

The Fourth Mission

CHAPTER XIV

THE SPIRITUALIST SOCIETY

The room in which I found myself was small and cosy, with a deliciously soft carpet, low chairs of some green wood, a Japanese screen from Kobe, several good oil paintings, and a variety of knickknacks—a lady's boudoir.

There was a fragrance of some subtle essence hanging about everything I touched, like the breath of a fading violet. It was especially evident near the writing-table, where pretty multi-coloured stationery, dainty penholders, ink in a vase of green bronze, and a collection of richly-bound books, were arranged most methodically. The little book-case was exquisitely designed, with quaint Jacobean carving. Then there was a workbox, whose open lid revealed a bewildering assortment of knitting-needles, reels of cotton, and skeins of coloured silks. But the dressing-table was the most noticeable. The mirror was large, its face perfectly free from any trace of scratch or dust. The drawers were of mahogany, with wrought-iron handles. There were things that told me my dainty lady was not above trying to improve upon nature, there were silver-mounted boxes and bottles labelled with suggestive names. Nor did she neglect her hands—witness the handsome set of manicuring requisites. It would take me too long to enumerate one half of what I saw in that sumptuous room, or to speak of the array of shawls, dresses, lace, and jewels. She must have had at least twenty bracelets.

I grew impatient to see her—my new client—the more especially as she was a woman. I hated her already! I stood and watched the leaping red flames in the grate, and compared them with the grey wreathing smoke. It was like watching an impetuous young soldier mocking a grizzled veteran. Then the oddly-shaped glowing coals took on themselves a resemblance to the outline of the pit of the lost. Ah yes! there was much to contemplate in the fire.

Raising my eyes to the wall above the mantelpiece, I beheld the portrait of a very lovely girl. But the feature that riveted my attention was the chin—so prominent and massive, yet so gracefully formed—such as is indicative of will, of what is commonly called “push”—and still it was beautiful. I saw vast possibilities in that chin. The eyes were dark, neither brown nor grey, but deep blue, deeper blue than the deepest of the sea, with a setting of long, curling eyelashes. Yet there was no true soul in the depth—only animal passion. Power—or money perhaps—would kindle those eyes as no spiritual emotion could. The brows were straight, fine, dark, and very striking. The nose was finely chiselled; the mouth wreathed in a smile that even in a painting was not easy to interpret. It might be amusement—or mockery—or something a little more sinister, perhaps. The teeth just showed, white, and even, and not too noticeable. Her complexion was pale; if truly rendered, too pale, I thought, for a healthy woman.

While I was still looking at the portrait, the cuckoo on the clock poked its head out of its box and cried four times. While the last stroke vibrated, the door opened, and a girl stood on the threshold.

It was, unquestionably, the original of the portrait.

The artist deserved all credit. His work was faithful in its perfection, even cynically so, for he had contrived to render the woman's character as significantly as her beauty. A single glance showed me that she was one of those whom allegorists describe as having chosen the gate and

path which was broad and smooth. I persuaded myself that this mission would not be a difficult one to perform.

The firelight made a very effective tableau of the girlish figure, with its slender, perfect symmetry. She wore a dark costume, with a collar of deep crimson velvet. The sleeves were loose, just drooping over the wrists and accentuating the slim whiteness of the pretty hands, with long-pointed fingers and carefully polished filbert nails. She wore an engagement ring, and her right hand also gleamed with jewels.

Gently closing the door, she came across the room and wearily threw herself down into the armchair which she drew up to the fire. I took up my position by her side, and read the history of her soul.

My new client, Ida Temple, was an orphan; her parents dying in her infancy, left her penniless, at the mercy of the world. Fortunately for her, a sister of her mother turned up unexpectedly and was inclined to play the role of Good Samaritan. This worthy lady, Miss Elizabeth Woodward, was wealthy and eccentric. She had strange hobbies, loved to do outlandish things, and was, above all, a man-hater. She would not allow a man to enter her house, nor visit where she was likely to meet any; would never allow her niece to talk of any—and this was the skeleton in Miss Ida's cupboard.

Miss Woodward was rich—reported fabulously so; and had no one with any claim on her except my client. She patronised many charitable institutions; and that often leads, in the case of whimsical old ladies, to a making of strange wills. So her niece must be careful to fall in with her views and never to outrage any of her sensibilities—above all, never to express any liking for the opposite sex. This was a difficult piece of simulation, for Ida's passions craved for male society; moreover, her heart was given to an individual man. It involved clandestine meetings in parks, at balls, theatres, and concerts, and when a mind once lends itself to petty deceits, it is not always willing to stop at small things. Miss Temple had a comfortable, a luxurious home, with a liberal allowance and every domestic indulgence—except one. She might not entertain—at least, not those whose company she wished for—girls of her own age and elderly spinsters counted for nothing, of course.

