Among these was a slight, graceful girl in a well-fitting habit with a pale, classic face, and the somewhat Venetian combination of dark brown eyes and red-gold hair. With a slight wave of her whip to her groom–who halted obediently under a neighbouring tree–she reined in her slender-limbed bay mare under a horse-chestnut tree whose shelter was still undemanded.

There she sat still in her saddle, with a slight frown–biting her lip–as she asked herself again and again, "Did he see me? Has he ridden out of the park?"

When she cantered along just as the shower began, she fancied she recognised an admirer she had believed to be far away, walking his horse in the same

direction as herself. This was Lord Vansittart–a man who had several times repeated his offer of marriage–an offer she did not refuse because he had not stirred her heart–for she loved him, and passionately–but for other reasons. Although it had caused her bitter pain, she had at least been determined enough in her "No" to send him off, in dudgeon, to seek forgetfulness in other climes.

And now he had appeared again!

Her first feeling had been dismay, mingled with involuntary ecstacy which startled her. Then came a wild, almost uncontrollable impulse just to speak to him–to touch his hand, to look into those love laden eyes once more–only once more!

She gazed furtively here and there, divided between the hope and fear that her longing would be sated–she would meet him. Riders passed and repassed. The little crowds gathered, thickened, dispersed. She was disappointedly telling herself that as the shower had temporarily subsided she ought to be returning home, when her heart gave a leap. A rider who was trotting towards her was the man–the man strongly if slightly built, handsome, fair, if stern–who alone among men had conquered that heart, who, although despair had driven her to hold her own against him, was her master.

It was all over–fate had decided–they two must once more meet! There was no escape.

He rode up. She blanched, but looked him steadily in the face. He gazed sadly, beseechingly, yet with that imperious compelling glance which had so often made her quail–into those beautiful brown eyes.

"We meet again, you see," he said, in a harsh, strained voice. He felt on the rack–to him, wildly panting, yearning to take her in his arms after weary, maddening months of longing, that gulf between them seemed a very hell.

"So it seems," she said, with a pitiful attempt at a laugh. "I thought you were in Kamschatka, or Bombay–or anywhere!"

"I have come back," he returned, lamely, mechanically accompanying her as she rode out of shelter–she would not, could not, stay there and bandy words with him! "I felt–I must know–the worst!"

Involuntarily she reined in, and so suddenly that she startled her steed, and it was some moments before the mare's nerves were calmed. Then she turned a white, set face upon her self-elected escort.

"What do you mean, Lord Vansittart?" she asked scornfully, and her eyes flashed.

"You–know," he hoarsely said. "I am not so utterly vain as to think that where I have failed, other and–and–more attractive fellows may not succeed!"

"You know, or ought to know, that what you are saying is absurd!" she faltered. What had she thought, feared? She hardly knew, she only felt a tremen-

dous relief. Thank Heaven, even had she been secretly vowed to the cloister, her conduct since their parting could not have borne closer scrutiny! "You must remember–what I said–I never, never, intend to marry–anyone. I shall never, never, change my mind–about *that*!"

He said nothing; but glanced at her–a curious glance. A puzzle to him since he first had felt encouraged to believe from symptoms which only a watchful, anxious lover would perceive, that she involuntarily, perhaps even unconsciously, loved him–she had remained an insoluble problem during the long days of their separation when he pondered on the subject the slow, lagging hours through–and, now again, she bid fair to be as great a problem as ever. For he felt, he knew, that her reception of him–her pallor, the strange look in her eyes and the curious pitch of her voice–why, the veriest fool alive would not have mistaken her demeanour or one of its details for indifference!

"I–I think you mistake yourself," he began slowly, revolving certain ideas which he had jotted down at intervals for his future guidance, in his mind. "I suppose you do not believe in marriage. You have seen its failure! Is that it?"

"Perhaps," she said. "I really can't tell, myself. All I know is, that I am firmly resolved not to marry–any one!" She spoke doggedly, with almost a childish obstinacy.

"But–you do not bar friendship?" he said, earnestly, appealingly. "Supposing some one of the unfortunate men you determine to have nothing to do with were to wish to devote his whole life and energies to you, secretly, but entirely–with the absolute devotion of a would-be anchorite or martyr–what then? You would not refuse to give the poor devil a chance? I mean, to give him something in return; if friendship were too much to expect, tolerance, pity, a look now and then, or a word, you would allow him to play your faithful knight, of course in strict secrecy, from afar, unsuspected by the world?"

A faint colour suffused her lovely face. She looked at him, furtively. "Some people may care for that sort of thing–I don't!" she bluntly said. "Oh, Lord Vansittart! why will you not, can you not, see and understand that all I want of–of–everyone is to be let alone? I have my own ideas of what my life should be; surely any one professing interest in me ought to respect them!"

"I respect your every thought," he eagerly, if somewhat perplexedly returned. "Only–I should like thoroughly to understand the kind of life you wish to lead. Because–well, I will not beat about the bush. Joan! you know I love you! You are my very life! And if I cannot be nearer than I am now, my only happiness and motive for living must be to serve you in some way, to see you, speak to you, help you, be your very slave—-"

Just as his voice was most impassioned his appeal was interrupted. An elderly gentleman rode swiftly up and tapped him on the arm.

"Why, Vansittart! can I believe my eyes?" he exclaimed, somewhat breathlessly. "Joan, where has he dropped from?"

It was Sir Thomas Thorne, the wealthy uncle who had adopted Joan, his late brother's only child, at her mother's death a few years previously. The admired beauty, whose only flaw seemed to be her adamantine pose in regard to her many suitors, was known to be sole heiress of the wealthy baronet and his wife, who were not only childless, but curiously devoid of near relations.

"From Paris, Sir Thomas," he replied, as easily as he could. Then he gave a brief account of his wanderings. He seemed to have roamed and ranged over the earth, prowling about for some interest, which evaded him from Dan to Beersheba. Sir Thomas listened with a peculiar twist of his thin, fine lips and a curious twinkle in his shrewd, handsome old eyes.

"Come in to lunch," he genially, if abruptly, proposed, as they left the park. "My lady will be delighted to see you–you are one of her particular favourites."

What could Vansittart do but accept? With many deprecatory glances at Joan–which, as she rode on looking straight before her, she either did not, or would not see,–he accompanied uncle and niece through the pale sunshine which now bathed the wet streets and shone upon the dripping bushes and bright green foliage of the trees, to the door of Sir Thomas' tastefully beflowered mansion in one of the largest West-end squares.

Here, before the groom had had time to wait upon his mistress, he was off his horse, and at her stirrup.

"Forgive me," he pleaded, as she eluded his help and sprang lightly down. "I could not resist the temptation!"

Had she heard him? She had marched on into the house. "She will not appear at luncheon," he told himself bitterly, as he accompanied the very evidently friendly Sir Thomas up the steps and through the hall. "She will make some plausible excuse to avoid me, as she has always done, worse luck!"

CHAPTER II

But for once Lord Vansittart's good star seemed in the ascendant. Joan was seated at the end of the long table in the big, finely furnished diningroom, where luncheon was already being handed round by the men in Sir Thomas' fawn-and-silver livery to some ladies and a man or two who had dropped in and been in-

vited to stay by Lady Thorne. As the kindly, middle-aged, motherly-looking lady welcomed him with what he felt to be pleasurable astonishment, he felt less sickened by the mingled scent of savoury entrées and the pines, forced strawberries and rich rose blooms that decorated the luncheon-table in profusion. Perhaps–she seemed to smile upon him, almost to sympathize, indeed, as Sir Thomas had made no secret of doing some months previously–his hostess might stand his friend in his hitherto dismally unsuccessful wooing.

While he accepted a vacant place on her right hand, and chatted about his travels, his ear was pitched to hear what Joan was talking so brightly about to Lady Mound and her daughters at the other end of the table. He lost the thread of Lady Thorne's remarks, until she startled him agreeably by asking him whether they would meet him that afternoon at the concert at Dulwich House.

"Are you–is Miss Thorne–going?" he stammered. "I–of course I only arrived last night, but Lady Dulwich is such an old friend, I know I should be quite the *bien-venu*!"

"Joan, you are coming with me to Lady Dulwich's this afternoon, of course?" asked her aunt, when there was a lull in the conversation. "No? Why not?"

"I am riding to Crouch Hill to see poor Nana," she said, and the determined tones of her resonant young voice seemed to strike upon Vansittart's hot, perturbedly beating heart. "I know it is not a month yet since I went last–my uncle is an autocrat, as I daresay you know, Lady Mound! He only allows me to see my poor old nurse once a month! But I had a letter from her, she is worse than usual. I meant to have told you, auntie, but you were busy, and I thought it did not matter."

"It matters very much, unless you drive, for I cannot accompany you this afternoon," said her uncle, raising his voice so that his wife could hear. "Joan can drive with her maid, my dear." He was well aware that Joan detested driving accompanied by her maid. "You can postpone it till to-morrow? I could not go with you then, Joan, I have to attend a meeting. Perhaps Vansittart will spare time to escort you? You are not deep in engagements yet I expect, my boy, are you?"

"I should be only too pleased, if Miss Thorne will accept my services, as she has done on occasion in the hunting-field," he said, with an effort not to betray his violent delight at such an opportunity to plead his cause.

"London is not the country, Lord Vansittart, thanks," said Joan, calmly; although she had suddenly paled to lividity with dread, with the indescribable fear she felt of self betrayal to this man who loved her. "I shall be perfectly safe, alone. One only meets a few wagons and carts along the highroads."

There was a slightly displeased expostulation from her uncle, a deprecatory

word or two in favour of Vansittart as her squire on the part of Lady Thorne; and Joan, desperate, capitulated, feeling unequal to being focussed by all the pairs of eyes around the table. She went upstairs to change her habit and hat for one more suited to the muddy suburban roads, and presently found herself trotting northwards on her spirited grey mare Nora, Vansittart at her side.

She had chosen Nora, she coldly remarked–she meant to be an icicle to Vansittart, it was her only chance–because she "wanted a good gallop," and Nora had not been out that day. And as soon as the young mare had frisked and capered through the suburbs in a manner which made Vansittart somewhat anxious, and effectually prevented conversation, she and her mistress bounded off in a canter, and literally tore along the soft roads, startling the few pedestrians and drivers of tradesmen's carts, Lord Vansittart's horse galloping after, and the groom scampering in the rear to keep in sight of the pair. Joan only slackened speed for more than a few moments when she saw the row of cottages where old Mrs. Todd lived, at the foot of the wide sloping road that wound downhill.

"There is the cottage," she said, pointing with her whip. "The poor old soul who lives in it loves me best in the world, and I think I return it with interest! She was my nurse when I was a child, helped my mother nurse my father through his long illness, then nursed her to her death, and only left me because she felt too helpless to be of any use!"

"And now you make her life happy by seeing her now and then," he said, gazing passionately at the pure, white, girlish profile under the felt hat.

"She can hardly be happy–doubled up with rheumatism, lonely, poor–it is ridiculous to suggest such a thing!" she said, disgustedly–then, touching Nora's flank lightly with her heel, she rode off; he followed, springing down to assist her to alight. But she frowned at him.

"You had better hold her, please," she suggested. "Where is that groom of mine? Oh, there he is! I shall be quite half an hour. You might inspect the neighbourhood."

"Thanks for the suggestion, perhaps I shall!" he good humouredly returned, with a scrutinizing glance at a stern old face framed by the cottage window panes, which disappeared as he looked; and as Joan slipped nonchalantly off her panting steed and went within, congratulating herself upon having furnished herself with a good chance of losing or evading him and returning alone, he decided to remain well out of sight of the cottage, but only where he could keep his eye on the groom and the horses.

"Well, Nana, here I am, you see," said Joan, entering and embracing the worn old crone who stood leaning on her stick in the middle of the kitchen and parlour combined. It was a dark, low room, filled with some old-fashioned furniture–remnants of Joan's vicarage home. A big old arm-chair stood by the

fireplace, where there was a bright little fire, although in a few weeks it would be midsummer. "Sit down at once!" She led her gently back to her chair. "Poor old dear! You have been bad this time, haven't you? You mustn't spare the doctor–send his bill to me! You got that chicken panada and jelly? That's right! I've brought some money for little things—-"

"Never mind money, dearie! but tell me who's the gentleman?" said the old woman, whose large, shining eyes shone living in her emaciated, deathly face–shading her eyes with her skinny, clawlike hand, and gazing anxiously at Joan, who had drawn a low folding chair near and was seated opposite the fire. "I like his face, that I do! I saw him as you got down from your horse."

"It is Lord Vansittart," said Joan, frowning slightly.

The old woman bent forward, and scrutinized her nursling's expressive features.

"You like him?" she suddenly asked. "Oh, if you do, may the Lord be praised!"

Joan gave a bitter, hopeless laugh.

"What good would it do me if I did?" she mournfully said.

"What good?" The aged crone leant forward and clasped Joan's gauntleted wrists with her dark, clawlike hands. "Oh, my blessed darlint! If you could only be married–to a real gentleman like him–and would forget all about that business, and that wretched chap, I should die happy, that I should! You have forgot him, haven't you, dearie?"

Mrs. Todd gazed anxiously at Joan's gloomy, miserable, yet most beautiful eyes. There was a far away look–a look of mingled dread and aversion, as if beyond all, she could see some loathsome, terrible object.

"Forget the curse of my life?" she bitterly exclaimed. "For, while I do not know where he is, if he is alive or dead, my life is accursed.... How dare I–love–care for–any good man, saddle any one's life with my miserable folly, confess to any honest person my–my–association with *him*? Why, I blush and groan and grovel and tear my hair when I think of it, and if my uncle knew– Heavens! he might curse me and turn me out of doors and leave me to starve! He does not love me as if I were his own child, I know that–how can he when he was at daggers drawn with my father all those years? And auntie, kind though she is, she is only his wife–she is good to me because he wishes her to be! They are only pleased with me because I please in society–people like me, like my looks–if they knew–if they knew–oh! my God!"

She clasped her hands over her face, and writhed. The old woman's features worked, but her brilliant, unearthly eyes were riveted firmly on her darling.

"You were once a great fool, dearie! But don't 'ee be a fool now, never no more," she said, sonorously, solemnly. "There was summat you once used to say,

poetry, when you was home from school–it did go right down into my heart like a bullet dropped into a well–summat like 'a dead past oughter bury its dead.' Can your uncle, or your aunt, or this lord who loves you, or you, or me, or the finest parson or king or pope or anything or body in this world, bring back one single blessed minnit, let alone hours or days? That's where common sense comes in, as your dear dead par used to say to me often and often! No, you can't bring it back, nor he can't! It's dead! He's dead–that brute–and if he ain't dead to you, he can't worry or annoy you, bein' in prison if he's alive, as a fellow of his sort is safe as sure to be—-"

"Hush! For Heaven's sake, Nana, don't talk like that!" Joan trembled, and glanced a despairing, furtive glance out of the window–above the pots of arums, and prickly cactus, and geranium cuttings, where the long, attenuated tendrils of the "mother of thousands" in the wire basket dangled in the draught. Much and often as she thought of her past, that secret past which only this faithful old soul really knew the facts of, she felt as if she could not bear it put into words.

"Who's to hear? The girl's out!" exclaimed the old woman, who was roused, excited. Her nursling's troubles, the obstacles to her becoming a great lady, were to her the worst trials of her suffering, lonely life.

"I tell you this, dearie, if you won't have anything to do with that splendid lord who loves you, and you say you like, I shall think you hanker after *him*–that viper who ain't fit to live, let alone to black that noble gentleman's boots! What–you don't? Then what should stand between you and him as loves you? That–that nonsense of that fellow's? What do it matter if he's dead, or in prison? It's four years ago, ain't it? If you are so partickler, you could wait another three, and then he wouldn't have any sort of claim upon ye, if he has any now, which I doubt! He was humbuggin' of you, dearie! I'm not to talk about it? I must! I can't die happy till I know ye're safe with a good man as'll take care of ye, my pretty, and that's a fact. And I am sick and tired of all these aches and pains, it's such a weary world! Now, my dearie, when he asks ye to be his'n, and he'll do it, too–ah! I can see he's done it a'ready–just you listen to him. Be engaged as they call it, secret-like, for a time. Then don't go and tell him about all that which is dead and done with–never tell living soul a word about *that*! But let him think it's one of the whimsies beauties like you are supposed to have. Make him wait! And then–find out what's become of *him*! I'll help ye! I'll help ye!"

"You–you have heard–from–of him!" gasped Joan, wildly. "Nana! When! How?"

"Gawd is my witness, I've never set eyes on him, the vagabond, since ye showed him to me that day when he came with us in the fields, five year ago, when you was at school, and your poor mar was nearin' her end," she said, solemnly. "Letters? Not likely! You've had a letter from 'im? No, I knew you

couldn't 'ave had. Them convicts–hush? All right, then! If you'll listen to me, I'll hush and welcome."

When Joan rose to go a few minutes later, her thoughts were in a frantic whirl, but there was a gleam of hope shining upon those dismal memories which stood between her and happiness.

Still she glanced round as she issued from the cottage, hoping that her escort would not be in sight, and they would happen to miss each other. She wanted time to think, to ponder over new possibilities suggested by her old nurse's words, possibilities which seemed to her, numbed by her long battle royal to overcome her passion for Vansittart, too magnificent ever to become probable. And she mounted, and after a pretence of waiting about for him as they walked their horses slowly uphill, she said to her groom, "We had better go on, Simms," and quickening her pace, was presently trotting homewards.

But Vansittart was calmly awaiting them at the cross roads, and reined round and accompanied her as a matter of course. She gave him a desperate glance as their eyes met, and it caused him to change his tactics. He had meditated an onslaught upon her emotions during their homeward ride. "It will keep," he sagely told himself, and after an uneventful canter and a little ordinary small talk he left her at her door without even an allusion to a next meeting.

CHAPTER III

She went to her room somewhat heavy-hearted. She was no woman of the world, and was taken aback by his unexpected change of manner. Her maid Julie was busy with a charming *toilette de bal* just arrived from Paris: a gauzy robe over satin, richly sewn with flowers and foliage made of tiny seed pearls.

"This will suit mademoiselle *a merveille*," exclaimed the little Frenchwoman. "And with that pearl *garniture*—-"

"I shall not go out to-night," she said, with a disgusted glance at the finery which seemed such hollow mockery. And as soon as she had changed her habit for a tea-gown, she locked herself in her boudoir, and stormily pacing the room, asked herself what this sudden chill in her lover meant.

"I have gone too far–I have been too cold–I have lost him!" she told herself, wildly. "I cannot bear it! While there was the faintest of faint hope left–that I might be with him some day–I could bear–everything! But to see him look at

me as if I were anybody, speak as if he did not care what became of me–no, no, I should soon go mad!"

Flinging herself prone on her sofa, she clasped her throbbing head in both hands, and asked herself passionately what could be done.

"I cannot, must not, lower myself by writing to him–and then, if he was the same again, I could not take advantage of it! Was ever poor wretched girl in such a miserable position as I am?"

All seemed hopeless, gloomy, dark, until a sudden thought came like a brilliant flash of light.

"He may be there, he will be there, to-night! Of course, he is a friend of the Duchess," she told herself. "That is what it meant! He knew we should meet there! He was teasing me–trying me!"

The suggestions comforted her as she rang, told Julie she had changed her mind, and would go to the ball; and she subsequently dined with her uncle and aunt, who seemed in exceedingly good spirits. (Sir Thomas' pet project was that Lord Vansittart should marry Joan, and he augured well from his appearance at this juncture, and went through the ceremony of dressing with a certain amount of patience.) When she stood before her long glass, with all the electric lights switched on, and saw herself in her gleaming white and shining pearls, tall, queenly, fair, with the glistening wreaths of golden hair crowning her small head, and her lustrous brown eyes alive with that peculiar, unfathomable expression which had gained her the epithet "sphinx-like" more than once when she was discussed as the Beauty who meant to flout every Beast that approached her, and did–she felt comforted. Only when she was shut into the carriage, her aunt prattling platitudes, and the flickering street lamps flashing stray gleams into the dimly-lit vehicle as they drove along, was she seized with a sudden panic.

"I feel as if–if he does not come–I shall break down, utterly–I shall not be able to bear my life any more!" she told herself, despondently. "I shall end it all–no one will care! There is only old Nana, who is barely alive, and she would follow me at once!"

The Duke of Arran was a man of ideas–and he lived to carry them out. The balls and entertainments at Arran House were always unique. That evening was no exception. As Joan alighted, and passing through the hall accompanied Lady Thorne through the vestibule and up the wide staircase, even she felt transient admiration. White and gold everywhere was the rule to-night at Arran House, where the famous marble staircase had been brought from an old Venetian palazzo. This evening's decorations were carried out in gold-yellow; after the gardens and houses had been denuded of gold and white flowers to the disgust of the ducal gardeners, the London florists had been commissioned to supply the banks and wreaths and festoons of gold and white blossoms which everywhere

met the eye, perfumed the atmosphere, and made a fitting background for the large staff of tall, handsome powdered men-servants in black velvet and satin liveries, which was augmented to-night into a very regiment.

One sickening glance round the magnificent ballroom, full of delicately-beautiful toilettes, bright with flowers, lights, and laughter, gay with the music of a well-known band–told her Vansittart was not there. However, she maintained her composure–he might yet come–and with her usual chilly indifference allowed her few privileged friends to inscribe their initials on her tiny tablet. New partners she declined, with the plea of fatigue. But it was weary work! She was just telling herself, fiercely, that she could bear no more; she was seeking Lady Thorne to implore a retreat, when she came upon Vansittart talking pleasantly to her aunt in a cool corner.

"I was waiting for you," he said, looking into her eyes and reading in them that which fired his blood. "You will give me this dance?"

"Yes," she said, and she accompanied him, meek, silent, subdued, and allowing him to encircle her slight waist with a firm, proprietory clasp, glided round and round to the dreamy melody of the "Bienaimée" valse. Once before, when she had first longed for his love, and felt the throes of this overwhelming life-passion, they had danced together to that swaying, suggestive melody. He remembered it–remembered how to feel her slight form almost in his embrace had urged him into a reckless avowal of a love which was promptly rejected. He set his teeth. He was at a white heat again–and she–? By some subtle sense he believed his moment had come.

"I must speak to you," he hoarsely said, as they halted, Joan white and breathless with emotion. "May I?"

She looked up into his eyes, and at the intensity of the appealing, passionate abandonment to his will in that gaze, he thrilled with triumph.

"We will go into the Duchess's boudoir, I know we may," he said, feeling a little giddy as he escorted her along a corridor and through the drawing-rooms. The boudoir was empty–one or two couples only were seated in the adjacent anteroom, he saw at a glance they were well occupied with their own flirtations. He closed the door, drew the embroidered satin portiére across–they were alone in the dimly-lighted room.

He turned to her as she stood gazing at him, pale, fascinated. He took her hands. "Joan!" he said–then, as he felt her passion, he simply drew her into his arms, and stooping, kissed her lips–a long, passionate kiss.

To feel his lips on hers was ecstacy to her–for a few moments she forgot all–it was like heaven before its time. Then she feebly pushed him away, and gave a low moan.

"Oh! what have I done?" she wailed, and she glanced about like a hunted

creature. "How could you?"

"You love me! What is to keep us asunder?" he hoarsely cried. As she sank shuddering, gasping, into a chair, he fell at her knees, and embraced them. "I am the happiest man on earth! For your uncle will approve, and you–you, Joan! All that was wanted was your love to make you my dear–wife!"

"Wife!" She sank back and groaned. "I shall never be any man's wife!" she said. "Why? Because I do not want to be! That is all! Because I never shall and will be!"

Was she crazy? He rose, slowly, and contemplated her. No! There were anguish and suffering in the lines about her mouth and eyes–in those lustrous, strained brown orbs–but no insanity.

"We must talk it all over. I must–I mean, I may see you to-morrow, may I not?" he gently said, drawing a chair near, and seating himself between her and the door, he besought at least one interview, so that they should "understand each other." He had but just obtained a reluctant consent to a *tête-à-tête* on the morrow, when the door suddenly opened, a gay young voice cried, "surely there can't be any one in here!" and a bright face peeped round the curtain and at once disappeared.

"Lady Violet!" exclaimed Joan, starting up. "She has seen us!"

"And if she has?" asked her lover, mystified by her terror at having been discovered alone with him by the Duke's eldest daughter. Still, with the promise of an elucidatory interview, he obeyed her wishes, and left her to return to the ballroom without his escort.

She did not linger: she almost fled, scared, from the boudoir through the drawing-rooms, into the corridor. Which way led to the ballroom? Hesitating, glancing right and left, she saw one of the picturesque black-clad servitors coming towards her. She would ask him.

As he advanced, the man's face riveted her attention. Not because of its wax mask-like regularity, and the intent, glittering stare of the black eyes which fixed themselves boldly upon her own; but because the countenance was singularly like one which haunted her memory–waking and sleeping–the hideous ghost of her foolish past.

"Heavens–how terribly like him!" she murmured to herself, unconsciously, involuntarily shrinking back against the wall as he came near.

Like! As the man came up, and halted, she gave a strangled cry like the pitiful dying wail of a poor hare.

"I see, you recognize me," he said, in a low voice, with a bitter little smile. "Don't be alarmed! I am not going to claim you publicly, here, to-night. But if you do not want me to call and send in my credentials at your uncle's house, you will meet me to-morrow at the old place, in the evening. I shall be there at eight,

and will wait till you come. Do you understand?"

"Yes," she whispered. As he passed on and opening a baize door, disappeared, she stood gazing after him as if his words had been a sword-thrust, and she was a dead woman.

CHAPTER IV

Joan stood in the corridor, white, hardly breathing, as if turned to stone, her beautiful eyes riveted on the spot where the man who was once her lover had disappeared.

"Victor!" she thought, as her whole being seemed to writhe in an agony of despair. "Victor–and in the duke's livery–am I mad?"

She gave a wild laugh, and the sudden sound startled her into sanity. Numbness had followed the shock of seeing the man living, in the flesh, whom she had hoped against hope was dead. Now she seemed to come to life again. She clenched her nails into her gloved hands so vehemently that the fine kid was rent. She suppressed her almost ungovernable desire to groan out her misery, and as she set her teeth and closed her eyes to realize the situation and deal with it, she seemed to see her soul naked within her, and it was ablaze with one dominating passion alone–love for Vansittart.

"I am all his," she slowly told herself. "How I have become so–I never wished it–Nature, fate, the Creator who made us, alone, know. But I am his, he is my lord and master, and whatever comes between me and him must be trodden under foot!"

Her whole being, violently shocked and almost outraged by the sudden blow, the reappearance of the unscrupulous man who had dared to annex her fair young girlhood and chain it to his fouled existence, rose and asserted itself in a strong, overpowering will–to belong to Vansittart, its rightful owner by legitimate conquest, against all and every obstacle. The feeling was so huge, so powerful, she felt as a very feather in its grasp: she was awed by it, but strengthened.

"I will, I must be his, and I shall be!" she told herself, feeling as if the words had uttered themselves prophetically, by some mysterious agency, within her soul. And she quietly returned to the ballroom, calmed; for she was as an almost automaton, swayed by some obsessive spirit which had asserted itself when she

was half wild with despair.

Entering the ballroom, she saw Vansittart, pale, his eyes laden with emotion, watching for her just within the doorway. The heat, the buzz, the patter of feet upon the parquet–they were dancing a cotillon–the braying of the band, took her aback in her strained, nervous state for a moment. Then she recovered herself and went up to him.

"Take me to auntie," she said, smiling up at him. "But first, one word! Do I look ill? I feel so–I am subject to horrid neuralgia, and it has just begun. I am distracted with pain! I shall be in bed all day to-morrow, I am sure! Put off coming till the day after, won't you?"

Was it a dream, an illusion–her confiding, tender manner–that sweet appealing look in those adored, beautiful eyes? Vansittart felt suddenly weak and tremulous as he drew her hand within his arm. She loved him! He was certain of it! She loved him! She had not known it till he dared all in that passionate kiss. He vaguely felt himself the Pygmalion who had awakened another Galatea.

"My darling, I am afraid it is my fault," he murmured in her ear, as he conveyed her towards the corner where Lady Thorne sat patiently listening to the prattle of the surrounding dowagers, and trying not to wish the evening at an end. "How dear of you to to say 'No!' Of course I will postpone coming. But I may call and enquire? No? Very well! You have only to command me, my queen, my adored!"

Could it be real, that faint pressure of his arm, as he looked fondly down upon that lovely little golden head? Vansittart almost lost his grip upon himself, almost forgot to act the mere amiable cavalier, as he accompanied Joan and her inwardly relieved and delighted aunt to the cooler regions of the ducal establishment, and after vainly pressing them to take some refreshment, found their carriage. As he stood bareheaded under the awning after they had driven off, he glanced up at the sky–it had been raining and now a wreath of cloud had parted to disclose a misty moon–and a vague but real remorse that he had not kept up with the noble truths he had learned at his dead mother's knee in those days which seemed a century or more ago brought the moisture to his happy eyes. "God forgive me, I do not deserve her!" was the honest prayer which went up from his overladen heart as he turned, somewhat giddily, and tried to walk into the ducal mansion without the unsteadiness which might lead some of those priggish menservants to imagine he had dined rather too well than wisely. "But, if I only can succeed in making her my own, her life shall be a royal one!"

Would he have felt so triumphantly joyful if he could have seen his beloved, after they parted?

Arrived at home, Joan dismissed her maid as soon as she could get rid of her without exciting any suspicion, and spent a night's vigil in facing the situation.

She remembered her innocent, ignorant schooldays–when, infected by the foolish talk of frivolous elder girls–they were mostly daughters of rich parents, Joan's godmother paid for the education which could not be afforded by the poor clergyman and his invalid wife–she was flattered by the admiring gaze of a handsome young man who watched her in church each Sunday from his seat in a neighbouring pew. Schoolgirl talk of him led to chance glances of hers in response. Then came a note artfully dropped by him and picked up by a school friend, delighted to feel herself one of the *dramatis personæ* in a living loveplay. This and ensuing love-letters proved the young man a clever scribe. He represented himself as a member of a distinguished family, banished from home on account of his political opinions. The secret correspondence continued; then, with the assistance of a bribed housemaid whose mental pabulum was low class novelettes with impossible illustrations of seven feet high countesses and their elongated curly-haired lovers, there were brief, passionate meetings. When Joan was just recovering from her grief at her father's recent death, the climax came. Her mother died–her lawyers sent for her. When she returned to school, it was with the knowledge that the rich uncle intended to take her from thence, why and for what she did not know; that her godmother acknowledged his right to deal with her future, and that her days in C—- were numbered.

With what agony and humiliation she remembered that next wildly emotional meeting with the man she fancied she loved–his passionate pleading that she would be his–her reluctant consent–their meeting in town a few weeks later when she had boldly fled from school to her old nurse in the little suburban house where she let lodgings, and their marriage before the Registrar, to attain which Victor Mercier had falsely stated her age, and their parting immediately after! She went to her uncle somewhat in disgrace because of her precipitate flight from school. But her beauty and the pathos of her orphanhood, also a secret remorse on his part for his hardheartedness to her dead parents, induced him to consider it a girlish freak alone, and to ignore it as such.

She had hardly become settled in her new, luxurious home when the blow fell which at first seemed to shatter her whole life at once and for ever. She read in a daily paper of a discovered fraud in the branch office at C—- of a London house, and of the flight and disappearance of the manager, Victor Mercier.

To recall those succeeding days and weeks of secret anguish, fear, dread and sickening horror, made her shiver even now. In her desperation she had confided in her old nurse. "But for her, I should have gone mad!" she told herself, with a shudder.

"You will never see him again, my pretty; all you have to do is to forget the brute!" was the burden of Nurse Todd's song of consolation. "Such as him daren't ever show his face at Sir Thomas'! Your husbin'? The law 'ud soon rid

ye of a husbin' of his sort! But there won't be no call for that! He's as dead as a doornail in this country–and, you're not likely ever to see him again!"

And now he had come to life, and in the Duke's livery!

"He was one of the auxiliaries, of course!" Joan told herself. "But how does he dare to be here? If only I had the courage to tell Uncle–all! I believe he might forgive me. But I could never face Vansittart again–if he knew! It would be giving up his love, and that–that I will not do."

No, she must endure her second martyrdom in secret, as she endured the first. There was nothing else to be done. And, she must become that most subtle of all actresses–the actress in real life.

Morning came, and she declared herself too unwell with an attack of neuralgia to rise. Her aunt came up and petted her, and she was left in a darkened room until evening when she sat up for a little.

