

# The Making of a Man

By Richard Middleton

He was a weedy clerkling and he had missed his way to Vauxhall Station in the middle of the night and was now walking timidly through sordid but singularly unfrequented streets. He was afraid he was missing his last train, but, when a stray figure did approach him, he lost his nerve and did not ask the way. He thought it might be a thief. At the same time, he knew that the soaking rain was spoiling his only overcoat and the thought made him miserable. Why had he not gone to Waterloo as Murray had suggested? Why had he omitted to borrow an umbrella? Why were there no policemen? He noticed with relief, however, that as he walked along the houses were improving. They were getting larger and more respectable and he hoped he might be approaching a main street.

Presently he saw a lighted window shining on the first floor of one of these houses, and as he neared it the front-door swung open and displayed a woman, who leant out curiously to peer at him.

Simmonds was relieved when he saw her sex, because he was not afraid of women. He was very young.

“Could you tell me the way to Vauxhall Station, please, miss,” he asked, and he raised his hat with a glad consciousness of his good manners.

The woman stared at him in a curiously intense way.

“Are you a medical student?” she said earnestly.

Simmonds was busy discovering that she was a lady, and handsome, and her question took him aback.

“A medical student?” he repeated stupidly.

“No, I see you’re not,” she said to herself and Simmonds saw her brow pucker in her effort to think quickly.

“If I could be of any assistance . . .” he said grandly, like the people in novels.

The lady made up her mind in a flash.

“Oh, if you would,” she cried. “I do so want help.” And she stood aside in the doorway.

Simmonds hesitated and very nearly ran away, but some instinct, he did not know what, made him obey and he stepped past her into the hall and waited under the gas-burner while she fastened the door behind him. Simmonds was sure she must be a lady because she wore so many rings and her dress was brilliant, though there was a bad stain down the front of it. She, for her part, had turned away from the door and was scrutinizing him as if in doubt, and the silence was almost too prolonged for Simmonds’ nerves.

“It is upstairs,” she said and swept past him up the staircase, leaving him to follow her if he wished.

Simmonds hesitated again, but it was so bad to turn back after all and say that he was afraid. So he ascended meekly and found her waiting for him on the landing with her hand on the handle of a door. When he approached she opened it, and half pushed, half led him into the room.

“There!” she said. “There!”

Simmonds looked and was deadly sick.

The room was furnished well enough as a sitting-room and lit by a gas-burner that squealed abominably. Just beneath it on the floor was a tin trunk, and as if sitting on the edge perched the

body of a man with his throat cut right across. The thing wore no coat or waistcoat, and the white shirt was wringing with fresh blood.

Simmonds thought of it and retched while the woman looked at him curiously.

“What are you going to do?” she asked when he seemed better.

He hardly heard her; he could hear nothing but the singing of the gas over the corpse and the sound troubled him.

“Is he dead?” he whispered.

“Dead,” repeated the woman. “Dead!” She approached him with the words, but he shrank away from her. There was blood on her dress.

“You must help me,” she said fiercely. “You must! You must! I can’t get it into the box. I tried and tried but I couldn’t. You must help me to cut it up. You can kiss me. Anything you like afterwards.”

He looked at her dully. He had never kissed anybody but his mother and that was a long time ago. It had given him no particular pleasure, he thought. In fact, he had rather disliked it. And now this woman—Of course, at the office he had heard things, coarse things. He had said them himself. But he had never wanted to kiss any woman. And yet—there was something—her lips would be warm. Other people seemed to like it—perhaps?

“Anything you like afterwards,” she said automatically, looking at him.

Simmonds felt a faint stirring in his veins, as if he would like to kiss those warm lips, if but to try. He found himself gazing at the body without horror. He thought it might almost be pleasant to hack at those dead limbs with a knife. He felt like cutting something.

“Come!” said the woman, and she showed him half a dozen knives. “You’ll do it, won’t you—for me?”

She bent forward suddenly and kissed him on the lips.

Why, it was nothing, after all—nothing whatever. And yet in a minute he knew that he would give the world to have that nothing again. The lips had only just touched his for a second: lightly like a flower. How if he had pressed them hard to his? till the blood came, with his arms round her tightly? He looked at her with a new light in his eyes, and she read them rightly.

“Afterwards,” she said. “Afterwards.”

He seized one of the knives and approached the body.

“It will stain my clothes,” he stammered.

“Take them off, then,” she said. “God, what a boy it is.” For he drew back blushing.

She ran quickly through a curtained doorway into the next room and came back with some clothes which she threw at his feet.

“It doesn’t matter spoiling these,” she said; “they are not wanted any more.” Then, as he still paused, “It’s all right, I won’t look.”

And she, turned her back on him while he changed into the dead man’s clothes. And of the two, hers was the greater wonder.

When he had finished he took the knife and began at first tamely and then fiercely. Every now and then he looked up and the sight of her lips parted made him tremble. But after a time the horror of those cold pieces of dead flesh overcame his passion and he worked away mechanically but stubbornly without knowing why. He had to finish it quickly, quickly—that was all.

The knives were blunt and he knew no anatomy, so that by the time he had finished and the lid was shut down there came through the cracks of the blind grey streaks of light. He had done his task and he rose to his feet. He had almost forgotten the woman and his clothes and hands and face were all dabbled with dry blood.

He was wondering happily why—something or other— didn't know what. He was very old.  
Across the room through a mist he saw the woman, standing and looking at him oddly. There was something—what was it?

She opened her arms suddenly and cried to him across infinite space: "Come!"

And with the word something seemed to break and a fierce stream of passionate blood swept through his body.

That was it. The woman! The woman!

He flung himself across the room with a sob on his lips, caught her in his arms and kissed his boyhood away on her hot face.