Like a graceful tiger she loved to wander in sunshine, to revel in the warmth of adoration; to torture, for the pleasure it gave her to inflict pain. The hearts of men were her playthings, she had a right to them all, as absolute as the right of the feudal lord over the possessions of his vassals.

Naturally, one so lovely, and presumably rich, was not without admirers, for Miss Woodward had not gone the length of denying her the right to mingle freely in society. She had heard their pleadings unmoved, dismissed their suits almost with insult. Yet even the goddess of Beauty is not invulnerable, and one day Cupid drew his bow, and the aim was sure.

She met her match. In trying all her artifices to win an obstinate heart, womanlike, she lost her own! Hubert Murchison, a thorough man of the world, was not blind to the possible advantages of the position; and so they became engaged, though as yet it was a matter almost of secrecy. There was no one to inform Miss Woodward! Murchison was by profession a barrister, who in the prevailing scarcity of briefs, added to his income by coaching a few pupils. He had travelled in the East, where he had had the good fortune to fall in with an Indian prince anxious to study the English law. The barrister's manner with strangers was singularly attractive, and he had easily secured this lucrative addition to his occupations.

My client leaned back in her chair in the utter abandon of laziness; her dainty feet rested on the fender, her hands lay on her lap, the fingers of one toying with the engagement ring and making it flash in the firelight. The smell of violets that pervaded the room hung about her too. It was all

the very refinement of elegant luxury. There she sat, her eyes half closed, thinking in a dreaming manner, yet always plotting and scheming.

“There must be some way out of it,” she thought. “But how foolish aunt is, and how wearisome it becomes to be hampered like this at every turn. Other girls never are. Stupid old woman—provoking, obstinate *idiot!* I feel inclined to—to—I don’t know what! I can’t think of anything—that’s just it. I wish women had the daring brains of men. Here am I—I settled my heart on Hubert. My heart! dear me, that same heart that ten—or is it twelve ?—men tried for in vain. He’s got it. Well—handsome Hubert—how his other old flames envy me! I suppose it is natural; I am as beautiful, as fascinating—oh, well, as everything as any other girl in London; I may be as rich. It can’t be deluded vanity; I’ve been told the same thing so often, that I can’t help knowing it. Yet I ought to be happy, and I’m not; just because I can’t get the one thing I really want, on account of the whims of an ugly soured old maid. I must think—think!”

She was concentrating her mind now with all its powers; it was my chance, and I did not mean to lose it. I placed my hand on her forehead, and whispered in her ear:

“Could your aunt’s whims not be led to take the direction of the spiritualist society? Hubert—séance—mesmerism?”

The girl started, then shivered and crouched nearer to the fire.

“Dear me, how extraordinary! I could have sworn (and she did swear, for the indulgence is no longer strictly confined to the sterner sex), “that there was some one here who whispered to me. It is uncanny, and the message was such a strange one. How horribly dark and cold the room is. I wonder am I any sort of a clairvoyant, as Hubert would say; have I got into touch with the spirit world he talks of? Hubert—séance—mesmerism. It is silly, and yet I can’t be mistaken, I heard the words so clearly, and I was not thinking of anything of the sort. It’s odd, and rather horrid—yet—ah!”

The girl had grasped my proposition at last, and the perfect cruel face lit up.

“And, after all, it was a good idea. I might persuade aunt to go to a meeting of this spiritualist society. It is fashionable and whimsical enough to suit even her. Hubert will be there—I’ll introduce him as the secretary—at his own special request, of course. Yes, it is very good. He will persuade her that she is a medium; she will like that because it is uncommon, and probably she will let herself be hypnotised. And Hubert vows that once a person has been successfully and voluntarily mesmerised, he or she is simply in the operator’s hands for ever after. Oh, you spirit, or whatever you are that suggested it, I should like to kiss you! Isn’t that something for the belle of the season to say? I hope you are properly flattered.”

And after this, her thoughts became a mere ripple of frivolous nonsense, a shallow brook running and chattering in the sunshine, all merriment and noise and bubble.

Outside the house, tall gaunt trees waved their denuded branches, the crescent moon gleamed like a reaper’s sickle. It was a glorious evening, but very, very cold. Yet in the boudoir the temperature rose, and the girl’s spirits rose therewith. She was as blithe and as irrepressible as a lark by the time the maid came to announce that tea was ready in the drawing-room.