"You need not stay in to-night, Julie," she told her maid, a devoted, if somewhat frivolous girl–her uncle and aunt, satisfied she was better, had gone out to a dinner whither she should rightly have accompanied them. "Tell them not to disturb me unless I ring. I shall go to bed directly and get a long sleep." Julie left her, half reluctant, half eager, for her evening out–lying cosily on a soft sofa, the last new novel from the library open in her hands.

As soon as she considered that those among the servants who indulged in surreptitious outings were clear of the premises, and the supper bell had summoned the others to the favourite meal of the day, she rose, dressed herself in a short cycling costume and a long cloak, tied a veil over her smallest, plainest hat, took a latchkey she had once laughingly stolen from her uncle, but had never yet used, and after locking her door and pocketing the key, crept quietly downstairs, crossed the deserted hall, and shut herself out into the warm, cloudy night.

CHAPTER V

The big mansion of which she was the pampered, cherished darling, lay solemn, pompous, solid, dark, behind her. Before her, the pavement, wet after a summer shower, shone in the lamplight. Dark, waving shadows against the driving clouds, with their fitful patches of moonlit sky, were the trees in the enclosure, dangled by the wind. She hurried along–turning down the first by-street she came to–and emerging at its end into one of the principal thoroughfares, she

hailed a crawling hansom.

"Regent's Park, Clarence Gate," she said, in a muffled voice, as she sprang lightly in.

To be dashing along the lighted streets to meet the absconded swindler who had dared to take advantage of her girlish folly to make her his wife by law, was delirious work. Cowering back in the corner of the hansom, she gazed with sickened misery at the gay shop-windows, at the crowded omnibuses, at the cheery passengers who carelessly stepped along the pavement, looking as if all life were matter-of-fact, plain sailing, "above-board." A hundred shrill voices seemed clamouring in her ears–"turn back–turn back! Face the worst, but be honest!" She had almost flung up her arm and, opening the trap, bid the driver return, when the memory of Vansittart–of his love–of his kiss–came surging upon her with redoubled force.

"If I am a coward, I shall lose him!" cried her whole nature, fiercely. No! She must battle through: she must circumvent her enemy–the enemy to her love, and Vansittart's.

But how?

"I will dare him," was her instinct. "I will tell him to claim me if he can!" But that was the madness of passion. Reason bade her use other means.

"One must fight a man with his own weapons," she told herself, as the hansom dashed along Gloucester Place, and she knew her time was short. It was now nearer nine than eight–she had seen that by an illuminated clock over a shop. *He* was to be at their trysting-place of old, when she had lodged with her old nurse in a street in Camden Town, at eight. "He lied to me from the first moment to the last. I must lie to him. I will pretend I have cared for him! It will put him off his guard," she thought, as, with a double fee to the cabman, who said "thank-ye, miss," with odious familiarity, she scurried away in the darkness, and crossing the wet road, turned up that which led to the Inner Circle.

There was no chance of forgetting the spot where they two had last met! As she neared it, a slim, dark figure stepped out from the shadow.

"My wife," he exclaimed, in emotional tones. He would have embraced her, but she slipped away and leant up against the paling.

"You can call me that–after leaving me all these years–not knowing whether you were alive or dead," she panted hoarsely. Under any circumstances emotion was natural, so she made no effort to conceal it.

"I? It was you who would not reply to my letters!" he exclaimed bitterly. "I wrote again and again, under cover to your miserable old nurse–and don't say you never had them! The last came back to me–'not known.' But the others did not–they would have if they had not reached!"

"If she had them, she never gave them to me!" she said truthfully. "And I

don't wonder! I was so utterly wretched when I read of your–your–flight–that I told her–all! I had to–I should have gone raving mad if I had kept it to myself!"

"Well, all that is over and done with, thank goodness!" he exclaimed, cheerfully, after a brief pause. "I will not scold you for misjudging me–you were but a child! But you are a woman now, of age, your own mistress! I have been fortunate of late, or I should not be here. Speculations of mine have turned up trumps–and not only that, but I have friends in the City who will introduce me to your uncle, and if you only play your cards well, our real wedding shall be followed by a sham one, and Mrs. Victor a'Court will take a very nice place in society. My dear, cash opens all doors, and I have it!"

"Some one is coming," she said feebly. His speech had called forth all her powers of endurance, and, while bracing herself to bear up as she did, Nature determinedly asserted itself. She felt cold and giddy–her limbs seemed as if they did not belong to her.

"Only a Bobby," he said, with a light vulgarity which seemed the last straw. As she turned to walk along by his side, she tottered.

"Don't do that, or the Bobby will think you are drunk," he said, coarsely, holding her up by the arm. His detested touch achieved what her slackening courage had failed to do. She felt suddenly strong with a new, fierce emotion–was it hate?

"I cannot understand how you can be well off–or, indeed, how you can be here at all," she softly began, as the policeman marched solemnly on before them, the light of one of the occasional lamps gleaming on his wet weather cape. "I thought—-"

"You mean, your old nurse thought!" he went on angrily. "You–you were not capable of suspecting me, if that old wretch had not put it into your head! My love, I was a victim of circumstances. The people I was with were a rotten lot. They accused me to protect themselves. They were bankrupt three years ago! Mercier was not my real name. My father was Victor Mercier a'Court. It suited me to use it, that's all! What–you don't believe me?"

"You told me lies then–why should I believe you?" she boldly said.

"Because you are my wife! It will not pay me to tell you untruths–nor will it pay you to doubt me!" he savagely retorted. "I had expected a welcome! Instead, I am treated like this! It is enough to exasperate a saint–and I don't profess to be that! Come, let us talk business, as you don't feel inclined for love. You are mine, and I mean to have you. You understand? I have waited for you all these years, and precious hard work it has been, I can tell you, for plenty of girls as good-looking as you made a dead set at me–and girls with loads of oof, too! If I don't get you by fair means, I will have you by foul–it is for you to select. By Jingo, it would serve you right if I went to that wretched uncle of yours to-morrow, and

claimed you!"

She stopped short and confronted him. The moon, breaking through the driving clouds, shone full on her face. Beautiful, corpse-like in its sombre, set expression, there was that in her great, shining eyes which gave him, hardened worldling though he was, a slight shock. He felt he had gone too far.

"Drop the tragedy queen, do, and be my own little darling once more!" he wheedled, and would have embraced her, but she slid away as he approached.

"Listen!" she began, in clear, determined tones, in which there was neither fear nor hesitation, "unless you treat me with consideration, decency, respect–unless you can give me time to arrange matters so that to avow myself your–wife–will not ruin me, body and soul, I swear before God that I will put a barrier between myself and you which will separate us for ever."

"Pah, pah, pah, spitfire!" he sarcastically said, swinging his umbrella and beginning to walk onward. "I know what you mean! You have some romantic idea of suicide. You are not the kind of girl who kills herself, I can tell you that–so that threat won't hold water with me. Come now, don't let us waste time quarrelling. What do you propose to do? Before I tell you my ideas, let's hear yours. *Place aux dames* was always my motto."

During her long vigil, scheme after scheme of escaping him and of belonging irrevocably to Vansittart, one plan wilder than another, had agitated her mind. She had at last arrived at one set conclusion–Victor Mercier must be cajoled into giving her time. Events would decide the rest.

"All I ask of you is to wait," she pleaded earnestly, vehemently. "Give me time to find some way of introducing you to friends, and through them to uncle and aunt–then I can begin seeming to encourage you, and feel my way—-"

He burst into a derisive laugh.

"Rats!" he cried brutally. "That sort of thing won't do for me, my dear wife, I can tell you! I see you are as big a baby as ever–you need some one badly to teach you your way about! No, no! I want you at once–who and what's to prevent me from taking possession of my lawful property? There is only one thing for us to do: to bolt together–and to leave them completely in the dark as to your fate. I hear that those two old prigs who wouldn't give bite or sup to your father when he was a dying man are dead nuts on you. We must make 'em suffer, my darling! We must madden them till they are ready to do anything and everything if they can only find you alive. And we must talk it over–so that your disappearance may be a regular thunderbolt! Can you come to my lodgings to-morrow evening? I want you to myself–it's natural, isn't it? This road, quiet as it is, is hardly the place for husband and wife to meet, is it? What? You can't come?" His voice hoarsened–he clutched her arm so fiercely that she gave a faint cry. "You don't want me?" he exclaimed, in tones which to her strained ears

seemed those of deadly menace. "If you don't–I know you, you see! I have not forgotten your kisses, if you have mine–it means another man! And if it does, I will have no mercy on you, do you understand? None!"

"How dare you?" Once more she faced him, this time in an access of desperation. "How dare you accuse me of crime? My coldness, my absolute refusal to listen to any man is so well known that it has been common talk in society! More than once I have felt that uncle has suspected me–and, indeed, he has sounded me—-"

In her earnestness she was off guard, and drawing her to him, he suddenly threw his arms about her neck and kissed her lips–a long, violent, almost savage kiss.

"There–go home and think of that!" he said, with a triumphant chuckle, as she staggered away and almost fell against the fence. "And take this address. I shall be here every evening at the same hour. And if you don't come–well, you had better come, that's all! I am not in a very patient humour."

She made her way out of the Park at his side, dazed, trembling. When at last he consented to leave her, and hailing a hansom, she clambered in, she leant back, and for a few minutes was barely conscious. She came to herself with a sob.

"Will God have mercy on me?" she wailed. "I was so–so–very young!"

CHAPTER VI

Joan made her way home–how, she hardly knew. In the confusion of thought succeeding that terrible interview which had successfully shown her she was in the power of a merciless tyrant, instinct guided her. After Victor Mercier had put her into a cab, and she had alighted from it in a thoroughfare near her uncle's house, she let herself in with the latchkey she had playfully annexed, little dreaming how she would need to use it–and meeting no one as she made her way up to her room, locked herself in to face her misery alone.

As she tossed and writhed through the long, miserable night she almost despaired. Perhaps she would have utterly and entirely lost heart, had not a thought flashed upon her mind–an idea she welcomed as an inspiration.

"There is only one way to escape the grip of that savage tiger–flight!" she told herself. Although the sole tie between them was the hasty ceremony in a

Registrar's office he had cajoled her into years ago–although she had met him but once afterwards before he absconded and disappeared, and that was in the very spot where their interview a few hours before had taken place, she believed, indeed she knew, that for her to try to undo that knot would entail publicity–disgrace–even shame–that if she endured the ordeal, she would emerge unfit to be Vansittart's wife. If *he* forgave her, even her uncle–society could and would never overlook the smirch upon her fair girlhood. She would bear a brand.

"Victor gave me the idea, himself," she told herself, with a bitter smile at the irony of the fact. "He–the man who is legally my husband until he chooses to renounce me"–in her ignorance of the law she fancied that Victor Mercier might divorce her quietly in some way, if he pleased–"proposed that we should disappear together, and frighten my uncle into a concession. What if I disappeared alone–and only allowed one person to find me–Vansittart?"

That Vansittart loved her passionately, with all the fervour and intensity of a strong, virile nature, she knew. Whether the love was mad enough to fall in with any wildly romantic proceeding, she had yet to discover.

"He will seek me as soon as he can!" she correctly thought. As she was crossing the hall after breakfasting with her uncle, who–in his hopes that his only niece and adopted daughter and heiress was thinking better of her aloofness to mankind, and melting in regard to his favourite among her many admirers, Lord Vansittart–had been unwontedly urbane and affectionate, a telegram was brought to her.

"If I may see you at twelve, noon, do not reply.–Vansittart."

At noon her uncle would be at his club, and her aunt had, she knew, an appointment with her dressmaker in Bond Street. She went to her room and spent some little time in deciding upon her toilette. How did she look best, or, rather, how should she be attired to appeal most strongly to Vansittart's imagination and senses?

Most women are born with subtle instincts in regard to the weakness of manhood, especially the manhood already to a certain extent in their power. Joan hardly knew why she felt that a certain dishabille–a suggestion of delicacy and fragile helplessness in her appearance, would place Vansittart more entirely at her mercy; but it was with this conviction that she attired herself in a white, soft, silken and lace-adorned tea-gown, with lace ruffles about her smooth, rounded throat and wrists–a robe that fell away from a pink silk underdress which, fitting tightly about her waist, showed the rich, yet girlish curves of her beautiful form to the fullest advantage.

Her hair had been wound somewhat carelessly but classically about her small head by Julie, who was rather excited at having received an offer of marriage. Joan had listened sympathetically–she had encouraged the girl in her love

affair, more, perhaps, because it would serve her own interests, being one which was to remain a secret from "his parents in France" until they had seen Julie, and therefore subject to mysterious "evenings-out" and holidays taken, with other explanations to the housekeeper. Altogether there was a certain softness about her whole appearance, Joan considered, as she anxiously gazed at her reflection in the many mirrors she passed proceeding to her boudoir, which was on the same floor as the drawing-rooms, and opened upon a small balcony full of flowers, with a peep of the enclosure and the Park beyond, just under the red and white awning.

It was eleven when she entered her room and set herself to write a whole host of letters. She had barely finished three before a brougham dashed up to the hall door. She started up, her heart beating, her cheeks aflame.

"It cannot be–why, it is hardly a quarter to twelve," she thought, glancing at the Dresden china clock. But even as she spoke she heard his voice–those musical, resonant, manly tones she loved–and in another moment the groom of the chambers announced, "Lord Vansittart," with an assurance which seemed strange to Joan, unaware of the freemasonry below stairs which enlightened the domestic staff as to the wishes and opinions of the master of the house.

As he came in, tall, his fair, wavy hair flung back from his broad brow; his large, frank eyes alight, his cheeks aglow with passion; some suggestion of a conqueror in his mien–his very fervour and exultation were infectious–she could have fallen into his arms and abandoned herself to his embraces as if there were no obstacle to their mutual love.

As it was she merely gave one limp, chill hand into his eager clasp, and cast down her eyes as he said: "I am early–I could not help it–Joan, Joan, what is it? You are not glad to see me"–his voice faltered.

"Sit down–won't you?" she said, and she sank into a low chair and motioned him to one out in the cold–but he would not understand–he drew a light low chair quite near to hers, and fixed her with an intent, anxious gaze.

"Last night you behaved–as if–you cared a little for me," he began, almost reproachfully.

"Last night–I was a fool!" she bitterly said. "I let you see too much."

"Why too much?" he drew eagerly nearer. "Joan, my beloved–the only one in the whole world I care for–for, indeed, you have all my love, all–I am yours, body and soul!–what can come between us if you love me? And you do! I know you do! I feel you don't want to–and I don't wonder, I am not good enough, no one can be–but if you love me, I and no other man, ought to be your husband!"

"Understand–I beg, pray, implore you to understand," she began, slowly,

painfully–this holding her wild instincts in check was the most terribly hard battle she had ever fought–"I have sworn to myself never to marry. Years ago my uncle was hard, cruel to my parents: they literally died, half-starved, because he would not help them. When he adopted me I did not know this. I had some work to accept his kindness after I did know. But never, never will I accept a dowry, a trousseau, from him–yet I will not explain why–nor will I go to any man a pauper. Now perhaps you can see why–I feel–I can only do justice to myself, and show mercy to him–by remaining as I am!"

"You mean to allow this folly about your uncle to come between you and me?" he cried imperiously. His compelling grasp closed upon her wrists. "Joan, Joan, do not throw away my life and yours by such an absurdity–such a whim!"

He gazed into her eyes with his so brimful of intensity of passion that they seemed to draw her towards him. She struggled against yielding to the appeal, the yearning in his face–and he, he watched the struggle–and as she gave a little sob, which was virtually a cry for mercy, he drew her to him–he took her in his arms–she was on her knees, in his embrace, her heart beating against his, their lips clinging to each other.

Long–so it seemed to Joan–was she enwrapped in that delirium of bliss she might have imagined, weakly, but had never felt in all its fierce, oblivious ecstacy. Then she held him from her.

"Oh, what shall I do?" she wailed–and clasping his knee she leant her face upon her cold trembling hands.

"You dear, innocent child! Do, indeed!" he almost merrily exclaimed, stooping and kissing her fair wreaths of shining hair. "Why exactly as you like! I don't care a fig for your uncle–at least, as regards what he can give you–I have enough for you and a family of brothers and sisters, too, if you had one. All I want is *you*, do you understand, you! You have only to dictate terms–I surrender unconditionally!"

CHAPTER VII

"You have only to dictate terms–I surrender unconditionally!"

Could she have heard aright? Joan lifted her pale, miserable face–miserable with the woe of reality after the delirious joy of being clasped to her lover's heart–and slowly shook her head.

"I have no terms to dictate," she slowly, dismally said. "I cannot go through a secret engagement! It would be impossible to keep it secret, either. Uncle will guess! Why, I have hardly been decently civil to any man who seemed as if he had ideas of marriage–he will know at once–and then–every one else would know–oh, I could not bear it! It would drive me mad!"

She spoke vehemently–and there was a wild, dangerous gleam in her eyes which he did not like. Perhaps the mental trouble it must have been to the sensitive orphan to accept bounty from the cold-blooded man who had let her father, his brother, die unsuccoured, had brought about hysteria. He had read and heard of such cases. It behoved him to come to his darling's rescue–to cherish and care for her–ward off every danger from one so beautiful, so helpless, so alone. As he gazed at her, an extraordinary idea flashed upon him–like lightning it illumined the darkness–the way he must go seemed to stand out plain before him.

"My dearest, there is a way out of our difficulty so simple, so obvious, that it seems to me a waste of time to discuss anything else!" he said, tenderly, gravely. "You are of age–you are entitled to act for yourself! Let us be married as soon as possible and start in my yacht for a tour round the world! I can manage everything secretly: you will only have to walk out of the house one fine morning and be married to me, and we will take the next train to wherever the yacht will be waiting for us, and be off and away before your absence has been remarked and wondered at! I will leave explanations to be sent to your uncle at the right moment, acknowledging ourselves eccentric, romantic, blameable, perhaps, but not unforgivable–saying that we knew so long a honeymoon would be unpalatable, so we took French leave–why do you shiver dearest?" He bent anxiously over her. "Joan! Won't you trust me?"

"Trust you!" she gazed up at him with that startling expression of mingled love and woe into his face–a look he had seen in a great picture of souls suffering in Hades–an expression too full of agony to be easily forgotten. "Only it seems too much to expect! It cannot possibly happen–those good things don't, in this miserable life!"

"You are morbid, dearest, if I may dare to say it," he tenderly said, drawing her into the arms with which he vowed to shelter and defend her from all and every adverse circumstance which might ever threaten her peace and content. And he set himself to comfort, hearten, encourage her drooping spirits, as he painted the joys of their future life in the most glowing terms at his command, during the rest of what was to him their glorious hour together. To a certain extent he thought he had succeeded. At least, Joan had smiled–had even laughed–although the tragic look in those beautiful eyes–absent, hunted, terror-stricken, desperate–was it only one of those things, or all?–had not been superseded by the expression of calm satisfaction it would be such relief and joy to him to see

there.

"Something is wrong–but what?" he asked himself, after he had stayed luncheon, and at last succeeded in tearing himself away. "Is it only that fact–a miserable one to so tender yet passionate a nature–that while she is loaded with luxuries by her uncle, her parents died almost in want because he withheld the helping hand? It may be! Well–anyhow–the best thing for her is absolute change–as soon as possible–and that she shall have!"

* * * * *

Victor Mercier–it was his real name, his father, a meretricious French adventurer, had married his mother for a small capital, which he had got rid of some time before he ran away and left his wife and infant son to starve–had left Joan the eventful night of their meeting after long years–in a towering rage.

His was a nature saturated with vanity and self-love. From childhood upwards he had believed himself entitled to possess whatever he coveted–the law of *meum and tuum* was non-existent in his scheme for getting as much out of life as it was possible to get. Naturally sharp, and with good looks of the kind that some women admire, he had not only made a willing slave of his mother, but when, some years after, the news of his father's death came to her, she married again, a widower with a charming little daughter, step-father and pseudo-sister also worshipped at his shrine.

Then he ingratiated himself with an employer so that he was entrusted with the sole management of the branch business at C—-. Here, he "splurged"; spent money freely, and–when he heard that the pretty schoolgirl he had succeeded in establishing a flirtation with was the only surviving member of the weakly family represented by the wealthy Sir Thomas Thorne–he grew more and more reckless in the expenditure of his master's money and in his falsifying of the accounts. Like many others of his kind, he overreached his mark. When he paid a flying visit to London to marry Joan before she was adopted by her uncle–her mother had just died–it occurred to the head of his firm to "run over" to C—- and audit the books. The day of Mercier's secret marriage he heard that "the game was up," and his only means of escape, instant flight and lasting absence.

It was quite true that his firm failed a couple of years later. But he had then just established himself as partner in a drinking-bar in the unsavoury neighbourhood of a gold mine in South Africa. The lady of the establishment had fallen in love with him, and there was, in fact, money to be made all round about by one who was not too particular in his morals and opinions. Suddenly, the neighbourhood grew too hot for him, and he found it convenient to remember that the rich Miss Joan Thorne must now be twenty-one and ready to be claimed as his wife.

So he returned with money enough to make a show, later on, of being rich, at least for a month or two. The first thing was to find Joan: the next to meet her.

An acquaintance made in his comparatively innocent boyhood happened to be now confidential valet to the Duke of Arran. He sought him out, flattered, and–without confiding his real story to him–made him his creature by using a certain power of fascination which had helped on his unworthy career from its beginning.

Paul Naz got him engagements as "extra hand" on state occasions in noblemen's houses; he had fulfilled three of these before he attained his end and encountered Joan at the Duke's–Paul consented to pay court to Julie le Roux, Miss Thorne's maid, so as to keep his old playfellow informed as to the doings of the family, who, he told him, owed his late father a considerable sum of money, which he wished to recover privately to save scandal. That very night Paul was taking Julie to see Mercier's so-called half-sister act in a transpontine theatre. "Vera Anerley," as she had stage-named herself, had been on tour with a popular piece–was absent at the time of Victor's return–and had appealed to his vanity by her wild emotion when they met. He was to see her on the stage, and to have a word with Naz, who had had to probe Julie in a certain direction, after he left his "wife" in the Regent's Park.

When he had watched Joan's hansom speed away in the darkness, Victor Mercier walked along, then–hailing a passing cab, was driven to the theatre. As he went he anathematized Joan in the strongest of mining oaths.

"Like all the rest," he bitterly thought. "Always another man–they must have a man hanging about them!"

Alighting at the theatre, he met Naz, a fair, innocent-looking Frenchman, coming out. He joined him, saying "Come and have a drink."

"You have lost much by being late, your half-sister is adorable!" said Naz, as they stood together at the bar of a neighbouring public-house.

"No doubt!" said Mercier carelessly. "So is your Julie, eh? By the way, how is Julie's mistress? Any news?"

"As I said," returned Naz, in an undertone. "The beautiful creature is trapped at last, by a lover who has been out of the country to try and forget her, shooting big game! They ride–meet–he was with her when I posted you in the corridor that night. They passed me, you must have seen him."

"Him–who?" muttered Mercier. There was a gleam in his eyes.

"Lord Vansittart," replied Naz. "The Duchess has been heard to say it was

a settled thing!"

CHAPTER VIII

The Duke's valet prattled on until the second and third liqueurs had solaced his being. Then Victor glanced darkly at the clock.

"Let us go," he roughly said.

The softspoken Naz only thought that the delightful fluid which warmed and comforted his gentle self had had a reverse effect upon his old friend, so–following him gently as Mercier stalked gloomily into the theatre and up to the dress circle, which was well-packed with honest citizens and their wives in their ordinary habit as they lived–he returned to his seat by Julie, and left him to his own devices.

The third act was over. In the fourth Mercier's so-called "sister" had plenty to do. She was a peccant wife, revisiting home in disguise, and seeking her husband's pardon. It was a pathetic scene, when she sought her husband and discovered herself. Throwing off her disguise–she was got up as an old woman–she emerged sweet, fascinating, in a white dress, with her black hair in Magdalen-like confusion, and sinking at his feet, alternately implored and adored with such passion and intensity that tears rolled down the feminine auditors' cheeks, and the house literally rose to her.

"And all that passion is mine, to take or leave as I please," was Victor's saturnine comment, as he leant back in his seat with folded arms and frowned darkly at the stage. He well knew that his amorous dalliance with his step-father's daughter, when he had had nothing more to his taste to dally with, had succeeded in inspiring her with so violent a devotion to him that, if he had not pitied, he might have come to loathe her. When she was a mere pretty, stupid schoolgirl, going to and fro to her middle-class girls' school, satchel in hand, he had had but little patience with her absorption in him and his career. But now that he saw her on the stage, beautiful with an undeniable beauty, full of grace and spontaneity, and possessed of that power which passion gives, he thrilled with mingled desire and satisfaction.

Strange ideas rose up in his mind–ideas of a subtle revenge upon Joan–of intense and vivid gratification to himself.

"Joan will be my wife–my bondslave, to be dealt with how I please, and

when I please; and as long as I kiss and caress her no one dare interfere, if I choose that she shall spend almost her life in my arms with my lips on hers," he grimly told himself. "But–Vera loves me–and if I am Vera's lover while I am Joan's uxorious husband, Joan's pride will not allow her to accuse me, even if she suspects! And how her proud, snobbish soul will hate my giving her half my love–as an Eastern potentate gives it to his appointed spouse, while his real devotion is his favourites'!"

The idea gave him a peculiar and indescribable pleasure. It seemed, indeed, to restore his equilibrium. As the curtain fell, he left the auditorium and made his way round to the stage door, as he had promised Vera to do.

"I wish to see Miss Anerley–which is her dressing-room?" he asked, when, after cautiously traversing a dark, unsavoury alley, he had pushed open the swing door, had entered a dimly-lit corridor where a sickly gas flame was flaring in the draught in its wire cage, and met a man coming towards him.

"You are her brother? Come this way, please." The good-natured acting-manager of the touring company, an eager little man in shabby evening dress, escorted Victor along a passage to a door on which "Miss Vera Anerley" was pasted, and knocked.

"It's your brother, Miss Anerley," he called out.

"Thanks! Wait one moment, Victor, will you?" cried a pretty, girlish voice.

"All right." Victor paced the narrow, damp-smelling corridor, hearing the thumps and shouts from the stage, intermingled with a murmur of melodramatic music now and then from the orchestra–making way occasionally for a stage carpenter in shirt-sleeves, or an actor hurrying from his dressing room–until Vera looked out. "I am so sorry to have kept you–come in," she said caressingly, and she pulled him gently in and closed the door.

"Tell me, how do you like me?" she eagerly cried, clasping his hand with both hers. There was no reserve between these two–if, indeed, propinquity had not established complete freedom from what Victor termed *gêne* long ago–and she gazed up into his face with eyes transparent, shining, darkly blue as sapphires, eyes so brilliant that in admiring them he hardly noticed the coarse red and white grease paint which thickly coated her delicate skin, or the bistre rings around those beautiful orbs. "Victor! Speak! If you are not satisfied, I shall chuck the profession–dearly as I love my work, I couldn't stand it!"

"Silly child!" He patted her hand, and looked round for a seat. There were two broken chairs in the large, bare, cellar-like "dressing-room," with its high window shrouded by a torn and dirty red curtain and its dresser-like table with looking-glasses the worse for wear under the flaring gas jets. But he shook his head at them. "I'll sit here," he said, perching himself on one of the big dress-baskets under the pegs hung with feminine garments. "By George! what a room

for a future Lady Macbeth to dress in, to be sure! My dear, don't gasp! That's your style, tragedy, melodrama, bloodcurdling! You're a damned passionate little witch, that's what you are–and I expected as much."

She gave him a rapturous glance as she drew a deep sigh of relief and satisfaction, and sank in a graceful, unstudied attitude upon one of the crippled Windsor chairs; and he dryly lighted a cigarette, and gazed critically at her. She was very fair! Small, with an oval face under glossy masses of dark silken hair; slight and graceful, with a child's hands and feet, and a tiny waist; yet the shoulders rising from her blue ball-dress with its gaudy wreaths of pink flowers were softly rounded–and the contour of neck and bust he considered "simply perfect." He ground his teeth and spat viciously on the blackened boards–there were only pieces of old carpeting here and there–as he remembered his wife–and her supposed lover, "Lord Vansittart." "What a cursed shame!" he thought. "They wallow in wealth–and I and this child–bah! there is something to be said for anarchy, after all!"

"You look–well, I feel I should like to kiss you," he grimly said.

She blushed under her paint. Since her woman's love had waxed so strong, all the former boy-and-girl intimacy went for nothing–she was shy of him.

"If you did you would spoil my 'make-up' and would get a dab or two of paint on your nose," she said, with slight embarrassment. It was just that coy fear of him in the abandonment of her passionate love which fired Victor Mercier when he was near her. Fierce though his mingled desire of, and hatred for, Joan had been, and still was, she had never thrilled him, stirred his whole nature, as this girl, the companion of his youth, had the power to do.

"You mean to say that is greasepaint on your shoulders?" he said, rising. He crossed the room, and, although she laughingly expostulated, he bent and kissed them–then lifted her chin and kissed her throat.

"Are you angry?" he said mockingly, gazing down into her eyes with an intent, triumphant expression.

"You know–very well–I could not be angry–with *you*!" she murmured, lifting them, dewy with tenderness, with fervour, to his.

Victor started, and stepped suddenly away. The door was flung open, and a young woman dressed in nurse's costume rushed in.

"Vera, what are you about? You'll keep the stage waiting! I beg your pardon, I'm sure," she exclaimed.

Vera sprang up, and with a glance in a glass and a wild pat of her hair, ran off. The young woman turned to him.

"It was a near go that time; but I think she's saved it," she said, somewhat dryly. "You're her brother-in-law, or step-brother, or whatever it is, ain't you? She's been all on wires to-night because you were in front! She's a good sort, is

Vera! We all cottoned to her when she got the post. But the stage-manager's got a grudge against her, and that's why I ran off to get her on in time. He'd have fined her as soon as look at her! You see he's taken a fancy to her, and she won't have anything to say to him. I tell her she's a fool for her pains–he's a young fellow with plenty of brains, and his people have loads of money. But there! She won't hear of it! I hope you're pleased with us, Mr., Mr.–a'Court? You are? That's a good job!"

Victor Mercier left Vera's colleague a few minutes later with the understanding that he would wait for his "sister" at the stage door. When Vera came out into the dark alley he met her, drew her hand under his arm, and marching her out into the thoroughfare hailed the first hansom he met.

"Get in!" he commanded. Then he gave the address to the driver.

CHAPTER IX

The hansom drove swiftly along through the muddy streets. Victor sat silently by his companion. His nature was strung up to its fullest tension. First had come the exasperating blow–the discovery that his jealous surmise had been right–the wife he called wife because of those few words spoken in a registrar's office, alone, loved another man–perhaps was even secretly his. Then had come the surprise of Vera's beauty–grace–talent–and the conviction of her great passion for himself.

"I will secure her," he grimly told himself. "I must tell her–something! To know there is 'another woman' will make her irrevocably my own." It was thus he correctly or incorrectly judged womankind.

Vera leant back in the corner of the cab, and gazed–rapt, if anxious–at his dark, handsome profile, visible now and again in the moonlight which flashed white radiance upon the puddles and silvered the wet slates of the roofs. Did he love her? Could he care for her? She was ready to follow him like a little dog through the world–if necessary, through disgrace unto death. For, as her sex will do, while she had worshipped him as her hero, she had acknowledged that he could err. When he had been "wanted" by the police she knew that he was "in trouble," if through folly rather than ill-doing; and while he had left his broken-down mother without a hint as to his fate, owing her the money she had borrowed that he might not starve while in hiding, it was Vera who had kept a roof over

her widowed step-mother's head–who had toiled and slaved for the lodgers all day, and danced and "walked on" at the theatre all night. Yes–unconsciously she avowed that her idol had feet of clay. But as she sat at his side, the blood raced madly through her veins–her heart beat so strongly against her chest that she could hardly breathe–she had to clench her hands so that they should not clasp his arm–bite her lips lest they should play her false in furtive kisses of the shoulder so tantalizingly near hers.

"I am a fool perhaps," she bitterly mused: "But–he is so splendid–so delightful!" She gave an involuntary sob–it was so terribly, cruelly convincing that her passion was unreciprocated, that while she was trembling and palpitating with emotion he should sit gloomily gazing out into the darkness with arms folded like Napoleon at St. Helena.

He heard it.

"You little darling, what is the matter?" he suddenly said–then his arms closed about her, she was clasped to his breast, her cold lips were warmed into life by a long, close kiss; and there she lay, in an earthly heaven, until they crossed a bridge over the Thames, now a fairy river like quivering, molten silver in the moonlight, flowing between mystic palaces whose windows glowed red in the shadowy façades, and the cab halted at the end of the street.

On his sudden and unexpected return, he had occupied the rooms vacated by a lodger called away to his mother's deathbed in Wales, in the house which was really Vera's, for she paid the rent, but which his mother literally lived by. All the rooms except a parlour and attic she let to students of the huge hospital in the neighbouring thoroughfare.

The windows of the little house all glittered white save one–that of the "front parlour."

"Mother is still up," said Vera disappointedly–to cool down and behave as a sister after that kiss was a terrible prospect! But let into the silent house by Victor's latch-key, they found the little parlour silent also, and empty, although one burner of the gasalier above the little dining table neatly laid for supper was alight.

On the table was a slip of paper: "Excuse me, I am so tired–Mother," was written on it.

Vera trembled a little. "Come, Victor, you must have some supper," she said coaxingly.

"Presently," he said, looking her over with a proprietary glance. "Take off that cloak! Wait, I will do it for you."

He went to her. As he unfastened the clasp of the old evening cloak she felt his touch upon her throat–it seemed to make her weak, almost faint. Then he flung it aside–it fell on the floor–and seating himself on the horsehair sofa he

drew her down upon his knee.

"You are all mine! Do you understand?" he imperiously said; and his dark eyes had a sinister, commanding expression as they gazed into hers which frightened her a little, in spite of her unbounded faith and adoration. "All mine! I could take you–or leave you–as I please! You acknowledge it?"

She nodded. To know he cared enough to make love to her overcame any poor scraps of pride that fluttered idly in the wild gale of her passion for him.

"Yes," she murmured humbly.

"Kiss me, then–let me feel there is one woman in the world worth the taking!" he said, with scathing irony. At that moment he told himself scornfully that they might all be everlastingly banished to Sheol except this one, and he would not turn a hair. He could look coolly over the edge of space and watch their torments with less compunction than he had felt gazing at the disembowelled horses in a Spanish bull-fight.

She threw her arms about his neck, and gazed adoringly into his eyes, before she fell yieldingly into his embrace and allowed him to kiss her again and again.

"Oh, I love you, I love you!" she murmured in her ecstasy. Unlike poor Joan, she had no burdened conscience dragging her back from the reciprocation of her lover's passion.

"You do, do you?" he asked suddenly, with one of his swift changes of mood, loosing her, and rising to his feet, taking out his cigarette case. "Suppose I were to test you, eh? Frankly, I don't believe in one of your sex!" He gave a sneering laugh, as he struck a match, and, lighting a cigarette stuck it between his lips. "Little wonder, considering that the old gentleman below sent one of his hags to work my downfall! Surely you–a woman–guessed that a woman was at the bottom of all–my–trouble?"

During that silent drive in the cab he had resolved what complexion he would put upon "that wretched business," as he termed his defalcations and consequent flight: in other words, what lies he would tell this trusting, devoted girl.

"W–What?" she stammered–turning deadly white and gazing at him as if in those words she had heard her death-sentence.

"The old game! A woman pursuing a man," he said, with scornful irony. Why would these women be so terribly tragic? It spoilt sport so abominably! "Don't be jealous! I called her a hag–and she was one! I won't tell you who she was–it wouldn't be fair. But she made a dead set at me–and I kept her at bay until my good nature let me into one of those beastly traps good-natured fellows fall into. I backed a bill for a chum, and he played me false, and left me to pay up. I borrowed money from the business, and then the governor suddenly came down upon me for it. I had to take her money and her with it. Nothing would do

but I must marry her! Well, I did, and before I had had time to replace the sum I had borrowed, the governor stole a march on me, and found it out! I begged her to settle matters, but she refused! So there was nothing to do but to bolt–and remain away–live with the old cat I would not! What is the matter? She is less than nothing to me–more, I hate, loathe, and despise her!"

She had sunk back with a groan and covered her face with her hands. He seated himself and drew her passionately to him.

"Come, come, there is no harm done! I mean to have you, d'ye hear? And soon! And as my wife! What else do you think? I heard to-night there is a man in the case. I mean to be free, with a capital to make merry on for the rest of our lives! I've only to play my cards properly, and you've only to keep *mum*. Can you, do you think? Can you keep everything I do and say to yourself, and help me a bit now and then? If you can, you'll be my wife! If you can't, you won't. That's flat."

"You know what I think of you!" she moaned, gazing piteously at him. "You know you are the whole world to me–that I would be tortured and killed rather than betray you!"

"What is there to groan about, then?" he cried impatiently, springing up. "Upon my word, you are enough to rile a man into chucking you, that you are!"

"What is there to groan about?" she repeated bitterly. "What a question to ask–when you tell me–you are married–when there is a woman alive who has the right to call–you–husband!"

"Not for long, make your mind easy about that!" he grimly remarked. He had made an unalterable resolve that in some way or another this girl should atone to him for Joan's shortcomings–yet should herself benefit to Joan's loss: and he set himself to such a lengthened course of cajolery and fascination of his admirer then and there, that the veils of night were shifting and lifting, furtive nightbirds crept from their lairs and fled along the streets as if scared by the dawn–and the light still glowed in that window of Number Twelve, Haythorn Street.

CHAPTER X

At first Joan had been almost fearful in her new-born hope. The prospect of flight with her lover, the idea of marrying him secretly, and starting for a tour

round the world, about which no one would know anything definite, seemed too splendid a prospect to be true! Then, as the days passed, and after writing an enigmatical letter to Victor at 12, Haythorn Street, the address given her by him–a letter promising to meet him in a week's time "with all prepared according to his wishes"–she had no tormenting reply, she took heart. Vansittart, in their constant, but seemingly accidental, meetings–riding, driving, at parties, and at the opera–encouraged her by promising that in one fortnight from the day they had "settled matters" their plan should be carried out. All seemed to promise to her the dawn of emancipation from the consequences of her past folly; when, awakening somewhat suddenly from sleep one morning, a terrible idea flashed upon her–she was unexpectedly confronted with a truth she had overlooked in her unreasoning passion for deliverance from Victor Mercier and freedom to belong to Vansittart.

Her marriage with Vansittart would be a bigamous one.

"Oh! Surely that was not a real marriage–that short ceremony at the registrar's," she told herself in anguish. "At all events, my uncle will make it worth Victor's while to undo it–never to take any steps to assert that he has any claim upon us. Uncle will manage it. He will have had his will–I shall be Lady Vansittart–he will be ready to do anything, proud man that he is, to prevent a family disgrace!"

It was a mean way of emancipating herself–to run away with Vansittart, deceiving him as to the reason of her strange desire for what was practically an elopement–to leave Sir Thomas Thorne recipient of her confession that Victor Mercier was legally her husband, and must be bribed to ignore the fact!

"But–if I cannot extricate myself in one way, I am driven to use whatever means remain," she sadly told herself. "I wish I had not got to tell lies all round! But if I must, I must!"

Every day she proposed to herself some plan of "managing" Victor Mercier, so as to keep him quiet. She hardly liked that silence of his. Although she had no idea that he had instituted inquiries, and was enlightened as to her intimacy with Vansittart, she felt as if that cessation of hostilities on his part was the calm before the storm.

Her brief encouragement was past and gone. She spent hours of silent anguish, pacing her room, cold drops upon her brow, her nervous hands wringing her gossamer handkerchiefs to shreds. Julie, finding them in wisps when she sorted the linen, wondered.

Then came the day before the date upon which she was to meet Victor, "with all prepared according to his wishes." There was an afternoon fête at the riverside residence of the Marchioness of C—-. Sir Thomas was to drive her down, together with Lady Thorne and some friends. Joan had expected that her uncle would propose that Vansittart should make one of the party. She knew nothing

of a brief but crucial interview which had taken place between her uncle and her lover, almost immediately after their mutual understanding.

Lord Vansittart's honour demanded that, while respecting the confidence of his future wife, and acceding with entire self-abandonment to her wishes in regard to their matrimonial affairs, he should at least defer in some way to her guardian *in loco parentis*. So he sought a *tête-à-tête* with his future uncle-in-law–he contrived to put himself in his way at the club.

It was the ordinary luncheon hour, and, after beguiling him into the empty reading-room, he began without much preface.

"I think you know–at least, I mean, I know you are aware, that I love your niece," he said. "You also know she rejected me–more than once."

"Yes, my boy–and I think you know I was deuced disappointed that she was such a silly little idiot!" warmly returned Sir Thomas.

"Well, I have some reason to flatter myself that if every one will only let everything alone, and will not interfere, I have a very good chance of making her Lady Vansittart!" He looked boldly at Joan's uncle.

"My dear boy, no one has the slightest wish to interfere! What do you mean?" asked Sir Thomas briskly.

Vansittart sighed, and shrugged his shoulders. "My dear Sir Thomas, your niece is a very extraordinary girl," he slowly said. "Once married, she will, I believe, settle down to be more like other people in her ideas, which at present are extravagance itself! But I will tell you this much–the man who refuses to fall in with them will never call her wife! Now, what am I to do? Am I to appear to outrage you by not deferring to your opinions and feelings in regard to our engagement and consequent marriage, or am I not? Dearly, passionately as I love her, I would rather give her up than behave dishonourably to you and Lady Thorne!"

"Good Lord, what nonsense!" cried Sir Thomas with a short laugh. "D'ye think I don't know that Joan is so soaked in romantic folly that she isn't capable of one single, reasonable, common-sense idea? Go on and prosper, old boy! You have my blessing upon whatever method of courtship you think best to adopt, even if it is to roll her in the mud and kick her, or climb up to her window in the middle of the night and carry her off down a rope-ladder! Upon my word, I am jolly glad that I am not the fool that every one thinks me, when I stick to it that Joan has read that Shelley and Swinburne rot until she can't tell black from white! Make her your wife your own way, Vansittart, and it shan't make any difference in her dowry, here's my hand on it!"

After such trust on the part of the man who had the giving of his beautiful niece, Vansittart continued his arrangements for the fulfilment of Joan's wishes, feeling as if treading on air.

The day of Lady C—-'s garden party was showery at first. But at noon out had come a brilliant June sun, and the rain had only succeeded in freshening the rich foliage and luxuriant flowers of Wrottesley Lodge, on the Thames–a somewhat older house than the usual run of riverside dwellings can lay claim to be.

The party on the top of the coach were extremely lively. But Joan sat silent. The beauty of the day was not for her. The summer breeze stirred the chestnut blossoms and diffused their perfume until the air was honeyed with it–the suburban gardens were gay with their beds of summer bloom. As they drove into the road where the gables of Wrottesley Lodge peeped up among the sombre pines and firs which screened the house from the vulgar gaze, the Thames came in sight, its wavelets dancing in the sunlight. All seemed careless happiness–even a boy with a white apron and basket on his arm stood whistling gaily as he watched the four-in-hand tool into the drive. Only Joan's heart seemed like a stone in her breast, and all around was to her a ghastly mockery–with that wretched hopelessness flooding her young soul.

Vansittart had arrived early, been welcomed, fussed with, and introduced to specially charming girls by his amiable hostess. But their society talk was to him like the chatter of the apes he had seen in the jungles–he gazed at their pretty patrician features and wondered where the beauty was which, with other things, had gone to make them successes of the season. When he caught sight of Sir Thomas' well-known team of roans, he muttered an excuse to the girl he was talking to, and hurried off to help his beloved to alight.

There was a bustle–Joan was almost the last to descend the ladder. How exquisite was that high-bred little foot, he thought, in the white shoe and delicate silk-lace stocking–already he was giving lavish secret orders for a whole trousseau to be on board the yacht for her use–there must be still more costly stockings and slippers to clad those dear, pretty feet! How lovely she looked altogether–her slight, beautifully curved form draped in a thin muslin robe dotted with purple heartsease, with silken sheen showing beneath–a big black hat with feathers and pansies crowning her proud little golden head! But when he met the startled, awe-stricken, "lost" look of those great eyes, it was as if some one had given him an ugly blow on the chest.

She smiled, as he welcomed her with a passionate ecstatic gaze in his kind, devoted eyes–but the smile was a miserable imitation–and he felt it.

"Come away–from the crowd–I have something important to tell you," he whispered. She gave him a glance of horror, and turned pale. "What?" she stam-

mered.

CHAPTER XI

That terror-stricken gaze of Joan's chilled Vansittart with a vague new dread–a fear impalpable, indefinite–still deadly in its effect upon him.

He laughed as he said, encouragingly, "I can assure you you need not trouble yourself that I have bad news–everything is going most swimmingly!" But as they threaded their way through the groups of brightly dressed girls and young men in all kinds of costumes, from whites to the severest frock-coat permissible at such *al fresco* gatherings, he gave a name to his misgivings in his own mind.

"I do not believe it is her brain–she is keeping something from me–she has a secret," he thought, as he talked gaily to her, the current small talk of the hour, while they traversed the rich, smooth green turf to reach the path which ran along a terrace by the river and led to the pleasance–"Lady Betty's pleasance" it had been called since the days when a Lady Betty walked there in hoops and pannier, a little King Charles spaniel waddling in her rear. "I must get it out of her! However much we may deceive our fellow creatures, we must not deceive each other."

"Where am I taking you?" he repeated brightly, in answer to her inquiry, although to him it seemed as if a sudden darkness had chased all summer brilliance from the day. "Oh, to a favourite spot of mine–a bench overlooking the river under some tree–a hawthorn, I fancy! We can talk there without any fear of being overheard. My darling–are you quite well? Are you sure you are?"

As they left the open, and were under the trees–a belt of well-grown shrubbery divided the spreading lawns from the pleasance–he stopped, and placing his hands lightly on her shoulders, gazed with such honest worship into her eyes, that she flinched and glanced away. Her lips paled and trembled.

"May I kiss you, dearest?" he almost pathetically asked–his voice faltered. In return she flung herself into his arms, and lifted her lips to his. It was a great moment to him, that abandonment of passion in his beloved–but even as their lips met, and he felt her heart beat against his own, a horrible sensation of despair mingled with the relief her spontaneous outburst had been to him.

She still clung to him after the embrace–her cheek against his shoulder–and he heard her groan.

"My love, this won't do!" he cheerily exclaimed. "You make me feel as if I had injured you somehow–that I must be a tyrant–a monster–if you repent of your bargain there is time yet, you know! Although I have the licence, and we could be married to-morrow if you chose, you can draw back. If you repent of your promise to marry me–I do not hold you to it! And remember, no one knows—-"

She stirred–and rose. "No one knows?" she feverishly asked. "You managed it all–without–telling *anybody*?"

"Except the people I was obliged to tell to procure the special licence," he answered lightly, as he walked along at her side. "And they–well, one would as soon suspect one's lawyer, or doctor, or banker, of betraying one's confidence as the Doctor's Commons fellows! It would be absurd."

The bench he remembered was there, under the hawthorn, which was still a mass of bloom. Below a stone balustrade the river ran, wide, flowing, hastening seaward. They seated themselves. He took her hand, drew off her glove, and kissed the pink, soft palm of her delightful, delicately slender hand.

"How soft it is, dear little hand!" he said tenderly. "Do you know what the supposed experts say of a soft palm, or skin? That the possessor is morbidly sensitive and sympathetic! I have thought that of you, darling! I have wondered, sometimes, whether you are not indulging in melancholy retrospect–thoughts of your dead parents' troubles, or something! If so, nothing could be more foolish and useless! Can we recall the past? No! it is dead–there is nothing in this world so dead! Are we not taught that our great Creator Himself will not meddle with it? Darling, you make me cruelly anxious, and that is a fact, by your gloom! Do you think I do not know–feel–share your secret suffering? While I cannot guess what it is, I can hardly endure your evident unhappiness–I could bear it, if I only knew! Joan, Joan–I am almost your husband; as we are to be married so soon, you might confide in me! Child! My dearest–my almost wife–tell me! I can help you, I must be able to help you, and I will! Don't you, won't you, believe me?"

His words–his passion–pattered harmlessly upon her preoccupied being. She had an idea–by a subterfuge to place her awful position before him, and hear what he would say to it.

"Of course I believe you!" she dreamily said. "I know you would help me if you could! But how can you? It is a foolish and stupid, rather than a wrong, action of mine, in the past! You yourself say that God Himself does not meddle with the past! No! He does not! We have to suffer the consequences."

"But–one may deal with the consequences, darling," he tenderly said. "Tell me–all–exactly as it is! Won't you? I knew there was something rankling in your mind. I can assure you we shall both be the happier for trusting each other. Come, out with it!"

"How can I put it to you without betraying–*her*?" she mournfully began, her strained eyes fixed on a beautiful clump of lilies, which seemed to mock her with their modest stateliness, their spotless purity–she, in her own idea, irrevocably defiled by her tie to Victor Mercier–her body smirched by his embrace, her poor cold lips fouled by his detested kiss. "It was–a dear, intimate friend, at school. I loved her so, that I believed in her feelings. I helped her in a secret love affair–with–a young man."

"Well, that was quite natural–there was no great harm in that, I am sure!" he exclaimed, heartily, beginning to be half ashamed of his secret doubts, and telling himself he ought to have remembered with what difficulty a girl brought up in a boarding-school learns life and its meaning, how a school-girl is handicapped when she starts real existence in the world.

"There was harm in it, although I did not think so at the time!" she went on, bitterly. "For she married him secretly–and no sooner had she done so, than he was taken up by the police for something or another–and ran away. She never heard anything of him until the other day, when he turned up. Oh, poor, unhappy girl! What is to be done for her? Cannot you understand that I, who helped to her undoing, am miserable?"

"My dearest child, we cannot go about the world bearing the consequences of other people's folly. It is not common sense, we have plenty of troubles of our own!" he said, almost chidingly. He felt just a little hurt that his love had not been strong enough to balance her vicarious suffering. The terrible truth that she was speaking of herself never once occurred to him. "Your friend married this man, not you! She must suffer for it. She had better make the best of her bad bargain–and really must not worry you! It is positively inhuman to do so!" He spoke with slight indignation. She shuddered.

"But surely–there must be some way to rid her of him?" she asked, striving with all her might to still her inward anguish, and speak collectedly.

"Oh yes, if she does not shrink from a public scandal," he said, somewhat dryly. "The young lady can apply for a divorce. How long since his desertion? Four years?" He shrugged his shoulders. "She had better employ detectives to find out his doings during those years. But she ought to consult lawyers!–What? She would not do that? Why not?"

"She will kill herself rather than do that–and her death will be on my–soul!" said Joan, solemnly. She looked her lover full in the face. Why was it that at that moment in imagination he seemed to hear a bell tolling and to see a churchyard with a yawning grave–towards which a funeral procession was making its way? He gave a short laugh, which was more a sob. What a grip this girl had upon his emotions!

"What power you have over me, you girlie!" he said, chokingly. "You

seemed to make me see all sorts of things ... Darling, if money is of any good to your friend–I should only feel too thankful to be of any help—-What? It is of no use?"

"It is of no use!" cried she, in a helpless tone. "None! ... And you mean to tell me–that that few minutes in a registrar's office–can only be undone–publicly–in the divorce court?"

"There is only one other thing that can free her, my dear child–death!" he said, seriously. "People seem to forget that when they rush into matrimony. But–my darling–" he looked anxiously into her half-averted face–"do you mean to say that this entanglement of your friend's is all you have on your mind–all? Joan"–he grasped her hands–"trust me–your husband–almost your husband–anything you may tell me–will be sacred!"

CHAPTER XII

Joan shuddered. To hear that fiat of her lover's–that only death or the divorce court could free a girl in her position from that slight yet deadly tie–and to hear it uttered with such seemingly heartless barbarity–was almost too ghastly to be borne.

She hardly understood his last impassioned appeal to her to confide in him–all–all that was troubling her. She stared miserably out upon the river. A steam launch went puffing up stream. Some one on deck was singing an apparently comic song to the strumming of a banjo; for shrill feminine laughter, mingled with ironic "bravos" was borne upon the breeze as the verse came to an end. Then the band engaged for the afternoon struck up a bright little march on the lawn the other side of the shrubbery. The mockery of the careless gaiety of ordinary life jarred her beyond endurance.

"Let us go away from here," she exclaimed, starting up, and glancing wildly at Vansittart.

His heart misgave him. This meant–he felt–that she was concealing something from him. Well! he must have patience, and bide his time.

"Presently," he said, in tender, but authoritative tones–and he drew her gently, but firmly, back on the seat by his side. "You must recover yourself first, darling–telling me of this wretched affair of your friend's has upset you! And really a girl who would be so reckless and foolish as to damn her whole life in

advance by linking it legally with that of the first adventurer who came across her, is hardly worth your sympathy, by the way! Come, cheer up, or people may, will think–well, they will make a shrewd guess that there is something going on between us, and you don't want that, do you?"

"Just now, I don't seem to care!" she replied–and her glance was one of slight defiance. "You are too hard upon my poor friend–she was a dupe rather than–what was it? 'reckless, foolish'!"

"I am afraid I must plead guilty to having scant sympathy with dupes," he said, somewhat slightingly. Her manner had hurt him unconscionably.

"I suppose that is why you fell in with my idea of making dupes of my aunt and uncle!" She gave a shrill laugh, so unlike her ordinary sweet, pleasant laugh–the laugh that had haunted him those lonely nights and days in strange foreign lands, when he had striven to forget her–that his temporary annoyance gave way to concern.

"That is hardly kind!" he exclaimed, reproachfully. "Remember, it was not I who wished for this extraordinary secrecy! However, let that pass. One of the things I brought you here to tell you, dearest, is that I have hinted broadly to your uncle that I mean to make a dead set at you, and conquer all your various objections to marriage–and that I have his entire concurrence and sympathy! Is not that comforting?"

"It may be, to you," she said. "Honestly–dear"–she suddenly softened, and gave him a pathetic, beseeching glance–"I am good for nothing to-day–the past seems to have its clutch upon me, and I cannot feel with the present, or believe in a future! You must have patience with me—-"

"You shall believe in a future, my angel!" he said emphatically–that look had swept away the cobwebs of doubt and vague suspicion, and he was once again the lover alone, as he drew her towards him and seemed to devour her with his eyes. "Listen, dearest–you have only to fix any day after a week is at an end, for our marriage, and the yacht will be ready. It is looking delightful–and I have already stocked it with a lot of things I think you will like. All I want now is one of your old frocks–to have some made by the pattern–and just one little shoe and glove"–he spoke hurriedly, somehow he shrank from such husband-like allusions as irreverent until she was actually and irrevocably Lady Vansittart–"may I, can I, have them, do you think? You see, I want you to be thoroughly, completely comfortable! And I do not mean the yacht to touch any port until we are absolutely compelled to–and then I shall choose some little station where one could not get ladies' dresses and things."

"How long shall we be able to wander without people knowing anything about us?" she asked eagerly. He was pleased–reassured–to see how the idea of a lengthy, secret honeymoon revivified her. She must love him! How else should

she wish to sail the oceans of the globe with him, alone, as her companion?

"Dearest, that will be for you to say," he fondly returned, gazing rapturously at the exquisite profile, waxen and delicate against the drooping black feathers of her picture hat. If only the lines under those beautiful eyes were less sharply defined, and the droop in those soft, sweet lips less ominous of secret sorrow!

But, as he himself termed it, at that juncture in their *tête-à-tête* Joan seemed to "take a favourable turn." First, seemingly roused from her melancholy mood by talk of their approaching flight and consequent life on the high seas, she became steadily brighter as the afternoon progressed. Returning to the augmented crowd of Lady C—-'s fashionable guests, they mingled with the rest, Lord Vansittart behaving with a decorous respect, and comporting himself admirably as a rejected suitor returned to the fray. Only when, by Sir Thomas' special invitation, he made one of the party on the coach, and throughout the home-going sat as close into Joan's pocket as he dared, did he permit himself to drop the carefully-assumed manner it had cost him such pains to maintain.

But, later, he was rewarded. After dining with Joan and a few guests of Sir Thomas', he spent a delightful half-hour with her on the balcony, among the flowers under the awning. No one could see them from below–opposite, the trees in the enclosure were dusky masses in the starlight. The summer night seemed charged with love-murmurs–the glittering heavens to twinkle joyously of the great emotion which brought forth the Universe.

"Only a few days–and you will belong to me for ever!" he said, rapturously. Almost as alone in their sought-for seclusion as if they were already riding the waves of the southern seas in the ship that was to see their first matrimonial bliss, he held her in his arms, and tenderly, reverently–with almost the passionate devotion of an anchorite kissing cherished relics–kissed her pale cheeks, her sweet mouth, her beautiful, thoughtful brows. "Darling–I will make you forget all your troubles–your self-reproach–everything that can possibly detract from your happiness! I promise you I will! Do, do say that you believe that I am capable of doing it!"

"If any one is, you are!" she murmured, clinging to him. "Somehow, tonight, I feel happier than usual–as if life had something in it, after all! And it is you who have made me cheer up–a few hours with you has given me a certain confidence–or rather, I should say, a hope–that perhaps the day may come when I shall be able to forget–everything–but my life with you!"

"God grant it!" he piously exclaimed; and for that night at least his prayer seemed answered–for after he and the other guests had departed, Joan retired to her room and seeking her couch, slept more tranquilly and dreamlessly than she had done since those evil days when Victor Mercier cajoled her into marrying him–and when almost on the morrow, she had learnt that her husband was an

absconding criminal.

She awoke, too, with a new sense of safety–and of the very present refuge in her trouble–Vansittart.

"Even if he got to know–he would not turn against me, I am sure he would not!" she told herself, as she lay and thought of him, smiling. For once she looked at peace and happy. "I feel it! How strange it would be if it turned out that he would have to fight my battles with uncle? But such things do happen–in real life as well as in fiction."

She lay and mused happily on the delightful subject–Vansittart, and the coming days when they would be all in all to each other–until Julie came with the hot water and the letters.

Then–it was as if death itself laid a cold hand on her heart–for there was one in the detested writing of Victor Mercier. He had dared–risked–writing to her openly in her own home, under her uncle's roof!

What did it mean?

CHAPTER XIII

The latent sense of being arbiter of a beautiful young woman's fate–which had been perhaps Victor Mercier's only sentiment in Joan's regard during their separation–developed, on that evening they met in the Regent's Park, into a certain passionate exultation in possessing her for his own, evidently against her wish. But when he felt convinced, from Paul Naz' innocent betrayal of society talk, that the girl who was legally his wife had a lover, and that already their names were coupled together, the smouldering resentment that her girlish passion for him was dead, burst into a fierce flame of absolute hatred.

He had enjoyed abandoning himself to the enjoyment of Vera's love with a double zest–because it was a secret revenge upon Joan. He had gone about after he had received Joan's letter postponing their next meeting, making subtle and refined plans for the long-drawn-out punishment of his "faithless wife," as he termed her. He told himself he was glad of a week's interlude. If he had seen her then, he might have betrayed his wrath and desire for revenge. His tactics were quite the opposite of that.

"First, I must compromise her," he decided. "I must have her actions now, at the actual moment, in my power–she must have been alone with me in such a

way as to turn this noble lord who wants her against her, should he know of it! Yes–if she had refused to see me, she might have gone in for a divorce! But if I have her condonation for the past on my side, she will have no case–even if she would not have entirely damned herself with this cur of a lover!"

This accomplished–something tangible in the present to hold over her head–he would take her away and make constant and passionate love to her. He told himself grimly that there would be a fantastic delight in this uxorious enjoyment of a wife whose heart was given to another man, which fell to the lot of few. The secret ecstasy would be the knowledge that he had left the loving arms of a devoted girl who was ready to die for him, and could return to them at any moment–for he well knew that Vera's infatuation for him included wholesale acceptance of any lie he chose to invent to account for his absence, or any detail of his life.

"Then–I can play upon them all in turn, as upon a set of musical instruments," he promised himself. "The uncle will do what I ask–snob as he is, parvenu, beggar on horseback!–to hide what he will think disgrace! The lover–well, he shall be neatly disposed of by-and-bye. He shall see me with her in my arms, somehow, somewhere, somewhen! Upon my word, that will be almost as much torture to them both as the old-fashioned, out-of-date revenges. It is a poor revenge upon people to kill them! Let them live–and thwart them, make them writhe in their impotence to do what they want!"

And during this week Vera must be plunged more hopelessly and abjectly in love, so that she would become such a mere echo of himself that she would do, or not do, whatever he suggested, without so much as a second thought.

So he devoted himself to her, and spent his money freely in the process. He bought her pretty trinkets, and some ready-made costumes and becoming hats–and almost every day took her some excursion. They had a day at Brighton, one at Windsor, one in Richmond Park, one up river. That was the day before the one in which the crucial interview with Joan was to occur; and he chose to assume a portentous gravity, and to tell her that he must go away for a time.

"My sweetest pet, this being with you is pretty well driving me mad with impatience to get rid of that cat of a woman who keeps us apart," he told her, as, after they had had a little *fête champêtre* of cold chicken and champagne, he lounged at her side in a boat drawn up under the willows of a little creek. "So I have made up my mind to set about it at once! What do you say?"

"Dearest!" was all she could reply. Her beautiful blue eyes gazed at him through a mist of emotion. How deliriously dainty she looked–flickering shadows cast by the willow branches on her *petite*, white-clad figure–the heat of a mid-summer noon bringing a rich rose glow to her rounded cheeks, so much more delicately pretty without war-paint.

"It will necessitate my being absent for a little while, but that you must not mind," he went on, judicially, resting his head on her shoulder and thinking what a wonderful provision of Nature it was–this unbounded credulity of enamoured women. Did they really believe in their men, he wondered, a little contemptuously–or did their frantic desire for their love to be returned swallow up everything that stood in its way? "When one wants a good thing, one must be content to make a little sacrifice for it, eh, darling? I don't think you are as selfish as most of your sex, I will say that for you!"

She glanced at him gratefully. One word of praise from his lips recompensed her for all the drudgery, hard work, and mental suffering of the past years–when, not knowing where he was or what had become of him–whether he was dead or in prison, or fallen among thieves in some unreachable country–she had slaved and toiled nearly the four-and-twenty hours through to keep a home together in which, some day, to welcome back the wanderer, or even the total wreck of him.

"And now you must help me in something," he went on, sliding his arm about her slender waist and looking up into her face with those sinister, penetrating black eyes, which were, perhaps, the deterrent when dogs growled and snarled at, and children fled from, him. "I am not one of those silly men who talk about their business–who chatter, prate, prattle, and do nothing!–I say little–but act! (The secret of successful life, my dear!) I have not been idle since I returned with the hope of winning you for my wife. Already I have found out much of the woman who was my ruin for a time with her unscrupulous devilry, which will help me immensely to free myself from that obnoxious tie. But I have still to see a very important witness against her, and I can only see the man at my leisure at home. Do you think that if I appoint to-morrow night, you can persuade mother to go to the theatre with you?"

"Don't you know? She is going to the entertainment given for the patients at the Hospital," returned Vera, eagerly. "That will be the very thing for you! You will have the house to yourself. Mr. Dobson is going, of course!" (Mr. Dobson was a student lodger).

"Everything smiles upon us, my love," he said, tenderly, grimly congratulating himself on his good luck. And he gave himself up to love-making for the remainder of the summer afternoon–returning earlier than he had intended, though, to write that letter to Joan: the letter which Julie brought among others to her bedside, and which she read with blanched cheeks and sinking heart:–

"You must not go to the old place, but come to me here, to-morrow night, Wednesday, at nine. If you fail, I intend to call upon you without demur, and

at all risk. Take a cab to the corner of Westminster Bridge, the other side of the river, and then inquire for Haythorn Street.

V. a'COURT."

CHAPTER XIV

The tone of the missive seemed to half paralyse poor Joan. For a little while she lay prone on her bed, unable to think, answering Julie mechanically as she hovered about, pulling up the blinds, getting the bath ready, placing the dainty garments ready to hand.

Then, with the first returning pang of despair–for that letter told her that she need not imagine she was in the least secure–a sword of Damocles hung over her unhappy head–she cast about what she must do.

Go, of course! that was certain. And make terms–or, rather, accede *in toto* to anything he might propose for that flight of theirs which was never to take place.

"I had better take money with me," she told herself. "And–to a certain extent I must take Julie into my confidence." "Julie, I have no money by me, do you know," she said, irrelevantly, as Julie was dressing her golden hair, and wondering why her young mistress' beautiful face was so pale and *triste*. Julie usually cashed her young lady's cheques drawn to "Self" for pocket-money.

"Shall I go for madamoiselle–after breakfast?" asked Julie, sweetly, as she vigorously combed the glistening hairs from the jewelled hair brush, one of Sir Thomas' frequent gifts to his niece. She had always liked her beautiful young mistress, but since Joan had sympathized with her love affair with Paul Naz, she had been ready and willing to fly to the ends of the earth to do her bidding, if need be.