CHAPTER XV

Hubert Murchison was tired. His work had been unusually tiring. The Indian prince seemed to have suddenly gone back in his studies, and to have developed a mania for asking purposeless questions; while the English pupil, thick-headed at the best of times, had drifted into absolute imbecility over Stephen’s *Commentaries*. To the coolest temperament, idiots are aggravating;

and Murchison's temperament was by no means cool, and his stock of patience limited. Still, he had tact and sense enough to refrain from any indiscreet manifestations of anger. He had been unusually polite to the two young men in pointing out their errors. But the effort told on him; and when he returned to his rooms at Dean's Yard, Westminster, it was to indulge in a marvellous outburst of swearing. The Indian prince was consigned with many invectives to the nethermost regions, and the English pupil delivered into the personal custody of Diaphernes.

Murchison's room was divided by an archway into two parts. The farther portion had a window overlooking a dismal courtyard, littered with rusting kitchen utensils and seedy bits of furniture. There was a drop from the window-sill of more than fourteen feet—and any one attempting the jump would have to be a good acrobat to avoid the row of sharp spikes directly underneath. There was no exit from this part except through the front portion, neither was there any furniture, and the floor was plainly covered with brown oilcloth. Yet the dull room interested me. I knew it was here that Murchison held his spiritualistic seances.

The front part of the room was very different. A soft Oriental rug stretched from doorway to fireplace, and a cheerful fire burned in the latter. There were two tables, a small round one and an ordinary writing-table. Against the middle wall was a luxurious sofa, and the comfort of the apartment was completed by easy-chairs and a handsome bookcase.

On the larger table lay the remains of Murchison's dinner—he had dined earlier than usual, and, expecting no visitors, had not rung for the cloth to be removed. Indeed, he was sitting with his shoes off, his waistcoat unbuttoned, and his feet against the chimney-piece, cursing the fate which had neglected to make him rich.

A gentle tap came to the door.

"Who the deuce?" he muttered, hastily dropping his feet and scrambling into his coat. "Come in!"

The door opened to admit two people. But he saw only one, a girl beautiful as the day, and exquisitely dressed. He viewed her gladly, approvingly, but it was with sensual appreciation rather than love.

"My darling!" he cried, crossing the room to meet her, and kissing her. "What on earth brings you here? But never mind, take off your boa and sit down."

The girl smilingly obeyed.

"I wanted to ask you something, Bertie," she said, drawing off her gloves slowly and noticing with pleasure his open admiration of her hands. She let him take one and hold it.

"I wish you could come and see me at home," she sighed. "It is too bad of auntie."

"Won't she *ever* change her opinion of man?"

Hubert muttered, his face hardening. "It is too ridiculous. I wonder how it originated."

He drew Ida nearer to him as he spoke. "I'm afraid not," she said. "Her aversions and her likings are both immovable; she is the most obstinate person I ever met. Still, this is so cruel."

Murchison gave the expected sympathetic kiss. "Would it do any good if I were to see her?" "Oh no, no! it would be useless, in fact, probably make things worse. But you won't hugh at me, will you, if I tell you a plan I have thought out?"

"Laugh at you? rather not! Tell me all about it, darling."

"You're sure you won't laugh?" She held a finger in front of her face—he caught and kissed it—and smiled as the very incarnation of trustful naïveté.

"I should think I would *not!* Tell me, dear! Nothing foolish could come out of such a dear little head."

"Well—auntie has taken a sudden notion that it is her duty to attend a spiritualist meeting."

“Whew! But, Ida—what in thunder *will* the old lady want next?”

“Hush! Don’t be a naughty boy and interrupt. She simply *must* go. You’ll get tickets for us, won’t you?”

“With all the pleasure in life, darling. I don’t see it yet, but I am interested.”

“Suppose we attend the meeting—you will be there.”

“Dear one, yes! Anywhere that you are.”

“Be sensible for once, Bertie. You will be there, and sit where auntie can see you. Observe her closely, and let her be aware of the fact.”

“Hullo! am I to mesmerise her?”

“Oh, be quiet, you stupid! During the interval you will come up to us and speak to me as if you were a very slight acquaintance. I shall introduce you as the secretary. Then you can tactfully let auntie know that you have made the interesting and important discovery that she is a medium.”

“Ha, ha!” The man burst into a laugh of genuine amusement. “A medium! Pardon me, my darling, but from what you have told me, I should say she is as unlike a medium as any one possibly could be.”

“That doesn’t matter in the least. You will do as I bid you, sir. She will be interested in you, forget that you are one of those horrid men, and will want to attend a séance. You will hold one for her here; no one but us there. Instead of spirit-calling, you will—”

The man had grown absorbed in her words; there was an undercurrent in her tone, an evident leading up to a climax.

“I will what?” he said, rather uneasily. “Not kill her, I suppose?”

“No, no. Only hypnotise.”

“Hypnotise? Good gracious—what next, and why?”

“Because I wish it.”

“Darling, that is the best reason in the world, but you can’t call it an explanation.”

“Well, then, you dear old goose, it is because, if you once hypnotise her and get her into your power, I should think you could easily blot out her aversion to your sex, or else you can’t do much! Do you understand *now*?” and she smiled her best at him.

What a pretty face it is!” ejaculated Murchison with unfeigned admiration, pressing his lips to hers. “I see it now. But, my love, Ida, no one but a woman (and I believe no woman but you), could have thought it out; yet they say we men have the brains! I won’t disappoint you, darling. It is a difficult, perhaps a rather dangerous game to play. But I believe I can do it, and it shall be done.”

More caressing after this—more lying in his arms, her soft cheek against his and her dark curls mingling with his short fair hair, more of the nonsensical phrases in which lovers delight, single ejaculations, strokings of the cheek and meetings of the eyes.

It was late for a lady to be out alone when Miss Temple rose to go. Murchison, of course, intended to see her home, and having wrapped her cloak snugly about her, he blew his whistle for a hansom. The drive to Charing Cross and the journey thence by rail to Blackheath occupied an hour or more, and it was close on eleven when Miss Temple rung the bell of her abode in St John’s Park.

She kissed her fingers and threw one lingering look in the direction of her fiancé, whose figure showed clearly in the moonlight, before she entered the hall, and the door closed noiselessly behind. Crossing the paved floor, with its handsome design of Egyptian figure-work, she passed into the dining-room. This apartment was brilliantly lighted with electric sprays, but, apart from the fire, would have impressed the observer as cold and cheerless. The paper was too light, and

there was no heavy, comfortable furniture. Perhaps the modern unsympathetic chair is more in keeping with our ascetic ladies of the hyper-aristocratic order. Other furniture would have been out of place—and other there was none. The chairs were covered in leather, pale blue leather that would have showed any stain had Miss Woodward's guests not all been too highly cultivated to carry dust on their skirts. Only men leave such marks! There were no antimacassars, no soft, luxuriant rugs. A few small tables were ranged round the room, on one albums, on another books. The books were all of one type: *Adam the Real Culprit*, *The Degeneration of Man*, *Why Women Make the Best Doctors*, *Should Men Abandon Professions*, *What Shall We Do with our Daughters?* and so forth. In one corner of the room was a small divan, on which lay an unframed black-and-white sketch: "A Skit on the Feature of the Times—The Millennium." It represented men as engaged in all menial occupations, washing dishes, wheeling perambulators, while some paraded the streets with begging placards, "Pity the Unemployed." Meanwhile the members of the other sex were walking arm in arm, laughing and smoking. I thought it had probably been sent to Miss Woodward as a practical joke. There were no musical instruments in the room, and the walls were devoid of pictures, except for some large photographic views in severe oak frames, arranged at regular intervals. As I said before, the dominant note of the room was one of absolute coldness. Seated rigidly in a high-backed chair, not too near the fire, sat an elderly lady.

She was such a thorough contrast to the conventional prudish old maid, that even I paused for a moment in astonishment. Her hair was grey, but cut short, and her dress was a careful contradiction of everything usually distinctive of her sex. The bodice was a gentleman's short coat and waistcoat, while her nether garments were unquestionably knickerbockers, fitting closely and displaying limbs neither full nor shapely enough to bear such accentuation. Yet this was the man-hater!

This lady turned on her chair as her niece entered. "It is very late," she said drily—her harsh tones exactly suited that bony nose and jaw. "Where have you been?"

"Only to a meeting of the spiritualist society."

"And—you had no escort?"

"Why, auntie, women are the rulers of the world. Surely we need no escort."

"Be reasonable, my dear. Men are brutes who would take any advantage over those weaker—physically weaker, of course. It is unsafe for you to be out alone at such an hour, and I trust you will never risk it again."

"But the meeting was so interesting, auntie."

"Oh, I'm glad to hear it, Ida. I am glad for you to attend instructive meetings which will enlarge your intellect and make you thirst for more knowledge. Knowledge! that is what we women want, and it has long been denied to us. But, thanks to a few noble-minded and courageous women, the cloud of darkness overhanging our sex will soon be dissipated."