"No. I am going shopping in the carriage, and you shall come with me. I don't like your taking much money into omnibuses, Julie, so I think I shall draw a large sum at once. It is perfectly safe locked up in this room."

Julie readily acquiesced–and during the morning drove with Joan to several shops, and to the Bank, where she cashed a cheque for a hundred and fifty pounds in rouleaux of gold, which she carried in a bag to the carriage. As they were

driving home Joan told her she wanted her to help her in an errand of charity that very evening.

"Mais certainement, mademoiselle!" the girl readily exclaimed. "To-night? I can easily go out another evening."

"I don't want you to do that," returned Joan. "What I want is this. My uncle knows nothing of this poor person I am helping, and I do not want him to know. I thought that I might take a sudden fancy to go–say, to Madame Tussauds', which I have not seen for years–that we might start together in a cab–my uncle and aunt are going out to dinner, and have the landau–and then I will drop you at a certain spot, and meet you there again when you are returning home."

Julie acquiesced with acclamation–and flushed with pleasure at being admitted to share a secret with the sweet, proud girl who would, she was certain, very soon be a great lady. If she had her doubts about the "poor person," and imagined, from what she knew by experience of Joan's eccentricity–as she considered her mistress' coldness hitherto in regard to the opposite sex–that the nocturnal escapade meant an assignation with the charming milord who intended to make a great lady of Miss Thorne–she kept it to herself.

Mistress and maid carried out their plan without hindrance. Sir Thomas teased his niece a little slily about the sudden fancy for waxworks–he had, like Julie, some *arrière-pensée* not unconnected with Vansittart–but he made no objection to the expedition. Nor did Lady Thorne, to whom, after his talk with Vansittart, he had said, after giving her some broad hints–"my dear, understand this once and for all–if we give Joan her head, and don't interfere in the least, she will be the Viscountess Vansittart before we know where we are!" Shortly after Joan had had a solitary tea-dinner in her sitting-room upstairs–a meal she affected when she preferred not to accompany Sir Thomas and Lady Thorne to a long, dreary, dinner-party of old fogies–mistress and maid started off in a four-wheeled cab to which a man-servant pompously gave the address–"Madame Tussord's."

Julie had admired, with a French girl's admiration, her young lady's *savoir faire*, when she had suggested that they should actually make a tour of the exhibition and take an opportunity of slipping quietly out when others likely to absorb the door-keeper's attention were coming in, and had readily acquiesced in the idea.

They alighted at the entrance, paid their money, walked leisurely in, strolled about, apparently examining the effigies with interest then steering unostentatiously towards the door by which they had entered; they waited until a number of lively children were flocking obstreperously upstairs and had to be held in check at the turnstile, when they issued forth, and walked along the Marylebone Road.

When they came to a church, Joan stopped. "Will you remember this place?" she asked. "You are sure? Then I will leave you here, and meet you again at the exact spot at eleven o'clock. If you are here first, wait until I come. On no account are you to go home alone–without me! Do you understand?"

Julie's protestations that she understood were sincere and hearty. Joan said no more, but took the bag from her–Julie had mentally commented upon its weight, and wondered who was the lucky person to be benefited by its contents–and with an easy "*au revoir*, then," was gone.

She sped along the street as much in the shadow as she could, lest a glance of recognition might by any possibility be cast upon her from any of the carriages which drove by almost in numbers, for it was the climax of an unusually gay London season. Then, when she began to meet crawling cabs and hansoms, she hailed one, gave the order, "Westminster Bridge–the Southwark end," and sank back in the corner a little spent and exhausted by the first part of her escapade.

"So far, so good," she told herself, drawing a long breath of mingled anxiety and disgust. Although she had steadily pulled herself together, willed resolutely to go through the tragic farce with Victor Mercier, as her only alternative–her loathing of the part she had to play was so intense that at times she felt tempted to take a leap into the black waters of the great river instead of submitting to his endearments. As the cab drove briskly towards Westminster, and her eyes rested miserably on the familiar landmarks of the great city, so beautiful in its nightly robe of the mingled light and darkness which is so typical of its very soul–she said to herself in a wild moment–"death or Vansittart–which?" and the memory of her beloved one's fine frank face, glorified into absolute beauty by the strong tenderness of his deep love–won.

"Even Victor's touch–his kiss," she grimly told herself, "are not too much to pay for a lifetime with *him*!"

A clock informed her that it was considerably past nine o'clock. So much the better! The shorter that hated *tête-à-tête* with Mercier would be, the more thankful she would feel.

The air blowing freshly down stream as they crossed the bridge, revived her. She alighted, paid the cabman, and taking her bag tightly in her hand, passed some roughs who were shouting noisily as they came along, by stepping into the road; then seeing the helmet and tunic of a policeman silhouetted against the sky–still dully red after the sunset–she went across the road to him.

"Can you direct me to Haythorn Street?" she asked.

"Haythorn Street? Yes, miss. Straight along that road, and first to the left."

Evidently the street where her bugbear at present lived was an ordinary one, and respectable. The policeman's tone of voice suggested that! She went along the road, which was rather dark, until she came to a neat-looking street of

small, uniformly built houses. Yes, this was Haythorn Street–she read the name by the light of the gas lamp close by. Now to find the number! The corner was number one, so she went on at once, and then her heart gave a dull, leaden thud against her chest. She saw a dark figure on a little balcony a few houses up, which disappeared as she advanced. When she came up to number twelve, the street door stood open–Victor came out, took her hand, and led her in.

"Welcome, my dearest wife!" he exclaimed, embracing her. Then he closed the door. She saw an odious, triumphant smile on his sharp, handsome features, and in his bright dark eyes. He was carefully dressed. Although only half a Frenchman, he had the southern taste for fantasy in costume. A diamond stud shone in his embroidered shirt-front, a button-hole of some white, strongly-scented blossom was in his coat.

"You are frightened, my own!" he caressingly said, with a suggestion of proprietorship which made her inwardly shudder.

"Don't be! We are quite alone in the house, you and I! And I will take precautions to keep us so," he added, returning to the door and putting up the chain.

CHAPTER XV

Joan staggered against the wall with sudden horror as Victor walked away and adjusted the chain which shut out possible intruders. Alone in the house–with him–and he was legally her husband! Could she face it? "I must, I will!" she said to herself, clenching her teeth and summoning all the fortitude she possessed to her aid.

As he turned, he noticed her pallor, the wild glitter in her great eyes. "At bay," he thought. "Mad with passion for another man–hates me–what a delicious situation!"

"Come upstairs, dearest," he said, in the new, abhorrently caressing tone which seemed to curdle her blood. "What? The staircase is too narrow for us both? Then I will go first." He tripped lightly up the steps, which were covered with oilcloth, and after turning up the gas on the landing, stood smiling upon her as she slowly, reluctantly, ascended. As she reached the top, he opened a door, and she saw a well-lighted room with a book-case, good, solid chairs, and a new Kidderminster carpet. But a curious odour floated out to meet her.

"What an odd smell of drugs!" she exclaimed, standing on the threshold. It seemed to take her back years, that pungent odour, to the schoolroom–when she went into the schoolmistress' little medicine-room to be physicked.

"I am very sorry, but I happen to be on sufferance in these rooms–their real tenant is a medical student, who has got leave because of a series of catastrophes in his family. Look here! This looks like business, doesn't it?"

He opened a cupboard door, and she saw a skeleton hanging on a peg. "Oh!" she cried, shrinking back.

He laughed. "I thought you were strong minded," he said. "But somehow I am rather glad you are not. But you are not going to stand there all the evening, are you, because there are a few harmless bones in the cupboard? There are worse things in creation than skeletons!" He spoke meaningly.

She watched him as he seated himself in a revolving chair by a writing table. There was a certain insolence in his manner and tone, as well as in his depreciatory stare, as he gazed slightingly at her and twisted his small black moustache. A diamond twinkled on his little finger.

Somehow she took courage from his shallow, careless attitude–and she was strongly stirred by a wild idea that flashed upon her. She would make use of her own scheme with Vansittart to cajole him into waiting until the mine was sprung, and he had lost her for ever!

"I am not strong-minded, more's the pity, or I should not be here to-night," she said, firmly, and she entered and seated herself opposite him, once more mistress of herself and her emotions. "Why not? Because I should have been with you long ago, if I'd had the spirit some women have!"

"You would–have followed me?" he asked, a little taken back, puzzled.

"I would! Because I believed in you!" she said, honestly. "I thought you more sinned against than sinning!"

"That is right! A woman's first duty is to believe in her husband," he exclaimed, leering at her.

"Her husband!" For a moment she was off guard, she spoke with scathing contempt. "A husband, who leaves his wife month after month, year after year, without a word!"

"A real woman would have searched for me the world through, when she had money to command as you have had!" he said, leaning back, folding his arms, and contemplating her with a savage, vindictive expression.

"Money? I have only an allowance!" she exclaimed, bitterly, and with a real bitterness. It had sometimes maddened her since his return, when she thought of what she might do if only her uncle had given her the control of a small fortune, instead of doling out an income. "And that is where our difficulty lies, Victor. I have taken a week to think hard about it. Suppose we hire a yacht under another

name, and wander about for a time, and then I appeal to my uncle? I think he would be inclined to forgive–everything."

"If you remember, my dear, that was my idea, not yours," he said, leaning back in his chair, puzzled. Was it possible that Paul Naz, and the people who coupled Joan with that "milord" Paul had spoken of, were mistaken, and that she cared for him still–only her pride and vanity had kept her from showing it? "Not a yacht–bah, I detest the sea–and to be shut up in a boat! Not even with you, my beautiful wife, could I stand such *gêne*! No, no, I have a better idea than that. Let us lose ourselves in Paris! You know nothing, you are still a baby, if you have not seen and enjoyed life there! But you are a baby–hein? I must teach my child-wife what life really is."

Slightly exhilarated by his new view of Joan, as possibly as potentially great a victim of his fascinations as poor deluded Vera, he sprang up, and going to her, took her in his arms. The instinct to fling, thrust him violently from her, was cruelly strong. But she–in an agony of woe and love–remembered Vansittart, and mentally thought "for his sake, for his sake," as she willed passively to endure, while Victor kept his lips long and firmly on hers. At last she could bear it no longer, and freed herself with a sudden frantic effort.

"You will suffocate–choke me!" she gasped, and her eyes seemed as if starting from her head–her voice came thickly from her quivering lips.

"Well, I will be gentler, my tender dove!" he said a little satirically. He doubted her again. If she had had "any mind of him," would not that kiss of his have effectually broken down all barriers of pique, and launched her on a sea of passion? But there was charm to such a *gourmet* in love, as he considered himself, in appropriating what she disliked to give. He took her hand. "Come and sit with me on our friend the medico's sofa under the window there!" he coaxingly said. "I want to look at my wife, to kiss her, embrace her after these years of longing, of waiting!"

She gave him an involuntary glance of horror and terror. "Presently," she stammered. "First let me give you the money I have brought you–let us settle about our journey, when it is to be."

He stood still for a few moments, gazing steadily at her. That look had told him much–the mention of money when he asked for love told him still more.

"Very well," he said, after a pause, during which she wondered whether it would end in his killing her–in that lonely house she was at the mercy of any sudden outburst of anger of his. Just then she felt that death would be preferable to another kiss of the kind which still stung her icy lips.

"I suppose the money is in that bag?" he went on, going to the writing-table and lifting it. "You want me to take care of it for you, as your contribution to our honeymoon?" He spoke sneeringly.

"Yes," she said, watching him as he seated himself before the table. Then she went to him, took up the bag, and shook out six common leather purses she had bought at the bazaar in a great emporium that morning, and filled during the afternoon. Purses and gold alike were untraceable. "There are a hundred and twenty-five sovereigns. Count them, won't you?"

"No! I will trust you," he said, with a sinister smile. "I may be a fool for my pains, but I trust you."

She sat as if spellbound, watching him take a small bunch of keys from his pocket and open a worn old travelling desk on the table. It was his own, that desk, she mechanically thought, as she noted the half obliterated letters "V.M." on the flap, and wondered what was passing within his mind to cause that dark frown, that cruel look in his black eyes, as he slowly packed in the purses one by one.

"It is a beggarly sum that you have brought me, do you know?" he said, turning to her with sudden fierceness–and his lips were drawn back, his teeth gleamed white under his moustache. "I am too good to you! I have that here in this desk with which I could coin thousands to-morrow if I pleased. I have only to show your letters, the certificate of marriage, to your damnably miserly old uncle, and he would at once make terms. And you–you would precious soon find me as much money as I wanted if I threatened you to take the lot to your lover, Lord Vansittart!"

If a bomb had suddenly fallen upon the table before her, Joan could hardly have had a greater shock. She staggered back and fell limply into a chair, staring at him. Her lips opened to speak, but no sound came. She was livid as a corpse.

He was frightened. If she should choose to have a prolonged faint–such as he had known some women to have–and Vera returned before he could get her away!

"Don't make a scene here, d'ye hear?" he savagely cried–and he went to the cupboard, and after a clinking of glass, he brought out a bottle half full of brandy, and two tumblers, and poured some into each.

"Take some of that, it'll pull you together," he said, not unkindly, as he held the glass to her lips. But she kept them firmly closed, and faintly shook her head.

"No! Water!" she whispered, hoarsely. "Water!"

"Don't be so silly! It's not poison! It wouldn't suit my book to get rid of you, my love!" he scornfully exclaimed, reassured by her being conscious, and speaking. Then he set down her glass on the table, and taking up his, drank off its contents at a gulp. "There! You see it is not! However, I'll get you some water, if you like."

He crossed to the door, opened it, and went downstairs. She sat up, listening to his footsteps. A new idea had flashed upon her. She glanced first at the

desk, hungrily, wildly, then at the cupboard. Then she rose, stepped cautiously, supporting herself, for she was giddy, by the chairs, and peered eagerly in at the half-open cupboard door, where the skeleton hung. She had seen shelves of bottles. Scanning these, she selected one marked "Morphia–Poison"–shook it–it was half-full–and returned to the table. Taking out the stopper, she poured the contents into the bottle of brandy, swift as a flash returned the morphia-bottle to its place on the shelf, then, going back to her chair, leant against the wall in the exhausted attitude she had been in when he left her.

"He drinks," she gloomily told herself. "He will take more. I must make him fall asleep. Then I will secure those letters."

CHAPTER XVI

She closed her eyes and listened to the patter of his footsteps, running up the oilcloth-covered stairs. He came in evidently breathless.

"Don't say I didn't make haste," he said, pantingly, as he poured some water from the glass jug he was carrying into his own tumbler, which was empty. "You won't mind your husband's glass, of course." He handed it to her.

"No," said Joan, who felt sternly apathetic–with but one dominant feeling–to circumvent this fiendish being, and possess the letters and certificate with which he threatened her. And she drank the water off at a draught, even as he had drunk the brandy. The glass must be empty to hold the drugged spirit.

"Great Scott!" he laughed, contemptuously, as he took the empty tumbler and looked curiously at it. "To see any one gulp down water like that gives me the shivers! Pah, I must positively warm my nerves after seeing you do it!"

She watched him, fascinated, as he poured out another half-tumbler of the now drugged brandy, and dashed a few teaspoonfuls of water into it.

"That is how I take my liquor–like a man!" he said, after a long drink, setting the nearly emptied glass down on the table. "Ah! I feel better of my temper already. You must not pay attention to what I said just now, old girl! I didn't mean it, really I didn't! Some one said something to me about a Lord Vansittart or somebody having boasted he would have you, or die. You doubtless know of the fellow! But you must be accustomed to that sort of thing by this time, eh? Your uncle has a big fortune to leave." He smiled sardonically.

She thrilled–a curious, cold thrill, at the insult. But she controlled herself.

"Victor–I have always remembered that I was your wife," she solemnly said. "My uncle has teased me to marry. I have never–encouraged–any one."

"Then you have a sneaking liking for your 'darling,' as you used to call me, eh!" he said, a little thickly. The brandy was already making him feel less critical and sceptical in his mental attitude towards Joan and mankind in general. "Come and sit on the sofa under the window. There is hardly a breath of air in this blessed little room. How I hate tiny rooms! I hope this is the last I shall ever be in!"

He held out his hand. What was she to do? After a swift query to herself, she determined to dare all–to woo him to that drugged sleep during which she would abstract his keys, open that desk, and steal those incriminating documents.

She allowed him to lead her to the sofa and, seating himself in the corner, encircle her with his arm. The evening air came in through the window which opened upon the little balcony where, coming along the street, she had seen him, a dark figure in the twilight, awaiting her.

"It is pleasant here, is it not?" he said, with a sigh, telling himself that he must have taken a bigger "dose" of that brandy than was prudent at this juncture, for it seemed to have affected his speech. His tongue was not so ready in its compliance as usual, and his eyes felt stiff, his eyelids heavy. "Perhaps it was running upstairs so fast, not knowing what she might not be up to," he thought, remembering a caution given him by a doctor that his heart was weak–a timely warning he had derided at the time, but which often crossed his mind when he "felt queer."

"Yes, it is very nice," said Joan, nerving herself to act–to conceal her violent loathing of him. "But as you like plenty of air about you, why not do as I suggest? Let us start in a steamer–a sailing vessel if you please–so that all trace of us is lost for a time, and uncle and aunt will not be able to imagine what has become of me."

She talked away, pitching her voice in a slumberous, monotonous tone, as she had learnt to do from a nurse, when Lady Thorne had a serious and tedious illness after her first year with them as their adopted daughter. The terror of the crisis, the tremendous issues depending upon whether the brandy she had drugged would send Victor to sleep and allow of her stealing her letters from that desk, lent her eloquence. She painted her uncle and aunt's state of mind when they would find her flown, in vivid colours–she held out the prospect of unlimited wealth they two would eventually enjoy–all to gain time until the morphia should hold him powerless. It was a big dose he had taken, she hopefully thought, even were he one of those unhappy mortals addicted to the use or abuse of narcotics. And as she talked on and on, she stealthily watched his face, his eyes.

"That is all–very fine–and large, as they say," he vulgarly returned–and wondered in a vague, stupefied way why his voice sounded so far off–an echo of

itself. "But–but–well, I–like–Paris–Paris–d'ye understand–Paris–you fool–what 'yer starin'–at–? Can't ye get–me–some–no, no–water–water–"

Something heavy was gathering in his chest. He felt breathless. He tried to push her away, but he could not move.

She jumped up, startled by his pallor, his sunken look–the gathering purple round his eyes. His nose stood out sharply from his face. She poured the drugged brandy into her untouched glass of the spirit, and filling the empty glass with water, brought it to him. He seemed to squint curiously at it, but allowed her to hold it to his lips. He swallowed a little, but it trickled from his mouth. What was this horrid feeling–this weight–powerlessness?–he asked himself–stupidly–then he thought suddenly of Vera, and the dread of Joan's being found with him by her brought a temporary rally from the strange, helpless drowsiness which had him in its grip.

"Go–go! Now! You–mustn't be found here–d'ye hear me? Go!" he spluttered.

"Let me stay till you are better," pleaded Joan. But he gave such a choking oath that, remembering she could feign leaving him and return, she pretended to obey.

"You will write and tell me when to come again, won't you?" she said; then, as he staggered into a sitting position and stammered out another terrifying oath, she fled, with a backward glance of terror and misery over her shoulder.

Down the narrow stairs, along the hall she went. Unchaining the door, she opened it for an instant or two, then closed it with a slight bang, as one might do from the outside. Then she leant up against the door silently and listened.

There was not a sound in the house into which she was shut, alone, with the man she had drugged. She could hear her quickened pulses as they ebbed back into a more normal beat. From below came a steady ticking–a kitchen clock, she thought, sounding loud in the empty, sparsely-carpeted dwelling. Then it struck; listening, fascinated, she counted eleven strokes.

CHAPTER XVII

"Merciful Heaven–it can't be that!" mentally exclaimed the unhappy girl. "Why–people will surely be coming in–I shall be found–and he–like that–with the drugged brandy in the bottle–and I shall not even have got my letters out of

that desk!"

She silently wrung her hands; then, determined to dare or lose all, she crept slowly, cautiously back, along the hall, up the stairs, and peeped in at the half-opened door.

He was lying almost prone on the sofa–his head thrown back–slowly, slowly snoring.

She stole in and gazed fearfully at him. He looked corpse-like, but she thought he would naturally do that after that dose of morphia. Insensible! Peering into his face, she saw his eyes, filmy, fishy, between the half-closed lids. She touched his breast pocket, cautiously–her heart beating fast and strong. Nothing there but the white handkerchief, arranged in dandified fashion. As she stooped the scent of the flower in his buttonhole turned her deadly sick. All seemed to surge around.

"This won't do!" she told herself, wildly. Then, with a violent effort, she lifted the hand that lay limply upon his knee across his trouser pocket. It moved easily. She laid it down with a light, almost tender touch, as she remembered she had seen him return his keys to the very pocket where she now saw them bulging, and putting her fingers gingerly into the pocket, she drew them out.

"Thank God!" she murmured, almost hysterically, and, telling herself that if only she could hold witnesses in her hands to that absurd, so-called marriage of him with her, and could dictate terms, every farthing she might inherit from her uncle should be his, and more–she went to the table, found the tiny key in the bunch, and opened the desk.

Just as she was beginning to remove the leather purses of gold she had brought him from the well of the desk, so as to search beneath, a prolonged, curious, hissing snore seemed to arrest her very breath.

She stopped and went to him. The hissing sound was barely over–how curious it was, that half-snore, half breath! He lay still still–still as—-

"Oh, no, no! It cannot be that! He looks asleep, and as happy as if he were an innocent little child!" she assured herself, returning to the table and to her task. Out she quickly took them, one by one, those silly purses–how puerile money and all those things seemed, she told herself, at such a moment–and then peered anxiously at the packets of papers.

Eureka! Her girlish handwriting! There was a package–she drew it out, and in the middle projected a paper–she could not undo the knots–there was no time–but she turned down a corner and saw printed letters–a margin—-

Seizing her little bag, she thrust them in, and rapidly restoring the purses to their place, locked the desk.

"Shall I put the keys back in his pocket?" she asked herself. "No! I can leave them on the table. It is of no use trying to hide my having taken the letters. He

will discover it."

She glanced round the room. What else must she do? She frowned and bit her lip as the brandy bottle caught her eye. There was still remaining a certain quantity of the drugged liquid.

"Any more would certainly make him very ill, if it did not kill him–and he will very likely start drinking again when he wakes up," she mused. "Can I pour it away?" She looked uncertainly at the door. No, it was too hazardous. Then she remembered she had seen some brown paper in that cupboard where the skeleton hung.

Once more she went to the cupboard and took out a crumpled sheet of brown paper, smiling almost derisively at the grinning skull of the hanging skeleton.

"How true you were when you said there were worse things than skeletons," she thought, inwardly apostrophizing the sleeper, as she quickly wrapped the bottle in the paper. Then, mentally wishing him a better and more generous spirit in her regard when he awoke, she ran rapidly downstairs with bag and bottle, and in another moment was in the street.

Her success, her escape, filled her with a joy which made her feel almost delirious. Still, she noticed a hansom with a lady in it drive past, and with an almost contemptuous mental comment–"she cannot be living at Number 12," she looked back over her shoulder, then stopped short, and leaning against the rails, watched.

The hansom did stop at the house she had left. More, the lady alighted–briskly, as if she were as young as she was slim and alert–looked up and down the street, as if, indeed, Joan thought, she, too, had noticed herself, and wondered what she was doing in Haythorn Street at that hour, and then, after paying the driver, ran up the steps and let herself in with her latchkey.

"A lodger," thought Joan. "I wonder if she knows him!" Then she turned and almost fled along the street, for the cabman had turned and waved his whip. To take that cab would be madness! Besides, she meant to lay that bottle quietly in a corner at the very first opportunity.

It came a few moments before she reached Westminster Bridge. She saw a doorway in the shadow, and quick as lightning she had deposited her bottle there and had gone onward. Almost a slight unconsciousness possessed her after that. She hailed a cab, drove to the spot where she had left Julie, and alighted.

"I have been here since eleven, mademoiselle!" exclaimed Julie, coming forward after she saw the cab drive off. She had been confiding in her lover–or rather, Paul Naz, as his friend Victor Mercier's honorary detective, had been worming matters deftly from her–and his advice had been to her to be very, ah, most exceedingly discreet, and the young lady would for her own sake prove

their best friend in the future. "It is nearly half-past now–shall I call a cab?"

A crawling hansom was hailed, and before midnight a sleepy man-servant of Sir Thomas admitted them. He was just going to bed, he said, in a drowsy and somewhat injured tone. "I told Sir Thomas and my lady you was in and gone to bed, m'm," he said, almost reproachfully. "They come in half an hour back! I am sure I thought you was, or I shouldn't have said it!"

"It doesn't matter in the least, Robert," Joan cheerfully assured him, and she went to her room with Julie, feeling more elated than she had done since the awful morning four years ago when she had to accept the fact that she was the grass-widow of a blackguard. Julie speedily dismissed, she spent a couple of hours over her letters.

The printed paper was her marriage certificate. The letters were six in number, nearly worn into shreds, and black with dirt. She read them through, she made a note of the dates on the certificate, then she burnt them under her empty grate.

"Once more I am free!" was her last exultant thought before she slept. "If I keep Victor at bay for a few days, I shall be off and away with *him*; and without those documents Victor is practically powerless! If he gets another certificate, Joan Thorne might have been any one–some one married under an assumed name. He has nothing to support his assertions!"

CHAPTER XVIII

When Joan awoke after a few hours' slumber, it was to a sense of racking headache and utter exhaustion. She could only vaguely feel, rather than remember, the crucial events of the previous night.

"A punishment for having dared to drug poor unfortunate Victor," she told herself, as Julie, after administering tea, left her alone in the darkened room. She could almost pity Victor Mercier, now that she had circumvented him by stealing those incriminating documents, and thereby, if not entirely destroying, certainly weakening, his hold upon her. "His headache, if he has one, as I expect he has–he looked awfully ill lying there under morphia–can hardly be worse than mine," she mused.

It was a long, weary day of pain. Towards evening, however, her suffering abated. "I will get up, Julie!" she said, when her faithful attendant came in on

tiptoe for about the twentieth time. "But I will not go down. I will have some tea up here. Yes; you may bring me a little chicken–I think I could eat that. And–Julie–let me see–yes–one or two of the evening papers."

As the dull weight had lifted from her weary head, she had begun to think again–and the dominating as well as tormenting misgiving she had felt on the subject of her escapade of the previous evening was anent that bottle with drugged brandy in it, which, wrapped in brown paper, she had left in the darkened entry of a house situated in some street the other side of Trafalgar Square.

"I wonder who found it?" she uneasily asked herself. What would the finder think of his or her discovery? Would he or she be sufficiently idiotic to partake of the contents–and if he or she did?

She shuddered. "No one would!" was her mental comment. She consoled herself with memories of the extraordinary accounts she had read of narcotic-consumers. Still, of course, those had been the *habitués*, who had gradually become accustomed to the drugs. Why, oh, why had she not thought of pouring away the wretched stuff before she threw away the bottle? It would then have been empty and harmless.

She was interrupted in her self-reproach by the entrance of her maid with the tea-tray and the evening papers.

"Mademoiselle must really eat some-ting," said Julie, coaxingly, as she arranged the enticing tray on the table at her mistress' elbow–Joan was lying back wearily in a big easy chair. "The chicken is delicious, I can assure mademoiselle–I saw it cut myself–and the tea–just as mademoiselle likes it!"

She poured out the tea and prattled on. As Joan was just languidly uncovering the chicken, hardly giving any attention to the girl's flow of talk–she was speaking of the actress she had seen perform the night Joan first met Victor in the Regent's Park–a certain word half startled her from her reverie–the word "suicide." Then, in her strung-up, nervous state, with that bottle on her mind, she was at once on the alert.

"Who? What suicide?" she sharply asked. "Not the girl you saw act, and liked so much?"

"No, mademoiselle, her brother," returned Julie earnestly. "Poor girl! Such an awful thing! Robert, who always reads the *journaux* when they arrive–he airs them, you know, mademoiselle–told me, for he knows I admired this Vera Anerley. It seems she had returned from the theatre to find her brother lying on the sofa–quite dead–alone in the house!"

Joan had clenched her hands on the chair as she listened incredulously. What a horrible coincidence, she thought, that Julie should have such a grotesquely parallel tale to tell her–with such a tragic conclusion, when only last night she had seen Victor Mercier lying in that deathly sleep on the sofa,

also alone in the house.

"Very dreadful for her, indeed," she slowly said, striving to recover from what was almost a shock in the circumstances, and sipping her tea. "Is the–the–story in one of those papers you have brought me?"

"Yes, mademoiselle! I can find it–Robert read it me–"

"Never mind! I will find it myself, presently," interrupted Joan. Then she sent the eager girl downstairs with a message that "she could not come down that evening; she had had no sleep, and was going to bed immediately"–a mission invented more to get rid of her than anything else.

What was it which made her spring up from the door and lock it, almost as it closed upon Julie? Why did she dart back to the table, seize the paper her maid had taken up and laid aside again at her bidding, and holding it in her trembling hands, scan its pages feverishly with her strained eyes–eyes almost blinded by intense fear?

It was more an awful sense of certainty than mere dread. As she found the paragraph she sought, she fell limply into a chair, and staring madly at the cruel words, told herself it was no surprise. No! She had known something terrible had happened–all through those hours of cruel physical pain–she had known it!

"I knew it, I knew it!" she gasped, as for a third time she read the fatal words, with a mad hope that she was under a delusion.

"MYSTERIOUS DEATH IN HAYTHORN STREET, S.W.

"A tragic occurrence of more than ordinary public interest occurred in Haythorn Street, S.W., last night. The young actress, Miss Vera Anerley, whose attractive performances at the —- Theatre we have already recorded, returned home to find her only and favourite brother, Victor a'Court, lying lifeless on the sofa in his room. The doctor, who was at once secured, pronounced life extinct, and by certain appearances, suggested suicide. At the inquest some sensational evidence seems likely to be given."

"Yes," she thought, as she struggled to the window, flung it open, and leant against the lintel, gasping, fighting for breath in her threatened faintness–her eyes were unable to see properly, there was a surging and roaring in her ears–he was dead–dead! And she–legally his wife–had killed him.

"I poisoned him!" she mentally told herself, in a species of dazed, wondering incredulity. "I sent him to face God–all his sins on his soul–oaths on his lips! I am lost–eternally–for ever–lost!"

It seemed to her as if a huge, yawning gulf had arisen between her and all

clean, honest human beings. Her past life lay the other side. She had done the worst of all deeds. She had destroyed a fellow creature.

"And–my own soul with him!" she groaned, in her extremity of fear and horror. The climax of her life seemed to her over, now that she knew–realized–the fact. After the first awful minutes, a dull, dead calm took the place of her overwhelming, hideous agony. She could see and hear again. As she leant against the wall she noted two smart young nurses in white, wheeling their perambulators out of the enclosure below. She saw one of them turn and lock the gate–she heard the key grate in the lock, and the other girl cry out sharply, "Master Dickie, leave it alone!" as a handsome little fellow in white knickers laid hold of the handle of the little carriage. Then a fox-terrier ran by, barking, and a tradesman's cart rattled swiftly along. A coster sent up his long-drawn-out cry in the distance. And–and–she was a murderess!

She laughed aloud, and then, frightened by the irresponsibility of her actions, she crawled slowly, miserably, across the room, gulped down a glass of water, and bathed her face. As she did so, she sickened–remembering how he had gasped–"water, water!" If only that choking prayer had told her that he was in danger–why, she would have risked discovery, disgrace, even the loss of Vansittart, to save the life she had endangered.

She recalled her former fancied love for the slim, handsome young foreigner. How she had admired him as he gazed fatuously at her in church! What a subtle, delicious excitement there had been in his veiled wooing, their hardly-obtained, schemed-for clandestine meetings! Her mother's death had destroyed the glamour of the pseudo love affair. Still, he had had sufficient compelling power over her emotions to bring her to marry him secretly. Then, of course, the thunderbolt had fallen which had destroyed her girlish passion at a blow–the *exposé*–the discovery that he was an absconding criminal.

"Still–nothing–nothing–can excuse me–from first to last," she acknowledged to herself, in despair. "I am–lost! Fit only to consort with the creatures who are for ever the enemies of God."

Just as she told herself this, with a pitiful sob, there was a knock at the door. "May I come in? I have something for you!" cried her uncle, cheerily.

One wild look round, then an almost savage instinct of self-preservation leaped up within her, forcing her into self-possession.

"Certainly," she said, crossing to the door and opening it.

"Are you better, dear? You don't look up to much," said Sir Thomas, gazing critically at her. "Vansittart has just been here, and left this for you. I had asked him to come in and have dinner with us. But hearing you were ill, he would not

stay."

CHAPTER XIX

Sir Thomas Thorne was sincerely, honestly attached to his beautiful young orphan niece–perhaps the sentiment was all the stronger for being tinged with a latent remorse for his callous attitude towards her dead parents in the still unforgotten past.

It was almost a shock to him to see Joan look so "awfully bad," as he termed it to himself. As he placed his paper package, a round, light one, on the nearest table in her bright, pretty bed-chamber, and seated himself by her, he wondered, a little anxiously, whether she was not perhaps ill with the insidious family disease which had "made short work" of his younger brother, her father. Ill-health would account for most of what he considered her "vagaries."

"I think you ought to see the doctor, Joan–really I do!" he exclaimed, with concern, as he gazed at her. She was white as her cream cashmere dressing-gown, and there were deep bistre circles round her more than usually brilliant eyes. "Let me send for him—-"

"Oh, I am all right!" exclaimed Joan, easily. She wondered at this new, unwonted self-possession. It seemed to her as if she–she–Victor's slayer–were standing aside–apart–and watching the doings of the better self from which her past actions had for ever divorced her. "What have you brought me?"

"Flowers, Vansittart said," replied her uncle, brightly. "I met him at the club, and he seemed as if he were to have a lonely evening–it was just one of those blank nights when one happens to have a lull in one's engagements–so I asked him to come in to dinner. He came, and brought this; but went away, as I said, when he heard you were out of sorts, saying he would call round and inquire in the morning."

He tore away the paper covering and disclosed a basket of blue and white flowers–a *chef-d'oeuvre* of a West-End florists. "Pretty, aren't they?" he said, handing them to Joan, his head admiringly on one side.

"Very," she returned mechanically, making a pretence of appreciation. The blue flowers were forget-me-nots. To her strung-up imagination they looked like innocent child-eyes gazing at her with reproach. Once she and Victor had sat by a stream, and she had picked some from the bank and fastened them in his coat–

he always liked a "button-hole"–Bah! These horrible thoughts!–What was her uncle saying? "He said he thought you looking ill. He wondered I had not sent to the doctor before."

"He–who?" asked Joan, sharply. "Lord Vansittart? What has he got to do with it?"

"There! You are going to faint," exclaimed her uncle, alarmed and annoyed, as she paled to lividity, sank back in her chair, and thrust the basket into his hands. Oh, the irony of fate! She had seen the exact counterpart among the flowers of the thick, small-petalled white blossom in Victor Mercier's coat that terrible last night–when she poisoned him. The perfume recalled it all–the waxen, deathly face, the still, silent form–the little room with the open window.

"It is the scent–it makes me feel faint when I am well, the odour of daphne, or tuberose, or whatever it is!" she stammered, forcing herself to speak with a gigantic effort. "And when one has a headache like mine it is worse."

"I will put them outside," said he, consolingly. She watched him as he did so, clumsily trying to tread softly as he went to the door. Poor, kind uncle! If he knew–if he knew!

"Do you know," he began, scanning her livid features with solicitude as he returned, and resuming his seat, pitched his voice in a low undertone, which only succeeded in producing a hoarse croak, so unlike his own cheery voice that in her hysterical, strained state she barely repressed a shriek of agonized laughter. "I am almost sure, indeed, I may say I feel convinced, that this headache of yours is a nervous attack brought on by seeing those waxworks last night. I am sure you went into the 'Chamber of Horrors,' and looked at the murderers. I did when I was about your age, and it got on my nerves. My opinion is, that that making effigies of terrible criminals who have dared to take their fellow-creatures' lives, and exhibiting them for money, is wrong, and ought to be forbidden. The law is right when it orders such human monsters to be buried within the prison, and their bodies consumed with quicklime. They ought not to be remembered! Every trace of their awful crimes ought to be instantly obliterated–ah! I thought as much! You shudder at the very recollection of those wicked faces! A delicate, innocent young girl like you ought not to go to such places! What? You did not go into the 'Chamber of Horrors?'"

"I don't think so," stammered Joan faintly, closing her eyes, and wondering how long this crucifixion of her soul would last. All her life? "But–what do you mean–the bodies consumed by quicklime? In the prison?"

"Never mind, we won't talk of such things!" said he, cheerfully. "Oh–poor little cold hand!" He was startled by the deathly icy touch of the hand he had taken between his warm palms. "Ah! There is your aunt! Come in, my dear! I was just telling Joan that I shall insist upon her seeing the doctor—-"

"I am sure you will insist upon nothing of the kind, Thomas," said Lady Thorne, entering in her handsome, sober black dinner-dress, redeemed from too great plainness by the diamond pins in the black lace head-dress crowning her iron-grey hair, and the pearl and diamond necklet and brooches around and about her lace-encircled throat, and seeming to bring in a matter-of-fact atmosphere from the outer world of ordinary commonplace, which jarred upon and supported Joan at one and the same time. "Joan has nothing the matter with her but a little neuralgia. She wants a good long sleep, and she will be as well as ever to-morrow morning. You leave her to me, and don't meddle with what you men, however clever you may be, know nothing about!" And Lady Thorne, who remembered her own girlish "attacks" during her love anxieties, and who had no mind for visits from a doctor who might order change of air and nip the engagement with Lord Vansittart in the bud, bustled her husband off, and administered a tonic to her niece in the form of a good-humoured scolding.

"Men always want to make mountains out of mole-hills, doctors too–they are all alike!" she ended by saying, after she had chidden her for not forcing herself to eat and drink. "You did not sleep! Of course not! Well, I promise you you shall to-night!"

She rang for some clear soup and wine, coaxed Joan to consume both, then, after herself "seeing her to bed" and administering a good dose of chloral–a drug she had in her amateur medical studies found was in the opinion of certain authorities antidotal where there was a consumptive tendency–sat by her until she was asleep.

And Joan slept–heavily. Only towards morning was her slumber visited by dreams. The one which arrived with the grey dawn, when the birds began to chirp in the trees below, was almost a nightmare.

She dreamt that she was a prisoner in the dock, being tried for the wilful murder of Victor Mercier, alias a'Court. The jury were filing back into the box amid an awful silence in the crowded court. She saw each one of her twelve umpires, scanned each sober, serious face, with a horrible presage of coming doom. She heard the sentence–"Are you all agreed upon your verdict?" and the reply–the terrible fiat, "Guilty." She saw the wizened features of the aged judge in his scarlet panoply assume a grim and solemn expression, as, donning the three-cornered "black cap"–a head-covering which gave him a grotesque, masquerading appearance–he addressed her. At first she was too dazed to understand; then, the concluding adjuration seemed to smite her ears, and stab her heart.

"This man loved you, and made you his wife. A wife should be one to stand by the man she marries 'for better, for worse'; which means that when she takes the oath to do so, she accepts the man's sins with the man–she becomes one with him, half of himself. There are wives who have died for husbands as faulty,

perhaps more so, than your unhappy victim. But you! What have you done? When you had money at your command, did you seek him out? Did you even endeavour to discover what had become of him? No! Instead, you, as it seems by the evidence we have heard–incontrovertible evidence of trustworthy witnesses–were planning a bigamous marriage and secret elopement with another man; and when, just before the consummation of your guilty plot, your lawful husband appeared, you were tempted to get rid of the obstacle to its accomplishment, and to kill him. How you executed the terrible deed we have heard. You have had every chance which the goodness of your fellow creatures, and their kindness to you has been almost unexampled, could provide. You have had, I fear, more mercy than you deserve. For myself, I cannot hold out any hope that your misguided and guilty life can possibly be spared." Then Joan listened in mute agony to the sentence which condemned her to be "hanged by the neck till she was dead"; she heard the awful prayer, uttered with deep feeling by an aged man to whom Death could not long remain a stranger, "and may God Almighty have mercy on your soul!" and all became a blank.

A blank–but not for long. She seemed to be roused by the tolling of a bell, and looking around, found herself in the condemned cell. Some one was strapping her with small leathern straps which hurt her, and in reply to her miserable, pathetic appeal, "oh, please don't," the man dryly said it would be better for her to be submit to be tightly bound–"it will be over all the sooner." It? What? Then she saw serious averted faces–they belonged to men who were forming into line–she heard the words, "I am the Resurrection and the Life," she caught the gleam of a white surplice.

She struggled–fiercely–madly–and awoke.

Awoke–bathed in sweat from head to foot–her pulses beating wildly–gasping, choking–but alive–free–free!

There was her dear familiar room, grey in the early morning light; the bell was tolling from a neighbouring monastic church–she was alive–alive! But–but–it might–come–true–that dream–

"Oh God, it must not!" she exclaimed, flinging herself out of bed and upon her knees. "It would not be just! You know, my God, I did not mean it! You know what he was! You must not let me be hanged!"

CHAPTER XX

Vera Anerley had never acted better than that night when Joan secretly visited Victor. Some subtle excitement–born, perhaps, of an unusually passionate kiss of her beloved's when she left him alone in the house to interview the man he had spoken of–was perhaps the spur which had produced an access of fervour. Perhaps it was the approaching separation. Victor had announced that he would start on a journey in a few days. She herself was leaving for the North with the travelling company to which she was attached.

In any case, her disappointed would-be lover, the young stage-manager, came up to her with a smile at her final exit–a thing he had not done since she was betrayed into pushing him roughly away when he attempted an embrace–and condescendingly said a few words of praise, adding a proposal to introduce "a friend of his," who had been "much pleased."

"He is the dramatic critic of the *Parthenon*!" he pompously added, surprised when Vera knitted her brow and shook her head.

"You are very kind, Mr. Howard, but I must be getting home," she pleaded. What was the critic of the Parthenon to her in comparison with half-an-hour's *tête-à-tête* with Victor? she asked herself, as she escaped into her dressing-room, leaving "Mr. Howard" anathematizing her "folly," and vindictively prophesying to himself that, in spite of her beauty and talent, she would "never rise an inch" in her profession. "Mother," as she called Victor's mother, her late father's second wife, was out with the mild student, Mr. Dobbs, at the hospital entertainment. She wanted to be home first!

"Put away all my things for me, won't you, Polly?" she said to the daughter of the veteran actress who took old women parts, and who travelled with the company as wardrobe keeper. "Thanks! You are a good sort!" and with a hasty hug of the girl she darted out of the dressing-room, along the passage to the stage-door, and into the cool, quiet alley.

Then she ran–into the still glaring, thronged thoroughfare–it was a neighbourhood whose inhabitants kept late hours, and "did their shopping" mostly at night–hailed a loitering hansom, and was driven to Haythorn Street. Eagerly glancing out at the house, she had noticed a tall lady with a swinging gait coming along. She noticed her as hardly the kind of feminine visitor frequenting Haythorn Street, and because she seemed to swerve now and then. When she stopped and seemed to watch her alight and pass into the house, Vera wondered if the gentleman Victor expected–he had hinted that his visitor was one moving in higher circles–had brought her with him, and that she was waiting for him outside.

"But I suppose a gentleman would hardly bring a lady here at this hour of the night, still less leave her in the street," was her second and more lucid thought, as she opened the hall door with her latch-key, passed in, and closing it, listened.

If there was any one with Victor upstairs, she knew she would hear voices. But the stillness was that of an empty house. As she stood, she heard the same loud, sober ticking of the kitchen clock which had seemed so almost terrible to Joan in her awful anxiety. Then came a plaintive "mew" from within the little front parlour–hers and her step-mother's. "Why, Kitty! Who could have shut you in?" she exclaimed, and she opened the door. The tortoise-shell cat–an old one troubled with a perpetually-moulting coat, ran out as she did so and rubbed itself against her old winsey "theatre skirt," purring loudly. "Victor must have shut her in," she mused, as she went slowly upstairs to find him.

Where was he? For the door of Mr. Mackenzie's, the absent lodger's, sitting-room stood open–and there was no sound within. Entering, for the first moment she deemed the room empty. Then she noted the two tumblers, one half full of dark liquid, and the glass jug of water, on the table–and her glance travelling further, alighted on the motionless form of her lover on the sofa.

"Asleep?" she wondered. It seemed strange–the mercurial, ever wide-awake Victor–so early in the evening, as he considered evenings, too! Still, she went towards him on tiptoe. "I will wake him with a kiss," she thought, with an incipient glow of passion as she imagined him rousing from sleep to clasp her close and fasten those adored lips on hers with that warm, possessive kiss of his which she felt was unlike every other kiss which had been given and taken since Adam's fresh lips first touched the ripe, yet innocent mouth of Eve in Paradise.

When she reached him she gave a cry of terror. Something was wrong! He never looked livid, sunken, his eyes half-open, like that!

She seized his hand and gasped with relief; for it was warm and limp; then she stooped and kissed his brow. It was damp and cold as clay after a frost.

"He has fainted!" she wildly thought. "I must call some one!"

She flew downstairs, intending to ask help next door, in spite of a disagreement with its proprietress after a too intimate acquaintance of the moulting tortoise-shell with some fowls kept for laying purposes in the backyard; but as she opened the hall door, her stepmother and the thin, amiable Mr. Dobbs had just come up.

"Why, Vera! You are home early," began Mrs. Wright, surprised. "But–why–child! what is it?" She stopped short, for Vera's eyes looked madly at her–the girl was deathly white.

"Victor is ill, I am going for a doctor," she gasped, distractedly–her efforts to be calm and self-possessed only seemed to aggravate her uncontrollable fear and anguish. "Do go upstairs and see to him, Mr. Dobbs, won't you? I think he has fainted. I will be back directly!"

"Thank Heaven they came!" was her thought, as she ran swiftly up the street and round the corner to the doctor who always attended them, the kind,

shrewd old practitioner, Doctor Thompson, and springing up the steps of the house vigorously rang the bell. She heard it clang within with that ominous toll some bells have, and peered through the coloured glass at the side of the door. Were they all dead? she asked herself impatiently, staring in at the empty entry, with its umbrella-stand and grandfather clock. What miserable mismanagement! Once more, although only a few moments had elapsed since the bell rang, she gave a tug to the bell-pull. A girl in hat and jacket came in sight within, put her fingers in her ears, and hurried to the door, looking disgusted. It was the housemaid, who had been to the hospital entertainment.

"I am sorry to have rung twice," exclaimed Vera, breathlessly, as she opened the door–she knew the girl. "But–is the doctor in? No? Oh, what shall I do?"

"It isn't the old lady, miss?–I saw her just now in the Priscilla Ward, a-larfin' fit to split her sides at the comic singing gentleman–what? Your brother? The smart young gent with the black moustache? A fit? My! Why don't you go round to young Doctor Hampton, who 'as just set up the dispensary? He's some sort of relation of master's, and I've heard master a-talkin' of his cleverness–round there, miss, two doors up–red lamp–you can't miss it!"

"She do seem put about," thought the young woman, as she looked out and watched Vera flit across the road like a black shadow. "Fancy takin' on like that about a brother!"

Wildly, telling herself passionately that a moment's delay might mean death–death was in his face–Vera tore into the still open entry of the little house with the red lamp and gave such a violent knock and ring that the door opened before it was over.

A young man stared at her, astonished, as she clutched at his coat-sleeve, despairingly adjuring him to come and save her brother's life, he was in a fit. He felt quite shocked and concerned at being suddenly assailed with such a pathetic flow of appealing language from so young and beautiful a creature.

"Yes–certainly–at once! Only let me get my hat!" he exclaimed; and after he had seized upon the head-gear nearest at hand, which happened to be a cricket-cap, he also set off running at her side, entered by the open door of Number Twelve, Haythorn Street, and sprang up after this agile girl three steps at a time.

The room was light. He saw two figures–a woman, kneeling by the couch, a man with his back to him, who turned as they came in. He looked pale and scared.

"I am afraid there is nothing to be done, Doctor," he said, in those low, hushed tones, which even the most irreverent use in the presence of the dead.

The young man passed him, and going to the couch, looked down upon the solemn face of the dead man. He laid his hand almost tenderly upon his brow–he listened to the heart.

"Take the old lady away, please!" he said, peremptorily, to Vera. Then, after the girl had, with some difficulty, coaxed her step-mother out, he turned to the scared and guiltless John Dobbs. "How did this happen?" he sternly inquired.

CHAPTER XXI

After that spontaneous, passionate prayer to Heaven for mercy, Joan seemed to awaken to a stronger, intenser life. A new instinct burst into a fierce clamouring within her–the primary instinct to live–live–anywhere, anyhow, at any price–but to live!

"I ought not to die–I did not mean to kill him!" she wailed. Her first mad notion was to confess everything from first to last. There would be an inquest. If she were to go to the coroner and tell him the whole story, would he not see justice done?

"But it would only be my bare word," she thought, as she sat on the edge of the bed, wringing her cold hands, shuddering so that her teeth chattered. "Any one who wanted to kill some one that stood in their way might do it, and say it was an accident!"

No; that Quixotic idea was untenable. Dead silence–absolute secrecy–these must be her defensive armour. No one knew she had seen Victor Mercier since his re-appearance in London, and only two persons were aware of the so-called "love-affair." One was the school-girl go-between, Jenny Marchant, who on the only occasion they had happened to meet, at a charity bazaar, had taken her aside and implored her never to betray her complicity in that terrible escapade–she had read of Victor Mercier's defalcations in the papers, but had not the remotest idea the consequence of her folly was that her chum Joan had bound herself to the "dreadful creature" by a marriage at the registrar's. She would never say anything! "And Nana would rather die than betray me!" thought Joan.

No–absolute secrecy–to act as if no such person as the dead man who had come by his death through her daring to drug him, existed, as far as she was concerned–that was the best, the only course open to her to save herself.

"But–but–I must not do anything wild," she told herself. "The plan to marry my beloved and start in his yacht must not be carried out! That would never do! Would not people suspect I had some very good reason for flight–for hiding myself?"

Then the truth suddenly flashed upon her; there was now no necessity for concealment! The man who had bound her to him in law was dead.

"I am a widow!" she murmured, shivering. "How impossible–extraordinary–yet, yet–literally true! I never was his wife–except for a quarter of an hour in the registry office–what a mockery! And all this–horror–my misery–his wretched, sudden death–came out of that–those few words of an ordinary man's–the signing of our names in a book!"

Would the registrar who married them come forward?

At the idea she sickened. Chill sweat came upon her brow.

"Why should he? He has enough to do without making himself more worrying work," she told herself. "Besides, he may think I went abroad with Victor and died there, if he thinks at all!"

No. She must find some way of accounting for her change of ideas to Lord Vansittart, she mused, as, hearing Julie outside, she returned to bed, and when the girl entered, stretched her arms and yawned.

"Oh, I am much better," she told her, as Julie made anxious inquiries; and with a violent effort she contrived to act her part pretty successfully–to dress and seem as usual–even to attempt to eat some breakfast. But this latter was a hard task. The morning papers had the "Mysterious Death" among their "sensations," and gave ominous hints as to "Victor a'Court's" career which threatened her with a return of that convulsive shivering.

However, when she went downstairs, her aunt and uncle seemed so cheerfully matter-of-fact–her aunt gave her such very pronounced hints on the subject of Vansittart–"they would be quite to themselves, because she was going out, but she hoped Joan would insist upon his dining with them that evening as he disappointed them last night," etc.–that she began to feel as if the tragedy in her young, unfortunate life were unreal–dream-like.

The sun shone warmly upon the brilliant bloom of the flowers in her balcony. A canary sang joyously from its cage outside the window of the next house. The lively rattle of carts, the smooth roll of carriages, the shrill voices of passing children–all meant life–life! And she was greedy, thirsty for life–she–who a few hours ago had done a fellow-creature to death.

"All is not–quite–lost," she mused, as she leant her tired head on her hands–she had seated herself at her writing-table, and was pretending to be busy with her correspondence. "I can do nothing–any more–for poor, cruel Victor–may God be merciful to him! But he has relatives–this actress sister–he never said a word of her to me, I may hope he never said a word of me to her. I may be able to make her life very different–after all this is over and forgotten–hers and any other relatives of his–and I will! I will not spend one single day without doing something to tend to some comfort or advantage for them!"

She was still trying to plan her announcement of her changed wishes to Vansittart, so as not to excite the faintest suspicion in his mind that anything had occurred to alter her ideas between her last meeting and this, when she heard voices outside–the groom of the chambers announced "Lord Vansittart"–and he precipitately entered.

He advanced, a little pale and anxious-looking, but so handsome, such a tower of strength, such embodied manhood at its noblest, that suddenly she felt utterly overwhelmed, submerged–she tottered gasping into his arms, and clung to him as madly as one drowning cleaves to his rescuer.

"Oh–it is you–" she deliriously stammered. "Don't–don't leave me–oh–what am I saying? Are we both–alive? Is it real?"

In her delirious collapse she would not let him kiss her lips. First she hid her face in his coat, then she kissed it–wildly, almost passionately.

"My poor, sweet darling; be calm–it is all right–I will take care of you!" he said, tenderly, brokenly. To see her thus almost unnerved him–he was losing command of his voice–two great cold tears stood in his eyes, then ran down and lay glistening on her golden hair. "Come, my dearest love! Something has upset you, but never mind; I promise you it shall not happen again–I will stand between you and trouble."

He stopped short, horrified–for she burst into a wild peal of laughter. She struggled to subdue it by hiding her head upon his arm. He gazed down at her pretty golden head, speechless with mingled feelings. Once more the ugly idea crept up unbidden within him–that Joan was "going mad."

"No! You are right there!" she cried her laughter subdued, glancing up almost defiantly into his face. "What–ever–does happen again? Did you not talk of the past being irrevocable, irrecoverable? It is! The present is bad enough, is it not? That I should be a hysterical fool like this–all because of a dream! At least I think my headache made me delirious all night. I am not good enough for you, dear. You must give up all idea of marrying me!"

She gazed tenderly at him with those dark eyes soft with the tears brought by that hysterical outburst.

"Oh, yes, of course!" he ironically said. "I am to give up all chance of happiness because you are not one of those Amazons I so cordially detest! Come, darling–I can see that London life is utterly and entirely disagreeing with you!" He seated himself on a sofa and drew her gently down beside him. "That fact reconciles me to taking you away, do you know–so it is the silver lining to the only cloud that is troubling my horizon!"

"You did not like that plan of mine? I am–thankful!"

As she ejaculated this with evident truth, Vansittart stared at her.

"Not that, darling! I am ready to do anything—-" he began, alarmed lest

she had seized upon a loop-hole for escape. But she interrupted.

"I had a dream last night," she began, slowly, striving for self-possession–the very mention of that awful vision unnerved her. "You know–what is on my mind–that I helped to ruin the life of a friend by helping her to marry a bad man. Well! I dreamt–that she came–to awful–grief! And the dream was so vivid that I take it as a warning. I do not wish to carry out our plan, dearest. If you care to marry me, let us be married openly, before the world!"

"Do you really mean it?" He grasped her hands and kissed them. He gazed at her with a face beaming, transfigured with joy. "Thank God, you do! Oh, my darling, my darling–I would have married you anywhere, anyhow, I would even have kept our marriage secret till the crack of doom if you had wanted to–but I hated doing it. I hated stealing you like a thief, instead of marrying you proudly, honourably, glorying in it, before God and all his creatures! You have lifted such a weight from my heart that I hardly know where I am, or what I am about!"

CHAPTER XXII

For awhile, as Joan sat, her lover's arm around her, all about them so bright–the pretty boudoir, decked with dainty gifts of her uncle's and aunt's, gay with flowers and sunshine–she was infected by his radiant happiness. A faint hope stole timidly up in her crushed heart–a vague idea of "misadventure"–"the visitation of God"–as the real cause of Victor Mercier's death, she only the unhappy instrument. The idea reigned–it was the melody to the accompaniment of his joyous talk.

Then her uncle came in, and without ado Vansittart asked his blessing.

Sir Thomas had hardly kissed and congratulated his niece, beaming upon her in his huge satisfaction, when Lady Thorne entered, and stopping short, placidly surveyed the trio.

"No, I am not surprised," she answered, in a superior tone, to her husband's inquiry, after he had announced the engagement. "Or at least, if I am, it is because you two young people have taken so long to make up your minds. I never saw two people so fitted for each other."

There was an air of subdued gaiety about the four at the luncheon table. Joan held her thoughts and emotions in check with a tremendous effort of will. In the afternoon the lovers rode out into the country, and she enjoyed an almost wild

ride. She had an idea that bodily fatigue might weaken her power of thought. If only she could tire herself into physical exhaustion, she fancied she might forget. Oh! only to ignore, to be able to ignore the past–for a few brief hours!

Vansittart was too madly in love to take exception to any desire or even whim of his darling's. He cantered and galloped, raced and tore at her side, although at last his favourite horse was reeking with sweat, and he told himself that he had not felt so "pumped out" for a long while. The fact that Joan did not seem to feel fatigue hardly reassured him. He determined to ask Sir Thomas to influence her to consent to an early marriage, that he might take her on a sea voyage. After they had dined, a pleasant *partie quarrée*, and he and his future uncle-in-law were alone, he broached the subject.

"I hope, Sir Thomas, you will not think me impatient if I suggest that there should not be a prolonged engagement," he began, taking the bull by the horns almost as soon as they had lighted up and their first glass of Mouton was still untasted before them. "But, to tell you the truth, I am not happy about my loved one's health, and I fancy that some yachting–say in or about Norway–might brace her a little."

"Great wits jump, they say! My dear boy, you have almost taken the very words out of my mouth!" replied Sir Thomas, confidentially. "Honestly, I have been uneasy about Joan for a long time. I told you months ago about the family tendency to phthisis! Well, I am not exactly anxious about her lungs, the medical men say they are perfectly sound, so far. But tubercular disease has other ways of showing itself, and there is a feverishness, a tendency almost amounting to delirium about the dear girl, which at times makes me uneasy. I intended to suggest a speedy marriage, and a sea voyage, knowing of your delightful yacht. I repeat, you have taken the words out of my mouth!"

Joan was winding wool for Lady Thorne's work for her special *protégés*, the "deep sea fishermen"–winding it with an almost fiery energy, as the two conspirators entered the drawing-room. Her eyes met Vansittart's with the old hunted, desperate look–his heart sank as he felt how impotent and futile his efforts to balance the disturbing influence, whatever it was, had been.

Sir Thomas had determined to "strike the iron while it was hot." So, as soon as coffee had been served, he broached the subject of an almost immediate marriage.

"My dear, it is the only thing to be done!" exclaimed his wife emphatically. "It ought to be a function, Joan's marriage! And if it is not as soon as I can arrange matters, it will have to be postponed till next season, when every one will be sick and tired of the subject. You are our only chick and child, Joan, and I will have you married properly, with *éclat*."

Joan made no objection. She gave her lover one tender, confiding glance,

then resumed her wool-winding, and allowed her elders to settle her affairs for her. Perhaps, she thought, when she was left alone with the awful facts of her life in her own room–perhaps she might learn to live in something less akin to utter and complete despair than her present humour, when she was alone with Vansittart, skimming the ocean in his yacht.

The necessary shopping and dressmaker-interviewing, too, might distract her from the terrible, gnawing anxiety of the coming inquest.

Each morning and evening the papers had some little paragraph about the affair. They hinted at the identity of "Victor a'Court" being a disputed one. But until the day fixed for the inquest there had been no definite allusion in print.

The night before the inquest was one of feverish anxiety for Joan. "If only I were not so strong–if only some dreadful illness would attack me!" she told herself, as the hours lagged and dragged. She could not face her world while that awful inquiry which might mean a shameful death to her was going forward; yet she dared not shut herself into her room to await the evening papers as she best could.

Her aunt was, fortunately for Joan, a "little out of sorts," as she herself termed it. So, her uncle being out–and having, indeed, almost entirely relaxed his barely-veiled supervision of her doings now that in three weeks time she would be Lady Vansittart and freed from his jurisdiction for always, she donned a hat and walking dress and wandered out, unseen–for the hall was empty.

Why she was attracted towards the scene of her "accidental crime"–that was her name for her administration of the drugged brandy to Victor Mercier–she could not imagine. But she was.

She had intended to stroll about in the leafy seclusion of Kensington Gardens, dodging her kind. But no sooner was she in the Park than she wandered almost unconsciously nearer and nearer to the place where she had done her former lover to death.

Oh, for some cool, dark refuge in which to grovel and hide during the awful hours of dreadful suspense! The light of day seemed too garish–every cheerful sound made her shrink and wince–every voice seemed to thrill each overstrung nerve in her aching body.

As she was pausing, miserably, under a tree, stopping her ears that she might not hear the glad voices and laughter of some children gaily at play, she happened to glance skyward where the towers of the great cathedral stood, solemn and noble, against the sky.

"I will go in there and wait!" she told herself. She felt unable to return home and face the evening papers in her uncle's house. She would wait for them there.

She almost fled along, across the road, into the cathedral, as a guilty, hunted creature seeking sanctuary. She halted when she had closed the door. There was

a calm, a rest, in the sacred fane which was as the presence of the Creator Himself. She slunk into a corner, and crouching down, clung for support to the rail of the bench in front of her and waited.

Waited, half-dazed and stupified, hardly knowing where she was, mind and brain confused as if too paralysed to think, to act. Hour after hour passed. Afternoon service proceeded in the choir. Almost grovelling in her corner, she listened. She could not pray–she was past that.

Then, as there was a movement of the congregation to the doors, she forced herself to rise and pass out among them. For she knew the evening papers would be out.

She hurried from the Abbey into the street, bought one from the first urchin she met shouting "Special Edeetion!" fled across one street and along another, into the Park. There she found an empty bench, and, well hidden from passers-by by a clump of shrubs, opened her paper with trembling fingers. Yes! There it was!

"INQUEST THIS DAY. STRANGE REVELATIONS."

CHAPTER XXIII

The paragraphs seemed to dance before her eyes. Joan's mind at first refused to understand. Then, as she read, she feared her brain was playing her false.

Victor a'Court was identified by several witnesses–one a detective, who had failed to track him when he was "wanted" four years ago for embezzling monies belonging to his firm–as Victor Mercier.

His old mother was called, but was in so pitiable a state that his identity was finally established by the evidence of her step-daughter, Vera "Anerley."

She was described as pale, but perfectly self-possessed. She told the coroner's court how Victor Mercier's father died in obscurity some years before her own father, a widower, met Madame Mercier and married her. She and Victor, who was ten years at least her senior, had called each other brother and sister, albeit not related. She knew nothing of the particulars of the charge brought against him some years ago, except that the firm were subsequently bankrupt. She knew he had "got on" abroad, but how, or why, he had not exactly said.

Then two medical men–one the aged practitioner who attended the family, Dr. Thompson, the other the young doctor, his nephew–testified to the death, and gave an account of the *post-mortem* examination they had made by the coroner's order. The sudden death, which at first had had the appearance of suicide, especially as some brandy in a tumbler had proved, on analysis, to contain a quantity of morphia–was actually due to failure of the heart.

Cross-examination elicited from both medical men that there was not much actual disease. The heart was not in good condition–it could never have acted strongly–and failure might have happened, they considered, at any time, after undue strain, or shock, or even indiscretion.

Was the dose found in the stomach sufficient to cause death? asked the foreman of the jury. The reply was–and Joan read it feverishly again and again–not, perhaps, in a healthy person who was addicted to narcotics. Those who were accustomed to other sedatives would possibly escape being poisoned by the amount of morphia Victor Mercier seemed likely to have swallowed. But with a heart like his death might certainly ensue were the person unaccustomed to narcotics and the like.

Then the medical student, who had returned from settling his dead mother's affairs to find his "diggings" the scene of a recent tragedy, testified to the amount and kind of morphia he had left in a bottle among the rest of his drugs. Probably two-thirds of the half-bottle had been accounted for by the drugged brandy left in a tumbler, and by the contents of the stomach. He identified the empty bottle.

Here a juror asked if the bottle from which the brandy had been taken were in court?

It was not. No bottle had been found in the cupboard or anywhere in the sitting-room, although several empty brandy bottles were in a corner of the adjoining bedroom, where Victor Mercier was temporarily sleeping. The student lodger vigorously disowned these, upon which the coroner asked the aged doctor whether a man whose heart was in the condition of Victor Mercier's would be tempted to resort to alcohol, and having received a decided reply in the affirmative, the subject was dropped.

Mr. Dobbs, the student who had escorted Victor Mercier's mother to the hospital entertainment, testified to finding Victor Mercier dead, as far as he could judge; then Vera gave an account of how she found him, and asked to be allowed to make a statement.

She told the Court that to her knowledge Victor Mercier had secretly married a lady, his senior, wealthy, of good position, who had behaved shamefully when he was under a cloud some years previously: that he had intended and hoped to procure a divorce, and that a person was expected to call upon him

that night–the night he died–whose evidence would go far to assist him in his desire. "I expected the person would be still with him," she added–"and–I found him–dead!"

The significant utterance of her statement appeared to have brought about a perfect storm of questioning. But, giving an absolute denial to any further knowledge of the affair, she adhered firmly to what she had said, and nothing further could be elicited from her, except the somewhat defiant reply to a suggestion of the foreman of the jury that Victor Mercier might have had some motive in wishing to have a divorce instead of claiming conjugal rights. "Yes. We–he and I–were engaged to be married, as soon as he could get rid of her!"

That speech, apparently, brought matters to a speedy conclusion. The Coroner placed the "ambiguous affair" before the jury somewhat diffidently. Their verdict was, perhaps in consequence, hardly a decisive one. They disagreed. While the majority wished to adopt the coroner's hint that "death by misadventure" might be a safe view to take, and that it would be easy for investigations to be proceeded with by other authorities, should those authorities feel inclined to dissatisfaction, there were some dissentients who suspected possible foul play.

These were, however, sufficiently in the minority for a verdict of "death by misadventure" to be returned, and when Joan understood that by this she was still unsuspected by man of that which God alone yet knew she had done, the sudden shock of joy was as bad to bear as her agony when she read that Victor Mercier was dead.

"I am not to be hanged, I am not to be shamed before the world–God is just–He is merciful–He has heard my prayer!" she frantically told herself, as in the folly of ecstasy she clasped and kissed the paper, and held it to her heart. Was the world all sunshine, all joy? What was the matter? she wondered. It was as if she had been groping through some dark, noisome tunnel, holding by the dark walls, expecting every moment that some horror would rush upon and destroy her miserable, hopeless being–and–without even a warning ray of light–she had suddenly emerged into a beautiful world–ancient, yet new–bathed in glorious sunshine, awake and alive with joy.

She heard, almost with wonder, that the birds were carolling, that gay voices and laughter, mingled with the ripple of the wavelets a few yards away, where little children were screaming as they fed the quacking ducks. Little children! Some day she might be a mother, and in tending innocent babes she might forget the horror of her life.

She had no pity for the cruel man whom she saw now, first, in his true light, as perjurer, liar, thief–who had stolen her young affections out of mere wantonness, so it seemed to her, when he really loved this "Vera Anerley," who

was supposedly his sister. He had lied to her all through–he was a mere nobody–he meant to climb to a position by her wealth: he had lied about his legal tie to her, this Vera–this love of his. What had he meant to do? How could he divorce her?

The answer to her own question was as a blow, so sharp, so cruel. She closed her eyes faint and sick.

"He knew about *us*," she thought. "He said–'your lover, Lord Vansittart.' He meant to get a divorce–because of him. He would have sworn to lies, very likely. He would have got 'damages'–a decree–and after he had disgraced me for ever, would have made that girl his wife! Oh–his death has been a mercy to every one–may God grant it has been a mercy to him!"

As soon as she was equal to the effort of walking–for she felt unsteady and giddy even then–she left the newspaper on the seat on which she had sat to read her fate, and making her way out of the Park, took a cab home, and entered without, she believed, being unduly observed. She found that her uncle had lunched at his club, and her aunt was in her room, so, joining Lady Thorne in her boudoir, where she was lying comfortably tucked up on a sofa, she excused her absence very casually. She had been detained shopping, had lunched out, had attended service in the Abbey. Lady Thorne smiled indulgently. "Of course, of course, my dear!" she interrupted. "But I am glad you are in. Violette has sent home one of your *trousseau* evening frocks. It is a poet's dream–pink embroidered roses, and a bouquet of pink roses has come from the Duchess with a little note–they decorate with roses to-night in your honour! I want you to wear that frock. It would make such a nice paragraph in the society papers, and encourage Violette to exert her utmost with the rest of the wedding order."

Joan went upstairs, wondering what it meant–this sudden flow of sunshine. As she inspected the dress–an exquisite *confection* of pale pink and white shot tissue, embroidered with clusters of La France roses with so cunning a hand that the blossoms looked almost real–she wondered what she would have felt, arraying herself in that gala attire, yesterday.

"My dark, darkest of dark nights, seems over, thank Heaven!" she told herself as she went down later on, radiant, to the drawing-room to receive her lover. As she opened the door, she saw him standing as if lost in anxious thought. He sprang towards her with a puzzled, astounded gaze.

"How lovely you look! But–but–oh, darling, how thankful I am to see you look almost happy for once!" he passionately exclaimed, as he kissed her–hands, brow, lips–with the tender reverence which made her almost worship him in return. "But–oh, something must have happened to please you! Tell me, Joan, do not let us have any secrets from each other!"

"You shall know to-night–at the dance," she said. The dance was given by

the Duchess of Arran.

CHAPTER XXIV

If Joan had succeeded in fascinating Lord Vansittart until his passion dominated him to the extinction of all his ordinary interests in life, while she was mysteriously enwrapped in an unaccountable gloom–a gloom which hid her natural charms, her bright, ready wit, her spontaneity, her sympathetic responses to the moods of others, as a thick mist hides a beautiful landscape–in her new gaiety and sudden joyousness she simply intoxicated him.

As he sat opposite her at dinner, he gazed fatuously at her in her pink glory, her sweet face shining above the roseate robe as the morning star above the sunrise-tinted clouds–and wondered at the magnificence of the fate dealt out to him by fortune. When they were driving to Arran House–Sir Thomas by his betrothed, and he squeezing in his long figure on the opposite seat–he felt that to sit at her feet and worship her was more happiness than he deserved. What of being her husband? Of possessing this delightful being for his very own–half of himself?

His mood, half deprecatory, half triumphant, but wholly joyful, seemed reflected in the brilliant atmosphere of Arran House, as he followed Sir Thomas, who had Joan on his arm, through the hall–where heavy rose-garlands wreathed the pillars, casting their rich, luscious perfume profusely upon the air–up the rose-decorated staircase to the draped entrance to the ballroom, where the duchess stood, a picture in rose moire and old point lace, the kindly little duke at her elbow, receiving her guests, but detaining the newly-betrothed for a few warmly-spoken words of congratulation. The ballroom floor was already sprinkled with couples dancing the second valse of the programme.

"Now we belong to each other publicly as well as in private, you must dance all, or nearly all, your dances with me," said Vansittart, in tones of suppressed emotion, as he gazed at her white throat, encircled with his first gift–a necklet of topaz and pearls with *parure en suite*; then, with a longing, searching look into her eyes. Half fearful lest the old enigmatic horror should still be lurking there, his heart gave a throb of delight as those sweet brown orbs gazed innocently, fearlessly, yet with a passionate abandon into his.

"Let us join the others–shall we?" he said. She nodded slightly–a trick of

hers–and encircling her slight waist with his arm, he made one of the slowly gyrating throng.

To Joan that dance was like a new, delicious dream. To feel the one she loved as she had never imagined it was in her to love, near her, was in itself an abiding joy. But to have lost the awful burden–her secret link to another–to be relieved of the weight of fear lest she should really be a criminal–that, mingled with the delight of being the betrothed bride of her beloved, was in itself an earthly heaven.

The valse over, they betook themselves to a couple of chairs placed invitingly under a big palm. But Vansittart yearned to be alone with her; or, at least, where they could talk unobserved. In spite of his pervading joy, there was just one discordant note sounding in his mind; there was one gleam of anxiety anent the cause of the almost miraculous change in Joan's mood, from darkest night to sunlit noonday.

"It was a pretty idea of the duchess, was it not, darling, to decorate with roses in our honour?" he said caressingly, as he took her bouquet and inhaled its delicate sweetness. "The flower of love! But–well, of course you know the story of the rose? It seems to me that that also may not be without its meaning in our case. It was through a bad member of my sex, was it not, that you had so much to endure? Why, dearest, forgive me for alluding to it. I thought you would not mind!"

Joan had started a little–as a sensitive horse at the unexpected touch of its rider's heel. It was only for a moment; she recovered herself immediately.

"What story? I don't know of any! Tell me," she replied, annoyed with herself at being so "morbidly impressionable." Still, any allusion to her secret stung her to the quick. It disappointed her. She had wanted to bury her dead at once and for ever.

"Why, I hardly like alluding to your confidences to me," he began, a little taken aback by her sudden change of humour. "The story is about a girl named Zillah–a Bethlehemite–whose would-be lover rejected, gave out that she was possessed, and had her condemned to be burnt. But the stake blossomed into roses! I take that to mean that no real trouble can come to one who is pure and good by the machinations of any vile man, however base—-"

"Oh, don't talk about it here!" she exclaimed, inwardly writhing. "Besides, I don't want ever to allude to–to–that affair of my poor friend's marriage again. It is not necessary. She has escaped from her troubles. It is that which has made me so happy. Do you understand? I cannot tell you how it has happened. You must trust me so far. But it is all over. I have only one, one boon to crave of you–that you will never, never again remind me of it. Can you do that much for your future wife? If you do keep raking up my past troubles, we shall not be

happy. I promise you that!"

"My dearest, I would sacrifice much rather than ever say one word to annoy you, give you pain," he began, somewhat hurt and mystified.

"I know," she exclaimed, and once more she beamed upon him. A brilliant smile beautified a face which was too flushed for health; sudden pallor at the tale of the rose was succeeded by a burning glow. "And now, there they are, beginning another dance. I want to dance. I want to live; to enjoy life. Can't you imagine it? For ever so long I have been thinking myself a perfect wretch, not eligible, like other people, for the ordinary joys of life; and now that I find out I am not, that no innocent person has suffered for my absurd and ridiculous folly, I want to be happy. Oh! let me be, if only for to-night."

"Joan, that is hardly just, not to know that there is only one thing in this world I really wish for, your happiness," he said, with deep feeling. "However, do not let us have the faintest shadow between us, when we are on the eve of belonging to each other for ever–pray don't! Darling, I will be careful for the future. Do you forgive me?"

"Don't talk nonsense," she cried, with a little laugh which sounded so gay and careless that he led her to join the dancers somewhat reassured. As they danced onward, round and round the duke's beautiful ballroom, the electric light shining through the softly-tinted Bohemian glass upon the lavish decorations of roses of all shades, from pure white to the deepest crimson, they both almost recovered their equanimity. The deep, yearning love in each young heart was sufficiently sun-like to dispel all mists and shadows.

To both the evening speedily became one of unmixed delight. Once or twice they had temporarily parted and taken other partners "for the look of the thing." "Hating your dancing with another fellow as I do, I would rather that, than that the frivols among them should laugh at us," he told her. "You know, dearest, to be in love as we are is terribly out of date."

So they reluctantly separated for a while, to enjoy each other's proximity with a more subtle ecstasy afterwards. The last dance before supper Vansittart had retained for himself. "It is more than flesh and blood can do to give up that; besides, it is not expected of me, after the paragraphs in the papers," he said. So, after a delightful quarter of an hour's gyration to the charming melody of the "Erste Geliebte" waltz, he escorted Joan to the supper room.

It was crowded. As Vansittart led his beautiful betrothed through the room, her pink train rustling, the jewels on her fair neck gleaming, all eyes turned towards them as they passed. His head held proudly high, he felt rather than saw that they were the object of general notice. Meanwhile, every one of the small round supper tables, laid either for two or four persons, seemed appropriated.

Joan had been scanning the crowd about the tables, feeling an unpleasantly

reminiscent thrill as she saw the ducal servitors in their picturesque black uniform and powder; and remembering that horrible shock–her encountering Victor Mercier in that garb, in that sudden and cruel way–she was somewhat startled by meeting the malevolent, searching gaze of a small, thin man in evening dress.

Surely it was the duke's valet–that man with the steel-blue eyes which seemed to flash white fire as they met hers? Yes, he was approaching them.

"Pardon, milord, but there is a table in the conservatory, if you would like it," he said. "It is cooler there, and I will tell some one to attend to you."

"Thanks, Paul," said Lord Vansittart genially, and he led Joan through the room after their guide, following him into the conservatory, where, among the roses, fuchsias, and orchids brought from the ducal houses, a tiny table was laid for two persons. "You are very kind. But you are not looking well. How is it?"

"A mere nothing, milord," said Paul, lightly. "And now, I will see to the supper for you and mademoiselle. But Monsieur le Duc wishes a word with you. He sent me to say it. You would find him in the hall, I think, waiting for you."

"You will excuse me a minute, darling?" Vansittart, released with a smile by Joan, left her.

Left her–with the valet, Paul Naz! Joan wondered to see the man, with a set, stern face she did not like at all, moving the knives, forks and glasses about upon the table in a foolish, aimless fashion. She marvelled still more when he stood up and faced her suddenly, an ominous gleam in his brilliant, pale eyes.

"A word, mademoiselle," he began solemnly, his hands clenching themselves so they hung pendant at his sides. "I wish to speak to you of my poor murdered friend, Victor Mercier."

[image]

"'I wish to speak to you of my poor murdered friend.'" A Woman Martyr. Page 216

CHAPTER XXV

If the duke's pale, wrathful valet had suddenly changed into the grinning skeleton which had seemed to Joan to mock and gird at her that night when she re-

placed the poison bottle in the cupboard after pouring its contents into Victor Mercier's brandy, she could hardly have shrunk back more absolutely terror-stricken.

At first she gazed, speechless, at Paul Naz's set, ghastly face, with those pale blue eyes flashing menace and scorn. Then that up-leaping instinct within her to defend herself came to her rescue.

"Are you mad, sir, to speak to me like this?" she haughtily said. "Leave me. If you presume to insult me, I will call for help."

For a moment her daring, her defiance, staggered Paul. Meanwhile, the sudden pallor of her beautiful features, the agony in her dark eyes, had strengthened his gradually formed, but confident, belief that Victor Mercier had been merely shielding a woman when he spoke of the Thornes owing money to his late father, and that he and Joan were either lovers, or had been so. Men did not dress up as men-servants to meet a woman who merely had some cash to repay. Then, he had seen other symptoms in Victor. He believed, when he had read the account of the inquest, that either Victor held Joan's promise of marriage, or that she was his secret and abandoned wife. To the story Victor had told Vera he attached but little significance. Men said such things sometimes to girls to cover unpalatable facts they need not be told.

Then, an interior conviction seemed to assert itself. "This is the woman," cried his soul. He gazed steadily at Joan.

"Mademoiselle, I am sorry to speak like this, but I know you knew my poor murdered friend well," he began in a low tone. "God forgive me if I misjudge you! But I feel you have been cruel to him. Time will show. Meanwhile, I wish to say to you that I will do nothing against you if you do not bring this noble gentleman I hear you are to marry to shame. I leave justice to the Creator, who invented it."

With which he made her a slight bow, turned, and stalked out of the conservatory. She sank into a seat breathless, and stared vacantly at the place where he had stood, for she seemed to see that white, scornful face with the pale blue eyes which to her excited fancy had been ablaze with lurid fire, still.

All was over, then! The mirage of happiness was a mockery. She was once more plunged, steeped, in the atmosphere of crime.

"I see," she told herself, in her mental writhings under this new scorch of pain. "He is a Frenchman; he is–was–Victor's accomplice, his spy. He told Victor of Vansittart. He has been watching me."

Her first insane idea was to tell the duke that his trusted servant was the miserable spy of unscrupulous wretches. Second thoughts said "madness! Keep it to yourself. What can the man do? He knows nothing of your visit to Hay thorn Street. If you say, or suggest, he is a spy, you arouse suspicions."

Upon these second thoughts she acted. She controlled her emotions, sum-

moning all her force, her self-possession, to her aid. There was a long mirror in the corner. She composed her features and rubbed her cheeks and lips before it, regaining a semblance of composure and ordinary appearance only just in time, for as she leant back in her chair slowly fanning herself Vansittart came in, looking grave, troubled, although he smiled as their eyes met. Had *he* seen or heard anything peculiar?

"Is it a breach of confidence to ask what his Grace wanted you for?" she asked, assuming a sprightly manner which shocked her even as she did so.

"Not at all," he said, a little abruptly; "something about a wedding present."

Then a manservant entered with a tray of champagne and the menu card, and until she had been revived by the food she forced herself to eat, and the champagne Vansittart insisted upon her drinking, she asked no more. But, in her strained state, her lover's pre-occupation was unbearable.

Desperate, she determined to know the worst. "Tell me," she began, leaning her fair elbow on the table and looking pleadingly into his face with those bewilderingly beautiful eyes. "You know you yourself proposed we should share our secrets. And, from your manner, I know–I am positive–the duke said something more than about a wedding present."

"If he did, it was nothing of any consequence," he fondly returned, gazing tenderly at the lovely face which was his whole world. "I would tell you at once, only you are such a sweet, innocent, sensitive darling, so utterly unsophisticated, unused to this rough planet and its still rougher inhabitants–you would make a mountain of what is far less than a mole-hill in one's way."

"What is it?' I would rather, really I would, know." She gave him a coaxing glance.

"Well, it is this," he replied, hardly. "Very little to annoy one. Only I am so absurdly vulnerable, that the merest breath which affects the subject of our marriage seems to shrivel me up. It is those wretched clubs; at least, the miserable gossip which the riffraff of the clubs seem to batten and fatten upon, drivelling, disappointed, soured units of humanity that they are! They seem to be prognosticating that our wedding will not 'take place,' because I have a secret wife somewhere, who is likely to turn up. Do you suspect me, darling?"

Her joyous laugh, born of infinite relief, almost startled him. When he reached his bachelor domain that night, and recalled the events of the evening, the sweetest delight of all was to remember how his beautiful darling took his hands, and with eyes brimming with love, drew him to her and nestled in his arms as some faithful dove might have flown confidently to his shoulder. That ensuing brief–all too brief–half hour, when, by their world seemingly forgot, and certainly their world forgetting, they interchanged tender words and still tenderer embraces, seemed to his passion-stricken nature to have so riveted them

to each other that the very machinations of hell itself bid fair to be powerless to part them.

"Her absolute innocence makes her so immeasurably sweeter than all the other women," he told himself, as he stalked about his rooms in a hyper-ecstatic mood. "It is that which makes her so unsuspicious, so trusting. Now, if I had told something of what the duke said to me to an ordinary woman, she would have suspected me of goodness knows what in the past. She might have concealed it, but I should have known that she did. I believe it is my darling's being so 'unspotted from the world' which influenced me to love her as I do. Oh, may I be worthy of being her guardian; for my past is not the fair, white, unsullied page that hers is! No man's can be."

* * * * *

When the young doctor she had fetched in her frantic fear the night of Mercier's death, after finding Victor insensible upon the sofa, came to Vera in the little sitting room where she was kneeling at her poor trembling old stepmother's side and telling her with the assurance of desperation that Victor must, would, soon be better–why should he not be? He had never been subject to fits. He was so well-knit, so strong, so athletic–she gave the intruder an imperious gesture, and, springing up, led him out of the room, and, closing the door, leant against the lintel, and gazed at him with such wild agony that he flinched, alarmed. She looked uncanny, and at such a crisis it was disturbing.

"I know. He is dead!" she resolutely said. "But, for God's sake, have mercy on his poor old mother. He is all she has in life. There will be an inquest? So much the better. Now go in to her, and tell her he is very ill, and must be left to you and me."

The young practitioner demurred. His private opinion was that people ought to "face their fate." He was fresh from the hospitals.

But there was something witchlike about this girl. She commanded the wistful, shivering John Dobbs, a mild specimen indeed of the genus medico, to remain and solace her stepmother with as many white lies as he could generate at the moment; then, over-riding the objections of old Doctor Thompson, who, returning home and hearing of her wild condition from his house-maid, had proceeded to Haythorn Street at once, she insisted on accompanying them into the room where the dead man lay with that calm, sphinx-like smile upon his handsome lips, and remaining there until Doctor Thompson actually took her by the shoulder and, turning her out, locked the door.

But, like some faithful dog, she remained outside. She watched them seal up the room in a dead silence. After tenderly assisting her stepmother to bed,

weaving fictions the while–"Victor was in bed and asleep, the doctors had gone, and their one direction was he should not be disturbed; his very existence depended upon his being kept quiet," etc.–she returned to her post, and spent the night crouched upon the landing, her cheek against the sealed door.

"My heart is dead; my life went with his," she told herself. "What there remains of me is left to find the woman who murdered him, and to bring her to justice."

CHAPTER XXVI

Old Doctor Thompson sat up in his study, smoking and listening to his nephew's theories anent Victor Mercier's death, while Vera, sleepless in her anguish, remained sifting her suspicions throughout that dismal night, limply leaning up against the sealed door which so cruelly barred her out from that silent room where her beloved lay on the sofa in the mystic sleep of death. "I have to revenge his murder–for he has been drugged–poisoned–I could swear it!" she told herself, over and over again. "That woman I saw–tall, well-dressed–stalking off–and staggering–she is the one who has killed him! It is she I must find–God help me!"

How impotent she felt, when all Mercier's belongings were under lock, key, and seal!

But she had enough to occupy her. The unhappy old mother was in a helpless state of grief–she alone had to "do for the household," since they kept no regular servant. Then, when she sent in her resignation, her admirer, the stage manager, Mr. Howard, urged the proprietors of the touring company to refuse to accept it. She had to go off and almost beg release upon her knees.

Then came the day of the inquest, and her statement; the grudgingly admitted verdict, and the consequent release from endurance of the worst of the bondage.

The purses of gold were all that they found which pointed to any one's visit the night of Mercier's death; and even Vera, despite her intense anxiety to find a clue which would bring her face to face with the wife he had told her of, the "hag," the "cat," whom he had spoken of so vindictively as the only barrier between them, could but think that the money might have been locked up in his desk since his return. He had spoken of possessing ample means for the

immediate present, and had spent lavishly upon her of late.

They searched high and low, the poor mother clinging to the relics of the only son whose heir she was, as she had few relatives belonging to her, and his father, her first, cruel spouse, had no kith and kin that he had cared to acknowledge. But while they found more money–neither in boxes, nor chests of drawers, or pockets, did they come across any traces bearing upon the part of his life they knew nothing about. The letters and papers in his desk and trunk related to past business abroad, alone.

The funeral was a plain, but good one. It was a wet, gloomy day when the hearse bearing the brown oaken coffin decorated with wreaths bought lavishly by Vera, and a few modest ones sent by the doctor's wife and some sympathizing neighbours, made its way slowly through the gaping crowd in Haythorn Street and the immediate neighbourhood, and proceeded more briskly northwards. Vera sat back in the first of the two funeral carriages–the two doctors were in the second–and as she vainly strove to comfort her weeping old stepmother, she gazed sternly out upon the familiar roads with a strange wonder at the ordinary bustle and movement. Life was going on as usual, although Victor Mercier's strong, buoyant spirit was quenched. They laughed and talked and screamed and whistled, those crowds, while he lay still and white within his narrow coffin under the flowers, his pale lips sealed for ever in that strange, wistful, unearthly smile.

"But they have not heard the last of him," she grimly thought. "The last will be far, far more startling than the first!"

Let him be laid to rest, and she would rouse like a sleeping tigress awakened to the defence of her young, and finding that wife of his, bring her to justice.

The belief that that woman had secretly visited him, and that by her means he had had his death-dose, strengthened every moment until it became a rigid, fixed idea. All had seemed to point to it. His careful dress to receive his visitor, the embroidered shirt, the diamond stud, the white flower in his button-hole, a costume assumed after she had left him in his ordinary day suit. Then his shutting the cat into the parlour was doubtless lest she should cover his visitor with her hairs–and the cat only affected women, and had a trick of jumping up on feminine laps.

"There is justice in heaven, so I shall find some clue to her," thought she, as they passed the stone-mason's yards on the cemetery road. The words haunted her–"Vengeance is Mine! I will repay, saith the Lord." They should be inscribed on his tomb.

Presently the horses slackened in their speed–they proceeded at a funeral pace–then they stopped. They were at the cemetery gates. Vera heard the distant tolling of the bell. It had been like this when her own father was buried, in whose

grave for two Victor was to lie.

"I must bear up," said the aged woman who leant against her, with a gasping sob. "Victor would not like to see me cry." And she tried to give a broken-hearted smile.

"No, mother," said the girl tenderly. But she was not really touched–it was as if her heart were turned to stone.

The funeral train went on with a jerk. A returning empty hearse scampering home the wrong way had been the temporary obstruction. Graves, rows of crosses and headstones–ponderous marble and granite tombs–the world of the dead was a well-peopled one. They halted–one of the solemn undertaker's men came and let down the steps. There was the coffin–

The beautiful words fell unheeded on Vera's ears. She was intent upon a small, pale man with fair hair, in black, who had joined them. Who was he? Was he the intimate friend Victor had casually spoken of?

As they stood in the narrow pews of the mortuary chapel, the first ray of sunshine which had pierced the clouds that day fell upon the close-cut hair of Paul Naz, who had determined not only to see the last of the friend anent whose fate he had such gruesome, horrible misgivings, but to offer his friendship to the charming young actress whom he now knew to have been more to the dead man than mere step-sister-in-law; and Vera said to herself, "It is an omen!"

As they stepped slowly out, following the coffin, she almost staggered as she vainly tried to support her half-fainting step-mother. Paul Naz helped her with a "Pardon, mademoiselle! I am his friend!" and she gave him a grateful glance.

They were at the grave. The clergyman was reading "He cometh up, and is cut down like a flower–" ... A thrush carolled loudly on a neighbouring bush. The sunlight broke through and shone upon the brass handles of the coffin as it was lowered into the grave. "My beloved, I will only live to avenge you, and take care of mother," murmured Vera, as she left the grave, and following her stepmother, who leant on Paul Naz's arm, listened to his affectionate talk of the dead man.

"I loved him, mademoiselle! And if I can help you, I beg you to send to me!" he said, earnestly, giving her a meaning, almost appealing look after he had helped Victor's mother into the carriage. Then he stood, bare-headed, and gravely watched them depart.

"He suspects!" Vera told herself, feverishly, as they drove home. "Perhaps–oh, if it only is so! He knows something!"

Back in the empty house, she coaxed her step-mother to bed, and was proceeding to give orders to the charwoman about the tidying-up of the place, when there was a vigorous pull of the bell.

"I will see to it," she said to the woman. Proceeding to the hall-door

and opening it, she was confronted with the landlady of the next-door lodging-house–a Mrs. Muggeridge, whose fowls had been harassed by the tortoise-shell cat, after which there had been ructions, and each house had cut its neighbour dead.

"I am sure I don't wish to hurt your feelings, or to intrude, Miss Anerley, but my mind is that troubled I must speak to you," said the old woman, who was stout and asthmatic, and looked pale and "upset." "I hope your poor mar is all right?"

"Yes, thanks! Will you come this way?" said Vera, who felt somewhat as a war-horse hearing the bugle, for she hoped to "hear something," and she conducted her visitor into the little parlour and closed the door.

Mrs. Muggeridge pantingly, with many interpolations, told her tale. She had a country girl as servant, "Sar' Ann, as good a gal as ever lived." Still, it seemed that Sar' Ann was human, and could err. The day after the murder, "as they did call it, and as some calls it now, in spite of that there crowner, Sar' Ann was took with hysterics, and giv' warnin'."

"Which I took. As I says to Sar' Ann, 'I don't want any one 'ere as ain't comfortable.' And she was right down awful, that girl was. One night I took and made 'er tell me what it was, and I'm goin' to tell you, now! For the very mornin' after–I suppose because I told her what she said to me she might have to tell to a Judge and jury, she ran away. She got the milkman to give a lift to her box, and when I got up, expectin' to find the kettle boilin', she was off and away into space–and there she is–like one of them Leonines as they talk of, but we never sees, Miss Anerley! It'll take a detective to find her, if so be as she should be called up to say what she says to me!"

CHAPTER XXVII

Mrs. Muggeridge paused, and had a fit of coughing. Vera waited with the patience which seemed part of her dogged resolve to avenge Victor's death.

"Yes?" she said mildly, as Mrs. Muggeridge wiped her eyes.

"Where was I? Oh! About Sar' Ann making tracks like that. Well, if I tell you what she told me, and ease my conscience like, will you give me your word, Miss Anerley, as no harm shall come to the girl? Poor, unfortunate girl! I'm glad as it wasn't me! You promise? Well, it was like this: My first-floor front, what

corresponds with yours where your gentleman lodges what's been away for his Ma's funeral, is occupied by a gent in the City, what leaves a lot of vallables about as I don't harf like having the charge of. So, when I'm goin' out, I locks up his room, if so be as 'e ain't at 'ome, and puts the key where he knows how to find it. Now, we was all out except Sar' Ann the night of the murd–oh, well, the night Mr. Musser died: I was at the horspital entertainment along with the rest. So what must my lady needs do, but get that key–sly puss! she must have watched and found out where I put it–and go up into Mr. Marston's room to fiddle about with his things. I believe she spent the evenin' there. At all events, when she was a-sitting at the window, peepin' out, she sees a tall lady come along, and disappear into your house. She did think it queer, knowin' or suspectin' as you was all out! So she listened, and small blame to 'er, as I told the girl! She listens–and she swore to me she could 'ear two voices in the next room, a man's and a woman's. She sat there listenin' for a hour or more after dark, and they was talkin'–sometimes loud–but she couldn't distinguish the words. And then there was quiet-like, and she wondered what had become of 'em–so she was peerin' out of window when out comes the tall lady, shuts the door, and makes off. Your 'ansom drove up at the same time, and she declared to me she see the lady stop short and stare at you! There now!"

Vera's thoughts, spurred by the excitement of such important, unexpected evidence, worked with lightning rapidity. Even as she listened with concentrated attention, she was warning herself to be cautious. If her suspicions that Victor was foully murdered were shared by others, the criminal might be forewarned, and escape her doom.

So she gave a sad, incredulous smile, and shrugged her shoulders. "My dear Mrs. Muggeridge, your girl ran away because she was a wretched story-teller, and was afraid of being called to account!" she dryly returned. "The voices, the tall lady–everything–is pure invention! Surely I ought to know? The only fact is that I came home in a hansom. You said she was hysterical. It is a pity her perverted ideas were on the subject of my dear, dead brother!"

"Brother? I read as you said at the crowner's quest that he was your sweetheart!" exclaimed Mrs. Muggeridge, vulgarly. She had confidently expected to become one of the chief *dramatis personæ* in the gruesome tragedy at number Twelve, and her disappointment exasperated her. "And as for my poor Sar' Ann bein' a story-teller, allow me to tell you as she's never told a lie to my knowledge! Stealin' the key? Gals will be gals! Let me giv' you a word of warnin', Miss Vera Anerley, or whatever you call yourself. Your best plan'll be to find Sar' Ann–I can't, my respectable house is ruined by bein' next door to a disreputable hole where people comes to sudden deaths and their friends want it hushed up–I've to see about movin' as soon as I've got over the shock it's been to me to be next

door to such a orful thing–but if you don't find Sar' Ann and let 'er help to discover the lady what murdered your sweetheart, p'raps you'll find yourself havin' the cap fitted to you, maybe! So there! Ere's Sar' Ann's larst address, to show as I don't bear no malice, and wish your poor old Mar well–I never had no call to complain of *'er*–but though I knows as Sar' Ann come original from Oxfordshire, that's all I do know."

Mrs. Muggeridge huffily made her exit, giving a contemptuous little shake of her skirts and a backward glance of defiance as she issued forth, and down the steps of the offending house.

Vera closed the door upon her and for some moments seemed riveted to the spot, her thoughts awhirl. If she could have known that where she stood, contemplating vengeance, fiercely if voicelessly praying for justice, the girl who had been her lover's legal wife, the girl who had drugged him and brought about his death, had stood unconsciously listening for his last breaths, that she might return and steal the documents which incriminated her!

But no voices came from out the walls, the ticking of the clock had no sinister meaning. She heard the charwoman singing some common music-hall tune to herself as she swept. Swish, swish, went the irritating broom–then an organ began to play aggressively at the end of the street–a chorus from a comic opera she had heard one night, nestling against Victor in the dress circle of a suburban theatre.

She shuddered and wrung her hands. Why was life so ghastly, so full of horror, of terror? But she must not stand there, letting the precious moments go idly, fruitlessly by.

"I must have help," she told herself. "Alone, I can do nothing. I will write to Mr. Naz, and ask him to come and see me."

Writing an ordinary little note, merely asking Paul conventionally if he could make it convenient to name some time to visit them, it would comfort her and Victor's poor mother to see one who had been a good friend of their loved one's–then going out to post it at the nearest pillar-box–restored her outward, if not her inward equanimity. She spent the day literally setting the house in order–assembling all Victor's belongings in the attic lumber-room, to be thoroughly searched by her on the morrow.

Early the following morning an empty hansom drove up, bearing a little note from Paul. Would twelve o'clock suit her to see him? And would she send an answer by the cab?

She wrote a few lines in affirmative reply; then, after seeing her stepmother comfortably established on the sitting-room sofa where she and Victor had revelled in each other's society that night of happiness after the performance–the night he first showed her his somewhat sudden passion for

her in all its fulness–she stole away upstairs to the attic to put away the relics of the dead man.

She had cleared her two best trunks; and in these she meant to store everything he had left–clothes, books, pipes. The money had been placed in a bank in her step-mother's name. A lawyer friend of Doctor Thompson had acted for them, and had simplified everything.

The little room was hot. She opened the window wide, drew down the tattered old green blind, and set to work shaking, folding, and arranging Victor's clothes.

How like him it was to have shirts that a French marquis would hardly have disdained! As she laid them away with as tender and reverent a touch as that of a bereaved mother storing away the little garments of a loved, lost infant, she almost broke down. But she took herself sternly to task, repressed her melting mood, and reminded herself that a strong man's work–the bringing a criminal to book–was hers. Any and every womanish weakness must be sternly disallowed.

One trunk was soon full of linen and odds and ends. This she locked, and proceeded to fill the next. The books came first–mere remnants of volumes, mostly French, with morsels of yellow paper cover adhering to them. But–strongly redolent of tobacco, she put them carefully in a layer beside the cases of pipes, and the odd-looking curios he had collected. They seemed almost part of him, somehow, those pipes. That they should be there, smelling of the weed he had smoked, and he should be mouldering in his grave in that densely populated cemetery! She shuddered. Her hand trembled: she picked up a yellow volume, *Quatre Femmes et un Perroquet*, with eyes brimming over with tears, picked it up carelessly; something fell out.

Something? Two things–one, a soiled little photograph. As she seized it her tears dried–her eyes burned. It was the photograph of three girls.

Evidently an amateur attempt–badly mounted. Three girls in summer frocks and aprons, two standing, one seated on a bench–in front there was grass–at the back, part of a brick house and some shrubs.

Fiercely, with intense anxiety, she stared at the three faces. Two were round and plain: these belonged to the girls–fifteen or sixteen years of age at the utmost–who were standing. The face of the seated girl was a beautiful one: full of sweet pathos, and yet with a tender happy smile about the mouth.

"Too young to be that awful woman," she mused, crouching on the floor, and gazing. Still, one of them might have been her daughter. The woman, by his account, had been older than Victor, possibly a widow with a child, or children.

She was so absorbed in contemplation that she forgot the other "thing" which had fallen from the book, until, as she laid aside the triple portrait and began to resume her task, she saw it and pounced upon it–darted upon it like a

serpent upon its prey–for it was a letter, and in a feminine handwriting.

A letter–soiled, its edges worn–it almost fell to pieces as she touched it. Yet it was, by its date, written but a few years previously.

The hand-writing was unformed. But it was unmistakably a love-letter.

"Dearest Victor," it ran. "I am longing to see you quite as much as you are wishing to see me. You say, if I cannot answer your question to me the other night you would rather not see me any more! It has made me very unhappy. You see, I am so young to be married. Then, if I did what you say, it would kill my poor mother, who is so very ill. But I do love you, Victor! I dream of you nearly every night. Sometimes you are Manfred, sometimes Childe Harold, and last night you were Laon and I was your 'child Cythna!' It was so sweet–we were lying side by side on a green hill, your eyes gazing into mine, and I seemed to hear some one singing 'Oh, that we two were maying'! Dear Victor, I must do all you ask: I could not bear not to see you again! It would break my heart!

Your promised wife, JOAN."

CHAPTER XXVIII

Was the loving, foolish "Joan" the woman he had married? The woman she had seen coming down Haythorn Street as she drove up? Or was she "another woman" altogether?

She gazed fiercely at the sweet face in the photograph. It seemed to gaze blandly, calmly, back.

"Oh, God! What shall I do?" she wailed, grovelling on the floor in her despair. The anguish of discovery that another had reigned over his affections, and so lovely a rival, was almost unbearable. Still, selfish misery was soon extinguished by the greater, sterner passion which possessed her–her grim purpose of revenge, or as she chose to consider it, the just punishment of the one who had, she believed, poisoned her beloved.

It was not like Victor to take a noxious drug, nor was he suicidal in feeling. He loved life! He was all gaiety and careless enjoyment of the passing hour, when he was not white-hot with passion.

But could he have lied to her about the age of his "wife"? Then, gazing once more at the face in the photograph, she miserably told herself that that girl could

not be termed "hag" and "cat." No, there must be two women! And yet–and yet–

She started. There was a knock and a ring. It could not be Mr. Naz! She glanced interrogatively at the little silver watch she wore which had been her own mother's. It told her that it was half-past eleven. She ran into the front attic–her and her step-mother's bedroom–and looked out of the window. There was a hansom at the door. A man stood on the step below.

She ran downstairs and opened the hall door. It was Paul–pale, serious, faultlessly dressed in half mourning. He bowed low as he took off his hat, and apologized for being early. He was not his own master! He thought of "wiring to her," but his anxiety for an interview urged him not to postpone his visit.

"Come in," said Vera, in a low voice. "My mother is in there, and I want to see you alone," she added, as she cautiously closed the door. "I had better tell her you are here, though. Do you mind coming up to the lumber room, where I am looking through Victor's things? There is nowhere else."

"Anywhere–where we can be alone, Miss Anerley," he gravely said–thinking that if ever human agony had been fully seen in a woman, it was now, in this fragile girl with the pale face drawn with anguish, the great eyes luminous with wild desperation.

He admired her for her self-possession, as he heard her ringing voice telling her step-mother, who was somewhat hard of hearing, that "Victor's kind friend, Mr. Naz, was here, and she would bring him to see her presently–she would first take him upstairs to choose something of dear Victor's as a keepsake."

"She is an actress, of course," he told himself, as he ascended the oil-cloth-covered stairs after her–how strange were these sordid surroundings of a man who had claims upon the wealthy, luxurious Sir Thomas Thorne and his family! "But there is only a little of the actress–the rest is woman–passionate woman!"

Vera mutely conducted him into the disordered lumber-room, amid the dusty boxes and old baskets, where the two open trunks were standing.

"I have been searching his things," she began, abruptly.

"Yes?" he answered, tentatively.

"Perhaps you can tell me who these are?" She dipped into a trunk and handed Paul the photograph of the three young girls.

At a glance he saw the subject. "My sight is not very good, I will take it to the light," he said, moving to the window, holding back the blind, and examining the portrait with his back to her.

Heavens! For a moment, as he saw the lovely face of the seated girl, he felt as if some one had given him a blow. There was only one Joan Thorne! To mistake that face was impossible.

Regaining his composure with a stern effort of will–for he must not "give his friend away," especially now that he was one of the helpless dead–he turned

to Vera.

"I don't understand! Who are these persons?" he asked, as if mystified.

"That is what I want to find out!" she cried, passionately. "Mr. Naz–I know, I feel, my dearest Victor was murdered! He never took that morphia himself! It was given him–and–by a woman! I should know her again–I should, I am sure I should! It was she I saw coming away from the house that night. I said nothing about it at the inquest, for fear of dishonouring my dearest; it was she the servant next door heard talking to him, and saw coming out of the house–the landlady has just been in to tell me about it! The girl will swear to it–when we get her–she was so frightened about it she has run away! Mr. Naz, you were his friend, surely, surely you will not rest till his murderess is found and punished? I demand it of you!"

Her great sapphire eyes gleamed–she was impressive in her intensity. Paul's fair hair seemed to bristle on his head. Victor had always fascinated–influenced him–his mantle seemed to have fallen on his beloved's shoulders.

"I don't understand," he stammered, taking refuge, for safety, in apparent bewilderment; although even as she had clamoured her new evidence with seeming incoherence, he saw all the damning circumstances in their most fatal light: Joan Thorne's portrait, Victor's curious suggestions about the Thorne family being in his power; Miss Thorne's secret expeditions with her maid Julie, his betrothed, whose acquaintance, although it had led to his really caring for her, had been made by him at Victor's suggestions; the admission of Victor's that he was married; then this new and startling evidence–and Miss Thorne's ghastly, horror-stricken face when he, only half believing she was the woman *liée* with the dead man, only half-suspecting that she might have been instrumental in his destruction, boldly taxed her with it at the Duke of Arran's ball, when alone with her for a few moments in the conservatory.

"You don't understand?" She spoke bitterly. "You are no friend of his, then! You would leave him–in his tomb–killed, murdered–his murderess at large!"

"What good could it be to him, now?" he said, firmly, almost impressively. "Can we follow the spirits we have lost, and do anything for them? Might not cruelty to others hurt them? How can we tell?"

"Cruelty to others!" she cried, wildly. "Understand, Mr. Naz! I know his love–his Joan! I will soon be on her track! If you will not help me, I will go to the detectives!"

In her almost frenzy of mingled love for the dead man, and hate of her rival, the woman who had been with him the night he died, she hazarded a chance shot, and even as she did so, she rejoiced. For the bullet had found its mark. Paul's face fell–there was an expression of dismay in the eyes which were almost fearfully watching her.

”No, no! You must not do that!” he slowly said. ”I do not know what my poor friend may have told you, but remember a man is sometimes betrayed into a little exaggeration—-”

”I have her letter,” said she, exultant, yet calm. ”I have plenty of evidence to give the detectives. I will not trouble you, Mr. Naz!” She glanced scornfully at him.

What was he to do? Abandon Joan Thorne to this infuriated, outraged, therefore unscrupulous rival, and a horde of professional detectives, who would show little or no mercy? His whole somewhat chivalrous being revolted against it. When he left Haythorn Street half-an-hour later he had pledged himself by all he held sacred to assist Vera in discovering the real story of Victor Mercier’s untimely end, and acting upon it, whatever it might prove to be.

* * * * *

When Joan, at the Duchess of Arran’s ball, had, with the most violent effort of will, played her dismal part, acted, feigned enjoyment of her last dances with Vansittart, beguiled him with well-simulated smiles, and sternly resisted the awful inward fear awakened by Paul Naz’s daring words and sinister demeanour, she almost collapsed. Then, left alone in her room, the prattling Julie gone, her night light flickering, she sat up in bed confronted by the new, hideous fact.

Paul Naz suspected her! He knew of her affair with Victor Mercier! He had identified her with the ”hag” wife that girl Victor loved had spoken of at the inquest! *What more did he know?*

The cold beads stood out on her brow. The innate conviction she now knew that she had felt from the very beginning of her love for Vansittart–the conviction that it would lead to her doom–arose within her like some unbidden phantom.

What doom? Public shame and the hangman? Or the utter loss of Vansittart’s love? One seemed as terrible a retribution as the other.

”But–do I deserve such an awful punishment for what was done in ignorance, my fancying myself in love with Victor, and being talked into marrying him at the registrar’s?” she asked herself, with sudden fierce rebellion against fate. ”Do I even deserve it for drugging him to take possession of my letters? What had he not threatened me with? And I never meant to kill him! I am sure I would rather have died than that!”

Again, a passionate instinct of self-defence as well as of self-preservation came to her rescue. As she lay there among the shadows in the silent night, with no sound but the distant rumble of belated vehicles, and the measured footsteps of the policeman as he went his round upon the pavements below breaking the stillness, she determined, once and for all, to kill the past.

"It shall be dead!" she told herself, sternly. "I will have no more of it! If any one or anything belonging to it crops up, I will defy, deny, ignore, resist to the death! No one saw me–no one can really hurt me! I have had enough of misery and wretchedness–I will–yes, I *will*–be happy–and no one in the world shall prevent me!"

CHAPTER XXIX

The morning after the Duchess of Arran's ball Lord Vansittart was seated at his breakfast, the *Times* propped up in front of him, when a ring of the hall-door bell was followed by a man-servant's entrance with a telegram.

Since his engagement to Joan, he had been singularly nervous–her changeful moods were hardly calculated to soothe a lover! He regarded the buff-coloured envelope askance.

Still his tone was cheerful as he said. "No answer." The message was from Joan; but there was nothing alarming in it. The few words were merely "Come as early as you can."

In a very few minutes after its delivery at his house, he had given his brief orders to the household for the day, had carelessly said he did not know when he should return, or if he would be home before night except, perhaps, to dress–and without waiting for a conveyance of his own–there would be delay if he sent down to the stables–he was out, striding along the pavement until he met a hansom, which he chartered with promise of an extra tip for quick driving.

"Miss Thorne is in her boudoir, my lord," said the porter, when he alighted at the house. Evidently the order had been given to that effect. The groom of the chambers bowed respectfully, but was easily waved aside. Vansittart crossed the hall and sprang up the stairs as only one of the family might do without disregard of the *convenances*.

Tapping eagerly at Joan's boudoir door, his attentive ear heard a footstep, the door was opened by Joan herself. She was in the pink and white *deshabillé* she had worn the happy day she had first admitted that she loved him sufficiently to marry him. But now, her beauty seemed in his fond eyes increased by the natural arrangement of the wealth of beautiful hair which was unbound and, merely confined with a ribbon, floated about her shoulders like a veil of golden strands.

She drew him into the room and blushed, as she said she had not expected him so early.

"I had to write to my bridesmaids about their frocks," she began, nestling to him. "I meant to have my hair done before you came—-"

For answer he seated himself and drawing her to him, kissed the shining tresses and held them ecstatically in his hand. Their soft touch seemed to fire his emotions.

"Do you know you seem unreal, you are so beautiful?" he said, passionately, lifting her chin and gazing intently at her delicate lovely features and the rich brown eyes which to his delight looked more calmly than usual into his. "You make me feel–as if–when I get possession of you–you must vanish into thin air–you are an impossibility–a mocking spirit, who will disappear with elfish laughter."

"Don't rave!" she fondly said, returning his kiss. "Or you will make me rave! And to rave is not to enjoy oneself! Dear, I asked you to come early–I want to spend every moment of my life with you–from this–very–minute! Why should we be separated? You know what you told me–that they were telling each other falsehoods about you at the clubs–so our being always together will be like killing two birds with one stone! It will make me happy, and give the lie to their wicked calumnies! Do you mind?"

"Do–I–mind?" He kissed her brow, lips, hair, again and again. "Am I not yours–more yours than my own–all yours through time into eternity?"

"For worse as well as for better?" She had said the words before she remembered her terrible dream–when the judge who was condemning her to be hanged had upbraided her for not having fulfilled her wifehood; as they escaped her lips she recollected, and shuddered. "You think me better than I am, dearest! I am human–erring—-"

"I–know–what you are!" he passionately exclaimed. He was plunged in a lover's fatuous ecstasy. It was half an hour before Joan could get away to put on her habit. She meant to ride to Crouch Hill to hear her old nurse's opinion of what had occurred. Mrs. Todd had not known Victor's name–she would not have identified "The Southwark Mystery," as the newspapers termed it, with herself and her wretched entanglements. She would tell her that Victor was dead, and hear what she would say to it.

While she was dressing, Vansittart went back to his stables, and waiting while the grooms equipped his now staid, but once almost too mettlesome grey horse "Firefly," returned to find Joan's pretty "Nora" waiting at the door, held, as well as his own horse, by her groom. He had barely dismounted when she issued from the house, a dainty Amazon from head to foot, and tripped down the steps, smiling at him. "Why did you ride your old grey?" she asked, as she sprang

lightly into the saddle.

"Why?" he repeated, as he arranged her habit, and thrilled as he held her little foot for one brief moment in his hand. "Because I am so madly in love with you to-day that I cannot trust myself on any horse but the soberest and most steady-going in the stables! I am particularly anxious not to bring my 'violent delights' to a 'violent end' by breaking my neck!"

They rode off through the sweet summer morning, he so bathed in actual joy, as well as fired by the anticipatory delights of life with Joan for his wife, that in his blissful mood he could have enwrapt the whole of humanity in one vast embrace–Joan abandoning herself with all the force of her will to the natural instincts that underlay all ordinary, acquired emotions.

During her long self-colloquy she had deliberately burrowed, mentally, below her civilized being, and sought these. She had told herself that the primary instincts of woman were wifedom and motherhood. For the present–until she was reassured anent her safety by time and the course of events–she would listen to no others.

The two lovers–so near in seeming, so far asunder in reality, divided as they were by a hideous secret–rode gleefully on, rejoicing in their youth and love, making delicious plans for their future together, gloating over their coming joys from different standpoints, but with equal ardour.

"And for to-day," said Joan, as they rode under a canopy of boughs in one of the country lanes still undesecrated by the ruthless hands of the suburban builder, "and not only for to-day, but most days, I want to see how the other half of humanity lives, dearest! Before I am Lady Vansittart, I want to see the life that commoners enjoy! I want to dine out with you, at restaurants, and go to the theatre with you, and, in fact, be alone with you in crowds who neither know nor care who we are, or what we are doing!"

Vansittart, albeit slightly puzzled, readily acquiesced. When they drew rein at Mrs. Todd's cottage, it was settled that they were to use a box he had taken for the first night of a new play brought out by a manager who was an acquaintance of his, dining first at a restaurant Joan selected as being one not affected by their circle.

Joan entered the cottage and saw the dark old woman totter to meet her, eagerness in her trembling limbs and brilliant, searching eyes, with a feeling of sickly dismay. Last time she stood here Victor was alive; since then she had killed him! Involuntarily she gave a little moan of pain.

"My dearie, my lamb, what is it?" The aged nurse was terribly agitated as she caressed and tried to console the only creature she really loved on earth, who had sunk crouching at her feet. "Is it–come, tell Nana–you know I would die this minnit for you, lambie–tell me if that fellow is alive and annoying you in any

way, for, as I sit here, if he is, I'll tell of him! I'll set the police upon him!"

"Don't," said Joan, chokingly, clasping her knees. For the first time she seemed to realize what she had done. "He is dead!"

"Thank God for that!" cried the old woman, in an access of fervour. "He is just, I will say that, if He's sent that blackguard to the only place he's fit for, instead of leaving him here to worry innocent folks as 'ud do their Maker credit if they was only let alone! And now you can be my Lady, and go to Court with as big a crown and as long a train as the best of the lot, duchesses and all! And you can bring little lords and ladies into the world to be brought up proper by head nurses and then send them to colleges, and make real gentlemen of 'em! The Lord knows what he is about! There ain't a God for nothin'!"

After the first thrill of something akin to horror at Mrs. Todd's grotesque rejoicing, Joan put aside her questioning as to "how the brute came to his end" by asking her if she would like to see Vansittart, and he, in his rapt adoration, eager to have to do with every detail of his beloved one's life, was only too ready to be curtsied to and congratulated and blest.

"She is a good old soul, darling, we must look after her," he feelingly said, as he waved farewell presently to the tall old crone watching them from her doorstep as they rode slowly up the road. "And now, where shall we go?"

After one of Joan's scampering rides they returned home, spent the afternoon in sweet talk in her boudoir, then Joan retired to dress–donning her plainest black evening frock and simplest ornaments–and he paid a flying visit to his house to dress also, returning to fetch her, as she had bidden him, in an ordinary hansom.

"I mean to enjoy myself to-night!" she gaily said. She insisted on feeling gay–insisted to herself. Presents were arriving in battalions, boxes of exquisite garments were delivered with a monotonous regularity. She had chosen the restaurant they would dine at, she was also to select the menu. As they alighted at the door, a man, who was about to enter, halted, and smiled as he lifted his hat.

"Who is that?" she asked as they went in.

"A very clever fellow, the dramatic critic of the *Parthenon*," he returned. "I will introduce him to you."

CHAPTER XXX

As Joan went into the restaurant on Lord Vansittart's arm, she felt a subtle, exquisite sensation of leaving her troubled, garish, emotional life on the threshold, and stepping into another, new existence.

The vast circular building, with a dome where the electric lights already cast a warm glow upon the bright scene beneath, was dotted over with white tables surrounded by diners. Palms stood about it–a grove of moist, luscious water-plants of subtropical origin surrounded a rosewater fountain, that tinkled pleasantly in the centre.

"We had better go upstairs, I think," said Vansittart; and he led her up a broad staircase into a wide gallery surrounding the building, and chose a table next to the gilt balustrade, where she might watch the crowd beneath.

"This is delightful," she said smiling, as a band began to play a selection from a favourite opera in a subdued yet fascinating style. Then a waiter came up, obsequious, as with an instinct born of experience he detected a couple above the average of their ordinary patrons, and after a brief colloquy with him, Vansittart offered her the menu, and seated himself opposite to await her choice.

"It is difficult to think of eating with that music going on," she said, feeling as if in the enchanted atmosphere coarse food was a vulgar item; and her selection was a slight one–oysters, chicken cutlets, iced pudding. Vansittart, possessed of an honest appetite when dinner time came round, felt compelled to supplement it with an order on his own account. "You do not want me to be starved, I know," he gaily said, as the man departed on his errand.

The music played, the fountain's tinkle mingled with the hum of many voices, the footfalls, the clinking of glass and china. Then the dramatic critic and another man took the table a little on one side, near to them. Joan met an admiring glance from a pair of intelligent eyes. The oysters were fresh, and some clear soup Vansittart had ordered seemed to "pick her up" so much that she resolved to force herself to eat for the future.

"I shall fight the horrors of my life better if I do not fast," she told herself, immediately afterwards chiding herself almost angrily for recurring to her "dead miseries." With a certain desperation born of the discovery that she had not cast the skin of her experiences on the threshold, she set herself to court oblivion by plunging violently into present sensations. She laughed and talked, ate, drank champagne, and Vansittart, opposite, gazed at her with admiring beatitude. Joan's lovely neck, alabaster white as it rose from her square-cut black dress, her delicately-tinted oval face with its perfect features, now brightened by her temporary gaiety, her great dark eyes, gleaming with subdued, if incandescent fire, her halo of golden hair–all were items in the general effect of radiant beauty. Vansittart hardly knew what she was talking about; he felt that the dreamy music discoursed by the little orchestra below was a fitting accompaniment to the

melody of her delightful speaking voice, that was all. He was plunged in a perfect rhapsody of self-gratulation. And she? Her suspicions were as alert as ever. She saw he was in a "brown study," and, although his eyes looked dreamy ecstasy into hers, and a vague smile of as vague a content hovered about his lips, she would rather he lived outside himself. She herself was trying madly to live in externals–to stifle thought!

"What are you thinking about?" she asked, leaning forward.

"You!" he said passionately. "How can I think about anything else with you there opposite me?"

"Hush, the waiter is listening," she said. But just at that moment the waiter was aroused by the dramatic critic and his friend rising and pushing back their chairs, and went forward to help them assume their light overcoats.

"Your friend is going, and you have not introduced him to me," said Joan.

"I will," said he, and, abruptly joining the departing men, he brought back the critic, in no wise reluctant.

"Mr. Clement Hunt–Miss Thorne, very soon to be Lady Vansittart," he said.

"May I offer my congratulations?" Mr. Hunt's face, if not handsome, was pleasant. His voice betrayed a past of public school and college. Joan instinctively liked him. After a little small talk and apologies on his part for haste–duty called him to be at his post at the raising of the curtain upon the new drama–he departed, volunteering to pay their box a visit between the acts.

"He is a capital good fellow, dearest," said Vansittart, asking her permission to smoke as the waiter brought their coffee. "But you must know that, for I would not otherwise have introduced him to you."

"He looks it," said Joan warmly.

"I suppose you know who that couple are?" asked Mr. Hunt, as he rejoined his friend.

"Lord Vansittart, wasn't it? What a beautiful girl! But if all is true they say, what an unfortunate creature!"

"Why, Vansittart is one of the best fellows I know!" exclaimed Clement Hunt; and he spent the next ten minutes in indignantly endeavouring to convince his friend that if club gossip were not invariably entirely false, in this case any rumour of a previous marriage on Vansittart's part was an absolute and odious fabrication.

Meanwhile, Vansittart had carefully cloaked his beloved in her quiet, if costly, theatre wrap, and, after royally tipping the waiter, had escorted her, followed by interested glances, down the stairs to the entrance. A hansom speedily conveyed them to the theatre. They were just settled in the box, Joan was glancing round the house through her opera glass, when the orchestra began the overture. At first, the music merely aroused a dormant, unpleasant, shamed

sensation. Then, as it struck up a well-known air from "Carmen," she inwardly shrank, her whole being, heart included, indeed seemed to halt, as if paralyzed with reminiscent horror.

It was the air Victor had whistled under her window at night when he was secretly courting her, and she had not heard it since.

What demon was persecuting her? Not only that air sent arrows of pain into her very soul, but the subsequent melodies drove them home to the core. It was as if a malignant fiend had picked out and strung together the favourite tunes the dead man had whistled and sung during the stolen meetings of their clandestine love affair, to clamour them in her ears when she was powerless to escape. To rush away before the curtain rose would be to betray some extraordinary emotion; yet she had to fight the desire to do so. It took her whole little strength to force herself to remain seated in the box and endure the consequent performance.

By the time the curtain rose she was the conqueror. She had held the lorgnette to her eyes, and pretended to scan the audience while that brief mental battle was raging, lest, removing it, her lover should notice her agitation. Fortunately, even as the curtain gave place to a woodland scene, the auditorium was darkened.

As the first act proceeded, she recovered herself a little. There was less of a dense black veil before her eyes, less surging in her ears. She could hardly have told what the first dialogue between the second heroine and the first heroine–a certain Lady Chumleigh–was. The girl was sister to the heroine's husband, Sir Dyved Chumleigh, and appeared to cause discomfiture to her sister-in-law by some innocent teasing; at least, that was what Joan gathered from the lady's subsequent soliloquy.

"However, it doesn't much matter whether I understand the thing or not," she told herself. "It seems vapid and unreal in the extreme."

The thought had hardly flashed across her mind when a sensational episode in the play awakened the attention of the house. A slouching tramp, ragged, dirty, abandoned-looking, suddenly appeared from behind a tree, and addressed Lady Chumleigh as "My wife!"

Joan sat up and stared. Was it an awful nightmare? No! As the interview proceeded between the aristocratic lady and the miserable ex-criminal, the husband she had hoped was dead, and with him her past degradation and misery, Joan recognized that the stage play was not only real, and no bad dream, but the parallel of her own miserable story. The unfortunate heroine had met and loved and been courted by Sir Dyved Chumleigh while trying to live down her secret past. And just when she seemed sure of present and future happiness, the wretch who had stolen her affection traded on it, and then having been imprisoned for

fraud, perjury, and what not, had appeared in the flesh to blast her whole life.

The curtain descended upon a passionate scene. The unhappy woman, after a spurt of useless defiance, fell on her knees to adjure, bribe, appeal to the man's baser nature, since he seemed to be in possession of no better feeling. He listened grimly. The outcome of the encounter was left to the next act.

"Dearest, it is upsetting you, I am afraid," said Vansittart, as the turned-up lights showed him Joan pale and gasping. "But don't think that villain will have it all his own way. I read a *resumé* of the plot, and she kills him before the curtain falls on the last act."

"What?" said Joan, gazing at him–very strangely, he thought. He was about to propose they should leave the theatre, when there was a knock at the box door, and Mr. Hunt came in.

"Well, how do you like it?" he asked pleasantly, accepting Vansittart's chair.

CHAPTER XXXI

When Vansittart had spoken those awful words, in a light, almost reassuring manner, "she kills him before the curtain falls on the last act," Joan first felt as if her whole mental and physical being were convulsed with a strange, almost unearthly, pain; then everything surged around her, and threatened to sink away into blackness, blankness.

Good heavens, she was going to faint! With an effort of will she fought against unconsciousness; gasped for breath, struggled to maintain her senses, and was rewarded by coming slowly back out of the mists, and seeing the plain, clever face of the dramatic critic appear opposite, seemingly from nowhere. Then she heard that Vansittart was expressing disapprobation of the play.

"I only happened to glance at the plot in your article in the *Parthenon* just before we came," he was saying. "It was the very last kind of play I should have chosen for Miss Thorne to see had I known the story."

"Indeed?" Mr. Hunt smiled, but Joan thought he gave her a suspicious, enquiring look. It was enquiring; he was wondering whether this beautiful girl were not the prey of some latent but awful disease–her ghastliness, the expression of anguish on her face, was undeniably the effect of some secret suffering. But Joan could not read his thoughts. She was frightened into bravado.

"I certainly prefer comedies to tragedies," she hazarded, and there was slight

defiance in her glance at the dramatic critic. As for her voice, she wondered if it sounded as unnatural in her lover's ears as in her own. "A tragedy is such an exception in everyday life; and when it does occur, one would rather not hear about it."

"You differ from the bulk of humanity, Miss Thorne," said Mr. Hunt, good humouredly. "And I cannot agree with you that tragedy is such an exceptional thing in ordinary existence. My own belief, and it is shared by many others, is that the under-current of most lives has an element of the tragic in it. There are scores of crimes, too, that never come to light; myriads of unsuspected criminals. This I think is shown to be the case by the interest the public have for what is called the 'sensational.' They recognize instincts they possess themselves, although those instincts may be undeveloped, or held in check."

"Hunt! You suggest that we are all of us potential murderers," said Lord Vansittart, with an amused laugh.

Mr. Hunt shrugged his shoulders. "I suggest nothing; I assume a Socratian attitude; I encourage others to suggest," he somewhat dryly returned. "What do you think of this much-belauded actress, Miss Thorne? I confess I am not infatuated, like the rest. She leaves me utterly cold; hasn't the power to quicken my pulse by a single beat, even in her most impassioned moments. I was wishing just now that the part had been played by a little girl I saw for the first time the other night–singularly enough, on the very night she became the heroine of a tragedy in real life. You must have read about it, Vansittart. You are not 'one who battens on offal?' I daresay not. Nor am I. I should not have been so interested in this affair if I had not been mixed up in it, and if a friend of mine were not destined, innocently enough, to become one of the strands of the rope which will assuredly hang the murderer, or, I should say, the murderess."

"Please, Hunt, don't let us talk of such horrible things," cried Lord Vansittart. He had seen his darling shudder.

"Oh, pray go on!" said Joan, with a sudden mad effort to hear what there was to hear without a shriek of agony. So–so–something more had been discovered–was known.

"You have probably followed the case, Miss Thorne. There was the romantic element in it which appeals to most ladies," said Mr. Hunt, smiling at Joan. "Ah! I see; you know all about it. Well, to put it as briefly as I can, I was urged to go and see the performance of a young lady, a Miss Vera Anerley, who had made quite a commotion in the provinces. Her company, a touring one, was coming to a suburban theatre for a couple of weeks, and already the reporter of a London evening paper had fallen a victim to her fascination. Well, I went, and I was so astonished at the spontaneity of the girl, at the natural art which, imitating nature, we call genius, that I asked to be introduced. She refused; the manager said

she must have a lover waiting round the corner. True enough, she had a lover, but not waiting for her round the corner, as it happened, but waiting for her at home, on the sofa, dead! He was a bad lot, it seems, that Victor Mercier. You must have read the case, Lord Vansittart, it was 'starred' a bit because of its association with a girl rumour says is bound to make her mark, sooner or later. But even if he was the blackest of black sheep, justice is justice. One doesn't care for assassinations done in cold blood in the very heart of civilized London. I know it was brought in 'death by misadventure'; some of those jurymen were the densest of idiots. But the ball has not stopped rolling. As I said, a friend of mine has come into the case. I must tell you; it is so odd; it so proves the old saying that 'truth is stranger than fiction.' A fellow I know very well, one of your circle, I fancy, went with me to see Vera Anerley act, but left me when I went round to the stage door, and, finding it a fine night, elected to walk home. As he was making his way westwards by Westminster Bridge, his attention was attracted by a feminine figure in front, because, besides being tall and well made, there was a *cachet* of belonging to a smart set about her, or he chose to think so. Then, every now and then the girl tottered. Was she drunk? he thought. What was she doing there? He followed her, and presently, seeing her peering here and there and glancing furtively about, felt sure he was on the track of something peculiar, especially when she flitted up some steps in the shadow, stooped, and seemed to deposit something she was carrying in the corner.

"Of course he at once jumped to the conclusion that she had abandoned an infant, living or dead. He naturally shied off being identified with a discovery of that sort, so he, I think, if I remember rightly, did not walk back, but waited for the first bobby that came along, and, telling him who he was, related what he had seen. Well, of course, when instead of a corpse or an infant they only found a bottle with some brandy in it, he felt rather small. But the bobby was sharper witted than he. 'There's summut rum about this, sir, or I'm very much mistaken,' he said; and he was right. There was something 'rum.' The brandy in that bottle was drugged with morphia; and there is a lot of interviewing of him going on which points, I believe, although he only winks at me and fences questions, that the detectives are on the track, and that the brandy bottle will hang that woman, whoever she is. Dear me! the curtain is going up. I must return to my friend below. *Entre nous*, the very fellow I was talking about is in the house to-night. *Au revoir*, my lord."

Joan contrived to return his bow; she held herself together sufficiently to wait until he was safely out of the box; then she clutched at Vansittart as wildly as if she were drowning in deep waters and he was the forlorn hope, the last available thing to grasp at.

"Take me home, or I shall die," she gasped.

CHAPTER XXXII

"Yes, certainly, we will go. Bear up, my dearest, you are safe with me. I deserve to be shot for bringing you to see this cursed stuff," murmured Vansittart, as he supported Joan to the box door, and, sending the attendant for iced water, brandy, salts, anything, tended her lovingly until he saw a faint colour creep back into her cheeks and lips, when, thanking the damsel, who had not been unsympathetic, and slipping a gold coin into her hand, he took his beloved carefully down into the open air and once more drove her home in a hansom.

She clung feebly to him as she lay almost helpless upon his breast–the cool night air, the darkness of the silent street under the starry sky, thrice welcome after her agony in that hot, glaring theatre–clung, feeling as if all else in her life were shipwrecked, engulfed in an ocean of horror, only he, her faithful lover, the one rock that remained. And a word of confession from her, one damning incident that betrayed her guilt, and she would lose even that grip on life and be hopelessly submerged.

"I am so sorry–I was so silly," she feebly began, but he interrupted her with almost passionate determination.

"My darling, I know, I understand!" he exclaimed. "That was your friend's story in a stage play. Joan, I feel I must protect you from yourself, for you have allowed an innocent, girlish freak of yours to lay hold of you in an unconceivable manner. It would be absurd, if it were not morbid."

He held forth eloquently on the folly of retrospection, of exaggerating the follies of youth, not only during the drive home, but when they were alone together in the cool dining room, for Sir Thomas was out, and Lady Thorne, not expecting them home so early, had retired for the night; and when he left her in Julie's hands, unwillingly obeying her behest, her demand, given with feverish energy, that her maid was not to be told that she had been attacked with faintness, he felt a little more at ease about her.

Suspect her he did not, except of being one of the most highly strung and sensitive creatures alive. And, being sure that this was so–feeling safe in his unbounded love and trust–she was able to rally.

Through all which might happen–even if Paul Naz changed his mind, and

followed up his suspicions; if the man who found the bottle of drugged brandy happened to recognize her as the woman he had seen; if "that actress girl" could identify her as the person she passed in the hansom; if, indeed, any scraps of her letters or some old photograph of her had been found among Mercier's belongings–nothing, she believed, would altogether alienate Vansittart's love.

She clung to the thought; it seemed her one anchor to life. But even as she gradually recovered from the shocks of that awful hour at the theatre, she regained a certain amount of hope.

The very pomp and circumstance of her wedding; the accounts in the papers; the laudation of herself, Vansittart, and their respective families–all must surely help to avoid exciting the suspicion that she, the heroine of the glorification, was a whited sepulchre; that she had stolen out by night and, alone in a poor room in a lowly dwelling-house with her lover, had poisoned him and then left him to die.

Conscience did not soften the facts of the case. She had to face them in all their unlovely turpitude and deal with them as best she might.

But that night when she had to see her own story partly enacted on the stage, and, worse still, hear it commented upon with unconscious brutality by the dramatic critic, Mr. Hunt, seemed the climax, the crisis.

As the night gave place to day–and the day was full of pleasing incidents as well as of fresh proofs of Vansittart's devotion; he arrived early, and took "her in hand," kept her cheerful, and, with his flow of joyous content, would not allow her a leisure moment for her "morbidity," as he called it–she seemed to settle down a little, as one respited for a time, who deliberately determines to make the most of the term of peace. The days went by quickly, for with such a function as a brilliant wedding imminent, there was a perpetual bustle, there were continual obligatory goings to and fro. Besides, Vansittart mapped out the days–rides, drives, receptions, dances, all formed part of his scheme to entertain her until she would be his wife, feeling his emotions, thinking his thoughts. Only the theatre was rigidly excluded. He avoided even the subject of the stage, nor did he allow her to hear much music. He considered that of all the arts music had the greatest power to reproduce past sensations, to recall memories, especially undesirable ones. He was rewarded for his solicitude by seeing his beloved outwardly cheerful, and apparently at ease.

Joan was, indeed, as the days went quietly by, encouraged by the lack of disturbing elements, by the entire absence of any signs that the tragedy of Victor Mercier's death had any life left in it to torment her. She had promised herself that, if nothing happened before her marriage day, she might consider that she was practically safe. And at last the happy day dawned–a glorious summer morning–and, arising with gratitude in her heart, she murmured a fervent

"Thank God!"

The house was crammed full of visitors–mostly the bridesmaids and their chaperons. At an early hour these girls, attired in their delicate chiffon frocks and "picture hats," were fluttering about the mansion like belated butterflies; for the marriage was to be early, for a fashionable one, to enable Lord and Lady Vansittart to start betimes for their honeymoon, which was to be spent on board Vansittart's yacht, but where, remained the young couple's secret. The bride was closeted in her room, Julie alone was with her. "I do not wish any one to see me before I appear in church," she had said, so decidedly, that her attendant maidens subdued their curiosity and started for the church in a couple of carriages–there were eight of them–without having had even a glimpse of the bridal attire.

Joan felt that she could not have borne the innocent chatter of those bright, unconscious girls, so happy in their unsullied ignorance of life and its undercurrent of horrors. Only in a silent, inward clinging to the thought of Vansittart–so soon to be her husband, her mainstay, her refuge, her only hope–could she endure the few hours before she would be safe–safe–alone with him on the high seas, no one knowing where they were or whither they were going.

Julie? Julie was her servant, of late quite her obsequious slave, with the prospect of being maid to "a great lady," and therefore a personage among her compeers before her. Julie was silent when she was silent. So no bride had ever been decked for the altar with greater show of solemnity than was Joan on her wedding morn.

"Am I good enough–do I look good enough–for him?" she asked herself as she gazed at her reflection in the long mirrors arranged by Julie so that she could see herself at all points–full face, back, profile. What she seemed to see was a pyramid of glistening satin, a quantity of lace, and a small pathetic face with a golden glimmer about it, under a frothy veil.

"A bride's dress is very unbecoming, after all," she somewhat gloomily said, as she accepted the bouquet Julie handed her–myrtle and delicate orchids; for she had told Vansittart, urged by the dread of being confronted with blossoms like the one she had seen in Victor Mercier's buttonhole as he lay dead, that if there were any strongly perfumed flowers about she might faint; a threat which had driven Vansittart to the florist who was to decorate the church to veto all but scentless blossoms. "It seems strange, does it not, Julie? that weddings and funerals should have the same kind of flowers."

Julie gave a little shriek. "Mais, mademoiselle, to speak of death on your wedding-day!"

"There are worse things than death, Julie," said she, with a sigh. And she proceeded below, Julie carefully carrying her train, while wondering with some dismay at her young mistress's extraordinary *tristesse*, then, met by the somewhat

agitated Sir Thomas in the hall, she drove with him to the church.

Policemen were keeping back the crowd. She went up the flight of crimson-carpeted steps, and, passing into the church, dimly saw a double line of bridesmaids, with their pure white frocks and eager, blushing faces; then the officiating clergymen and choristers in their surplices. "They meet a bride as they meet the dead," she thought, with a delirious instinct to burst into laughter. Then she heard the sweet, solemn strains of the wedding hymn, and she felt rather than saw Vansittart, his manly form erect, even commanding, standing at the altar awaiting her, his eyes fixed gravely on her, compelling her by some mesmeric influence to be calm.

How dreamlike it all was! The serious, holy words; the sacred promises; the ring placed upon her finger; the farce, to her who had lost the power to pray real prayers, of kneeling on bended knees with downcast eyes at her husband's side; then the fuss and fervour in the vestry, the cheery smiles of the clergy, the excited embraces, the tiresome congratulations. Suddenly she began to feel her carefully-accumulated patience give way, and in a terror lest she should betray herself, she turned to Vansittart.

"Cannot we go now?" she almost wailed, with a pathetic, entreating glance.

"Of course, my dearest!"

The registers were signed, the business of the ceremony completed, and, somewhat abruptly, bride and bridegroom left the vestry and the little crowd of their gaily dressed friends, and went quickly through the church, to return to the house.

What stares and murmurs she had passed through, running the gauntlet of the crowded pews of sightseers! As she emerged on her husband's arm, the cool air made her gasp with relief.

Whispers, murmurs, policemen backing the crowd with commanding gestures. There was the bridal carriage. She saw Vansittart's horses; they were plunging a little. What a monster bouquet the coachman had! She was passing down the carpeted steps, she was about to halt to step into the landau, when someone came right in front of her, offering her some flowers.

Flowers! Those horribly white, thick-scented blossoms! She recoiled for an instant, then, remembering she must appear gratified, she took them, vaguely seeing a ghastly face, blazing blue eyes, a figure in deep black, a figure she did not know.

In another moment she was in the carriage; they drove off. "Horrible things; throw them out of window," she faintly said, recognizing the hideous fact that the posy was of the very flower Victor had worn when he died.

"Presently, dearest; we cannot let the girl see us do it," he gravely said. He was examining a label attached. In sudden terror she flung down her bouquet,

snatched the posy from him, and stared wildly at the written words–

"In memory of Victor. 'Vengeance is Mine, I will repay, saith the Lord.'"

CHAPTER XXXIII

"Joan! What does it mean?" asked the bridegroom, white, stern, after the shock, still seeming to see those awful words, "Vengeance is Mine!" dancing before his dazed eyes in letters of blood.

"Mean? That I am hunted down–that they are after me, cruel creatures, for an act you yourself said was only childish folly!" She writhed, and gave a mad, wild laugh which seemed to freeze him. But her explanation–her allusion to that which she had told him–that wretched affair in which she had innocently helped to ally her school friend to an utterly worthless scamp–brought instantaneous relief from his sudden, over mastering terror that the label hinted at some unknown horror.

"That was your poor friend, then, dearest, that you unwittingly helped to injure!" He detached the label with the Scriptural quotation from the bunch of flowers, pocketed it, and flung them out of the carriage window. "But I thought she was quit of him? Why should she persecute you, now? When all is over?"

She gave him a desperate glance, and shrank away into the corner of the carriage. White, her eyes ablaze–even in his miserable dread, his anxiety, she reminded him of a celebrated singer he had seen at the opera a few weeks ago in "Lucia." Why, why was her agony so intense about a mere secondary trouble?

"Understand!" she hoarsely said. "If you cannot take me on trust, we had better part, we had better separate now, this very hour, and go our different ways—-"

"How dare you!" he cried; and almost fiercely, in his anguish to hear such a suggestion from her lips, he placed his hands on her shoulders, ruthlessly ignoring the bridal finery, and gazed into her strained eyes. "You are my wife! It is an insult to me, what you say! I am your husband."

He took her peremptorily in his arms, and kissed her with mingled adoration and despair. The despair was involuntary–born of a huge misgiving that something was seriously wrong with his new-made wife, and that he had yet to learn what that something was.

"And now, here we are at your home!" he tenderly said. "You must try and

pretend to be the happy bride I hoped you were!"

As he helped her to alight, and acting the part of the delighted, joyous bridegroom, led her through the little crowd of servants standing about the hall, acknowledging their murmur of congratulation, those melancholy words of his–so untrue in regard to her love for him–to her rejoicing in the midst of her misery that she was his wife–touched her to the quick.

"My poor love!" she gasped, as soon as they were alone in the flower-bedecked drawing-room, throwing herself upon his breast, and gazing adoringly into his face. "I–I had not the courage to tell you before, but I must–now! I told you my unhappy friend was free, but I did not tell you how! Her husband was that man that died–that Victor Mercier! Perhaps she had something to do with his death! That is what has been eating my heart out–that I had had a hand in killing a fellow-creature–killing–depriving some one of life–oh, it is awful! Sometimes I feel that if that man were alive again, I would willingly die myself–give up all our happiness–leave you for ever! Now perhaps you can imagine what I have been suffering, and what I suffered at the theatre listening to that Mr. Hunt talking of the woman with the brandy-bottle, dreading lest he might be speaking of her–my poor miserable friend!"

"My darling!" There was a world of compunction, tenderness, sympathy in his voice as he drew her down by him on a sofa, and lovingly clasped her cold, trembling hands in his. "But you ought to have told me before! I quite–see–all–now–and now I am to bear your troubles for you–troubles indeed, absurd cobwebs–trifles light as air! Your real trouble, my dearest, is being in possession of an over-sensitive conscience! Come–there is the first carriage–how quickly they have followed us up–try and look a little more as a bride ought to look. Your being pale doesn't matter–brides seem to be given that way–but unhappy? For my sake, darling, try to look a little less as if you had just been condemned to death instead of to living your life with me!"

He kissed some colour into her white cheeks and lips; and then the wedding party began to flock in. Carriage after carriage drove up, and the bridesmaids and young men, the older relatives and friends, crowded the drawing-room, and there were embracings and congratulations–not half over when luncheon was announced. It was a gay, or a seemingly gay wedding breakfast. Joan went through it all with a curious feeling of unreality. She heard herself and her loved husband toasted, she heard his eloquent yet well-balanced little speech. She smiled upon those who spoke to her with the almost reverential solicitude with which a bride is addressed on her marriage day, and she muttered some reply, although she did not seem to gather the meaning of their speeches. She cut the cake, she rose and adjourned upstairs when the rest went to the drawing-room. Happily, she had to hurry her "going away" toilette, which was presided over by

her aunt, in the seventh heaven of delight at her only niece's splendid marriage, and by her aunt's maid–Julie having already started with Lord Vansittart's valet and the luggage, to be on board the yacht with everything ready when the bride and bridegroom arrived. Happily there was not a spare moment to be wasted if they meant to "catch the train" they had planned to start by. Before she was quite ready, Vansittart's voice was heard outside the door, hurrying them. They were obliged to hasten their farewells, and drive rapidly to the station–the terminus they were starting from no one knew but Sir Thomas, who was bound to secresy.

But even when the express was rattling across the sunlit country seawards, Joan feverishly told herself that she was not yet safe. Since that posy was offered her at the church door, since she had read those awful words written on the label, and had looked into those menacing blue eyes, a renewed, augmented fear had seemed to half paralyze her, body and soul; more than fear, worse than dread–a horrible conviction of coming doom.

It asserted itself even when she lay on her husband's breast in their reserved compartment, listening to the passionate utterances of intense and devoted love with which he hoped to dispel her nervous terrors–terrors which, although he began to understand that she had unfortunately been drawn into being one of the actors in an undesirable life drama, he regarded as mere vapours which could be dispelled by an equable, peaceful life shared by him and ruled by common sense. Those clear, threatening blue eyes seemed still gazing into hers, penetrating to the secrets hidden in her soul. All through Vansittart's endearing words, the bright pictures he verbally drew of their coming happiness, those words repeated themselves in her ears–"Vengeance is Mine! I will repay, saith the Lord!"

But when day succeeded day upon the yacht; when hour after hour she was calmed by the tender devotion of her husband; when sunlit summer seas under blue, tranquil skies were her surroundings by day, to give place to a dusky mystic ocean lit by glittering trails of moonlight, and reflecting myriads of stars at night–a certain calm, which was more stolidity than calm, a content which was more relief from dread than peace–came to her rescue.

They spent some weeks on the high seas, touching only at obscure foreign ports. At last Joan's latent fears began to reassert themselves. She urged Vansittart to make for a seaport where they might procure English papers.

This led to their return from a coasting tour of the Mediterranean Islands. The heat was intense, only tempered by sea breezes and by the appliances on board the luxurious craft. Still, Joan would not consent to go northward, where people would naturally expect them to be. Vansittart put in at Marseilles, went on shore alone, saw the papers, ascertained that there was nothing in them anent "the Mercier affair," about which his young wife was, in his opinion, so unreasonably conscientious, and brought them to her with secret triumph.

He hoped that now she would be "more reasonable," and to his content, his hope was so far realized that when he tentatively suggested a return home, she readily acquiesced. A week later they arrived at his favourite country seat–a pretty estate in Oxfordshire, near the most picturesque part of the Thames.

An old stone house which had seen the birth of generation upon generation of Vansittart's ancestors, Pierrepoint Court stood in a wide, undulating park. Rooks nested in the tall elms, shy deer hid among the bracken under the preserves. An atmosphere of calm, of unworldly peace, reigned everywhere, and seemed to affect the new mistress of the place, even as she entered upon her duties as its *châtelaine*.

A day or two passed so delightfully that she frequently told herself with mute gratitude to Heaven, that trouble was over–happiness had begun. She strolled through her dominion with her husband at her side, all his retainers and tenants welcoming and congratulating them. Most of all she enjoyed driving with him in a dog-cart to outlying farms, and rusticating among the orchards, visiting the poultry-yards and dairies. This was before they had written to announce their arrival to Sir Thomas and Lady Thorne. The morning their letters must have reached, they were starting for a long drive when a telegraph boy cycled up. Vansittart read the message, which was from Sir Thomas, and crumpling it up, thrust it deep in his pocket. "It is nothing," he said, smiling. But his heart misgave him. The words were ominous of trouble.

"Meet me at my solicitors' as soon after you receive this as possible. This is urgent."

CHAPTER XXXIV

"No answer," Vansittart said to the boy. Then he turned, his face pale, his lips twitching, and saying, "Come in for a moment," he took Joan's hand and led her back indoors, through the hall into the morning-room, where they had but just been laughing over their breakfast like two happy children.

"I must catch the next train to town, dearest, my lawyer wants me on important business connected with the settlements," he said. "Yes! Really, that is all! Am I pale? I confess that the sight of a telegram always upsets me–I am not as stolid as I seem. And now, darling, I must be off at once, if I mean to catch the next train!"

He embraced her fondly, adjured her to be most careful of herself, suggested that she should keep to the grounds while he was away–he did not like her "wandering about the country alone"–and promising to return as soon as his legal business was over, he left her.

She stood at the door watching the dog-cart speed away through the park until it disappeared into the avenue of limes; then feeling as if her heart were a huge leaden weight within her breast, she went to her boudoir, a room Vansittart had had refurnished for her in white and pale blue, and where they had sat together since their arrival when they were not out of doors. It was one of those close, thundery summer days which encourage gloom; and as she flung aside her hat and gloves and sank hopelessly into a chair, she wondered how she would contrive to get through those hours before his return.

Evidently Vansittart had become not only all in all to her, but she hardly dared face life without him. A nervous terror seized upon her. She felt, as she looked fearfully round, as if mocking spirits were rejoicing to find her without his protecting presence. Faint, jeering laughter seemed in the air, or was it only a singing in her ears?

"If I don't fight this awful feeling, he will find me mad when he comes home!" she wildly thought. So she rang the bell, and asked for the housekeeper, who presently came in in a brand-new, rustling silk, a little fluttered. But she felt gratified by her mistress asking so sweetly to be "shown everything," and the hours before the luncheon bell rang were whiled away by an inspection of the mansion and its contents from offices to attics and lumber-rooms.

Then came luncheon in the big, pompous dining-room: luncheon alone, with strange-looking ancestors painted by Vandyck, Lely, and others, gazing grimly out upon the slim girl in the white frock sitting in solitary grandeur at the table, obsequious men-servants in solemn, silent attendance. After that ordeal she felt she could bear no more, and tying on her hat fled into the grounds.

Here the extraordinary stillness of everything under the dense canopy of slowly massing clouds oppressed her still more. She felt more and more eerie and distraught as she wandered, until she came to the river. Here there was movement, something like life again. A faint breeze stirred the wavelets as the flood rushed steadily seawards.

"I will get out a boat and have a row. That may make me feel less horrible!" she determined. She went to the boathouse, chose a skiff, and was soon rowing rapidly up stream. She had learnt to row as a child. The boat sped cleanly along, as she neatly, deftly, handled the sculls.

Her melancholy slightly dispelled by the exercise, she forgot how time was going–how far she had rowed out of bounds, when suddenly an arrow of lurid lightning went quivering down athwart the dense grey horizon, followed by a

detonating roar of thunder.

"I am in for it, there's no doubt of that!" she told herself, almost with a smile. Rain, storm, thunder, lightning–what items they were in the balance against a conscience bearing a hideous load such as hers! As she turned and began to row steadily homewards, she realized her mental state almost with awe.

Another flash illumined the whole landscape with a yellowish-blue glare, then a clap of thunder followed almost instantaneously. Down came such a deluge of rain that for a minute she was blinded; she sat still, wondering whether the slight craft would fill and be sunk.

Then, remembering her beloved, she urged herself to make an effort and return home. Although the downpour beat steadily upon her, upon the boat and the water around, although little runnels trickled coldly down her neck, and her straw hat was already pulp, she went steadily on and on, until at last she was at the boat-house, and had moored the skiff under its friendly shelter.

The rain had given place to hail, so she thought better to wait awhile before walking home. She sat there, wringing the water from her skirts, and wondering what Vansittart would say if he knew her plight, until the clouds parted, watery sunbeams cast a sickly lemon tint upon the river and its banks, and a rainbow began to glow upon the slate-coloured clouds.

Then she stepped from the boat and started to walk across the park. Her clinging garments made locomotion difficult. "What a drowned rat I must look!" she told herself. "What will be the best way of getting to my room without being seen? I know! The side room window!"

"The side room" was a chamber leading from the hall, and conducting by a second door to the offices. It was used for humbler visitors, messengers who waited answers, dressmakers and the like. In the hot weather the window was generally open. "If they have shut it, I must go in by the usual way," she thought.

It was not shut. With a little spring she balanced herself on the sill, and slipped down upon the floor, to find that the room was not empty as she had expected. A slight person in deep mourning, who had been seated, rose and confronted her.

Joan stared at the white, stern, but beautiful face in sick dismay. This was the woman who had given her the flowers–the posy with the strange, awful threat written on the label, when she was about to enter the bridegroom's carriage as she left the church after her wedding.

"I see–you know me," said the girl. She spoke with icy composure. "I have come to speak to you of your danger."

The two looked into each other's eyes unflinchingly–Vera with a cold condemnatory stare; Joan with the apathy of abject despair.

"Come this way, please," she said. Her garments dripped slowly on the

polished floor; she glanced at the drops with a curious wonder, then led the way along a passage, and held open a baize door. In another moment the two were shut into Joan's boudoir, and Joan waved the girl that her wretched, so-called husband had loved, towards a chair.

She shook her head, impatiently. "I meant to wait to see you until you were in the dock," she began. "Your whole doings are known, from the first letter you wrote to poor Victor, to the hour I saw you in Haythorn Street, coming out of the house after you had poisoned him and left him to die! I had meant to tell all I knew to the detectives, but they came after me. All is complete–you may be arrested at any moment. Then will come your trial, your condemnation–your hanging. I expect you have dreamt the rope was round your neck; at least, if you have any feeling left in you. Murderess that you are, you have ruined my life, you have killed my dearest love, who loved me, not you–and I was gloating over the idea of your being hanged by the neck till you were dead, when I dreamt of my Victor. I dreamt a shadow–his shadow–bent over me, and said those very words that I thought meant your doom, 'I will repay, saith the Lord!' I awoke, and knew that I was to come and warn you, that you may escape."

She stopped short, gazing curiously at Joan's drawn, ashen features, features like those of an expressionless corpse. Her eyes, too, were dull, wandering.

"Escape?" she said, stupidly. Then she dropped into a chair, feeling half dead, half paralyzed. The thunder rolled faintly in the distance. It seemed to her that she was still seated in the boat, rowing, rowing, and was dreaming this wretched misery.

"Yes, escape!" the other repeated, bitterly. "You must confess everything to your husband–mind! everything! Then, perhaps, as I, whom you have injured for life, have had mercy on you, he may! At all events, he may do something to save your neck. You have but a few hours' safety–"

She started and stopped short. The door was flung open, and Vansittart entered, briskly, eagerly. He looked from one to the other, then went up to Joan, and reverentially lifting her hand, kissed it.

"Who is this lady, dearest?" he asked, gazing steadfastly at Vera.

CHAPTER XXXV

"I am Vera Anerley," said the pale girl, speaking in clear tones of deadly meaning.

"I have come to tell your wife that the case against her is complete; that she may be arrested at any moment for the murder of Victor Mercier!"

Joan gave a faint cry, and buried her wet, dishevelled head in Vansittart's coat-sleeve.

"Hush, darling, I am here!" he tenderly said. Then, supporting Joan's fainting form, which was already a dead weight, he looked with cool scorn, with stern defiance, at the slender, black-clad figure, at the white, miserable face with those menacing eyes.

"Case, indeed," he exclaimed with scathing contempt. "A jealous woman's vengeance, you should say! But your miserable plot to destroy my injured wife, woman, will succeed in injuring no one but yourself. I have this morning learnt every detail of the trumped-up charge, and given my instructions for the defence. If, indeed, the affair will go any further after my deposition on oath that on the night that–man–died–my future wife was with me until she met her maid to return home. And now, since you have succeeded in making Lady Vansittart ill, I must ask you to quit the house–I will have you driven to the station, if you like–"

Vera interrupted him with a groan.

"I forgot!" she wailed. "I forgot–a man will perjure himself to save the woman he loves! But your lies will fail to save her, my lord! Husbands and wives are nothing in law, in a murder case! If you want to save her, you must take her away!"

With a sob she turned on her heel and went out. Vansittart gathered Joan in his arms, and sinking into a chair tried to kiss her back to life. "My darling, I know all! I will save you!" he repeated passionately. What could she have been doing? She must have been exposed to the whole fury of the storm. Had the vindictive creature killed her? He had thought himself hopelessly crushed, body and soul, when he arrived at his lawyers' to find the distracted Sir Thomas with his awful tale of the charge to be brought against his niece, which Paul Naz had in compassion forewarned him of. But the sight of his darling–who looked dead or dying–who lay like a stone in his arms and hardly seemed to breathe–brought back life and energy, if it augmented his despair.

Her garments were wringing wet–what a frightful state she was in! With a half-frantic wonder what he had best do, he lifted her in his arms, so strong in his anguish that she seemed a mere featherweight, and carrying her upstairs to her room by a side staircase that was little used, laid her on the bed, and rang for Julie. While a man was despatched in hot haste for the doctor, the two cut and dragged off Joan's soaking garments, and vainly endeavoured to chafe some warmth into her icy limbs. But at last insensibility had come to the rescue of Victor Mercier's unfortunate dupe. Joan lay inert and senseless, and when the old doctor who had attended a couple of generations of Vansittarts in their Oxfordshire home came

in, his wonted cheeriness changed to gravity.

Nothing could be done but wait patiently for the return of consciousness, and telegraph for nurses. He could make no prognosis whatever at that stage, but that Lady Vansittart's health was in a critical condition.

"Do you mean that she may not recover?" asked Vansittart. They had adjourned to Joan's boudoir, leaving Julie and the housekeeper in temporary charge of the patient.

Old Doctor Walters shrugged his shoulders and raised his shaggy eyebrows. Vansittart was answered.

"When I tell you that I hope to God my wife will die, you will understand there is something terrible in all this!" he exclaimed–and the tone of his voice, as much as the meaning conveyed by such a speech, made the old man sit up in his chair aghast.

But he was still more horrified when the unhappy man he had known and tended since childhood told him the miserable story as he had gathered it from Joan herself, and from the dreadful tale told to Sir Thomas in its entirety by Paul Naz: the tale of a romantic schoolgirl secretly wooed and married by a man who immediately afterwards absconded, as he was "wanted" by the police on a charge of theft and fraud: her foolish dream dispelled when she learnt that fact, hiding her secret from the uncle and aunt who had adopted her; then, as the years went by and the husband-in-name made no sign, hoping against hope, and giving way to her great love for a man who adored her. Then, just as they were promised to each other, the man's reappearance with threats of exposure, his compelling her visits to his rooms, and her succumbing to the temptation of mixing morphia in his brandy. The one item unknown was Joan's motive for drugging Mercier. So the case looked terribly black to Vansittart and his friend in need, his good old doctor.

Good–and tenderhearted, for at once he offered to see them through their trouble–to the end.

"If the police appear with a warrant they cannot refuse to listen to me," he said. "So I shall take up my abode here, and leave my patients to my partner and our assistant."

The honeymoon was waning in the most dismal of fashions. The house was wrapped in gloom. Joan had recovered consciousness to suffer agonies of pain, and fall into the delirium of fever. The prolonged chill of being the sport of the storm, with so terrible a shock to follow, had resulted in pneumonia. A specialist was summoned from town. He gave no hope. When his fiat was pronounced a look of relief came upon Vansittart's worn, lined features. The specialist went away wondering, but old Doctor Walters understood.

Then the stricken husband took up his position at his wife's pillow, and

banished every one. Whatever his life might contain in the future of hideous retrospection, for those few short hours left he would watch his erring darling yield up her soul to the great Judge who alone knew the frail clay he had made, without any human soul witnessing his agony.

Joan had been raving, madly, incoherently of the past and present, tossing and writhing, now and then clamouring and groaning. But a few minutes after Vansittart had banished the nurses and taken up his position by her side, she seemed to grow calmer.

Was it possible that at least she might die in peace, free from those horrible fantasies, those cruel pains?

He watched her anxiously hour after hour. As the delirium abated the restlessness ceased, and she seemed to fall asleep. He had come to her at midnight. When the grey dawn crept into the room Joan was asleep, and as he lay and gazed wearily at her, his head drooped until it rested on the pillow.

After a succession of wild, tormenting dreams–a purgatory of horrible physical sufferings–Joan slept. She was vaguely conscious of Vansittart's nearness, vaguely sensible that relief had come. The sleep was like heaven after hell.

Then at last another kind of dream was added to her sense of slumber. She felt that something greater and nobler had been added to her life, and that it was all around and about. In the tremendous vastness and solidity of the new influence all seemed petty, small; she knew that she, Vansittart, Mercier, Vera, all were but dancing specks in a gorgeous sunlight.....

Vansittart awoke with a start, a feeling of guilt, fear, and a pain in his arm from some heavy weight.

Then a horrible cry startled the nurse who was keeping vigil in the next room. She rushed in and up to the bed.

* * * * *

The following day three stalwart men descended from the quick train from London and chartered a fly to drive them to Lord Vansittart's.

"A fine place," said one, almost regretfully–he was young, with a fresh colour, and his errand seemed ghastly to him–as they drove in at the open gates, past a lodge which was to all appearance empty.

"Yes," said the eldest of the trio. "Dear me," he added, looking out as the fly passed out of the lime avenue. "What a melancholy looking house! All the blinds down, too!"

Arriving at the hall-door, the oldest and sternest-looking emerged and asked to see Lord Vansittart. The porter looked impressed, but unhesitatingly admitted him, and conducted him to the library, leaving him with a grave "I will

tell his lordship."

"Strange; he did not ask who I was or what I wanted," murmured the man to himself. The silence in the great mansion was almost oppressive. He heard the servant's footsteps, distant voices, the clang of a closing door, then a slight pattering, which grew gradually more distinct, and seemed to keep pace with the beats of his pulse. Advancing footsteps!

"They have heard, and they have all gone; the man is coming back with some fine tale or another," he told himself, exasperatedly. As the door opened he turned with ready resentment, which gave place to a startled, uncomfortable sensation as in the ghastly man in deep black who entered he recognised Lord Vansittart.

"I am very sorry, my Lord, but I have a most painful duty to perform," he began, taking the warrant from his pocket. "I am compelled to arrest Lady Vansittart for the wilful murder of Victor Mercier on the –th of June last."

Lord Vansittart bowed, asked to see the warrant, and then slowly said, "If you will come this way, I will take you to her ladyship, who has a complete answer to the charge."

The detective bowed, passing his hand across his lips to assure himself that he was not smiling–he had no wish to wound the wretched husband of a miserable murderess–and followed the proprietor of the richly-furnished mansion across the hall, up the grand staircase, and along the corridor. Vansittart paused at a door, opened it, and entered.

The detective followed, half suspicious, half uneasy. The room was hung with white–everywhere were piles, masses of red flowers. On the white-hung bed lay more blood-red blossoms. Lord Vansittart went up to it with bowed head, and folding back the sheet that was scattered with the crimson blooms, showed a beautiful waxen face surrounded by close-woven gleaming hair: waxen hands folded meekly on the breast.

"Good God! Dead!" The detective recognized her–he had no doubt as to the fact–but he felt it with a shock.

"No," said Lord Vansittart, grimly, turning to him with a look which he afterwards confided to his wife was the worst experience of his hard-working and disillusionary existence. "Alive! Men may torture and kill our bodies, man, but who can kill the soul?"

THE END.

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