But the excitement was too much for the old lady; she stopped, groaned, and complained of a pain in her heart.

"I suppose I must see a doctor," she grumbled.

"Who, auntie?"

"Who? Dr Alicia Marshall, of course, the only reliable doctor in Blackheath. But, about your meeting; you say it was interesting."

"Very."

"Any men there?"

"Very few—none in the least objectionable."

"I daresay not. Ahem! I daresay not! Did you talk to any of them?"

“Only to the secretary—a strong advocate of the rights of our sex.”

“Then he is more sensible than the majority. But you shouldn’t have talked to him—you shouldn’t. But there—you did!” She broke into a little nervous laugh. “Do you think—perhaps you could take me with you to one of those interesting meetings?”

“Why, auntie,” and the girl could not hide the flash of triumph in her eyes, “I should be so pleased. You are just the sort of person they want—some fearless leading spirit to command attention.”

“Ahem—well, my dear, I will think it over and keep it in my mind. Was there a big gathering?”

“N—no—not more than thirty?”

“And chiefly women?”

Yes—very few men.”

“Young women?”

“I was by far the youngest there.”

“Then they were wise folk who had reached the age of putting aside girlish frivolities and waste of time. Time!—yes, it flies. It seems but yesterday I was your age.” The old lady paused. I wondered was it to wipe away a tear; but she only lit a cigarette. “It is strange (puff) how the young fraternise with men (puff)—and pleasure in their empty flattery (a more emphatic puff than ever)—cherish an ideal—and hope to find it! Absurd! (puff, puff, puff). I was fortunately not so constituted—I always looked on men as silly and dangerous. They admired me, said pleasant things about me, sent me verses, pestered me with attentions, and got no answer. I wonder how many girls could say as much, eh?” The old lady put down her cigarette; she smoked less from liking than as a matter of principle.

“You were unique, auntie,” Ida replied, trying to conceal her weariness with a smile.

“Unique? I suppose I was. Ah, the old days are gone—yes, I’ll go to your meeting. It is select, of course?”

“Lady Jugenhop, Lady Fitzhurse and Mrs Harrison—they go,” was the demure response.

“Yes—well, I will go too.”

My client displayed some anxiety as she glanced towards her aunt’s costume. This difficulty had not occurred to her before. How could she be seen in the company of such a guy? It would make her the laughing-stock of the room. Besides, the hall-porter might refuse to admit her. Were women allowed to masquerade in men’s attire? And at her aunt’s age it was too ludicrous. It must be managed somehow.

“Auntie,” she said slowly, stooping to pick a thread from her skirt (how useful stray threads can be at times), “I don’t want to vex you—you know I don’t mean to be rude—but, will you—I mean, what are you going to—”

“Well, what is the matter—speak up, child.”

“Are you going to—wear—?”

Miss Woodward fairly jumped. What a question! With her coldest expression she said icily: “What am I going to wear? Be good enough to explain yourself.”

The girl was equal to the occasion. She appeared genuinely pained and distressed.

“Forgive me, auntie dear,” she said gently, “but it *is* a rule of the society that ladies do not attend in rational costume.”

Miss Woodward wore an expression of wounded dignity.

“And now, perhaps, you can interpret the words, ‘rational costume.’ ”

“Oh, they only mean an imitation of masculine clothes.”

She saw her blunder too late. Her aunt broke in vehemently.

"What!" she shouted. "You dare to hint that I—I wish to imitate man! I? And man the abomination of my life! Oh, to think of such ingratitude. You whom I adopted, clothed, fed, educated, to say this! Are you a woman or a viper? Are you—"

Her niece gently interposed and checked the tirade.

"I beg pardon, auntie, if I even let you think for the moment that I meant anything of the sort. I only tried to explain how certain people use the words."

"Then you yourself think differently?"

"Why, you taught me yourself, auntie."

"Could any one compare me with a man?"

"*Certainly* not," the girl spoke with emphasis, for she was thinking of Hubert.

"Well, I am glad you have some sense left, Ida. I had begun to suspect that you were devoid of my gift of sober reasoning. Now, give me a hint in this dress matter, for if I go to your society's meetings, I suppose I must not run counter to the whims of its members."

"Couldn't you wear your black gown?"

"The one I threw aside years ago?"

"Yes—it is as good as new—and of a description that never goes totally out of fashion."

"As if I cared about fashion, silly girl! But I will think it over; and, as I suppose you want to go to bed, you may shake hands."

For this curious woman never kissed—a kiss was the very sign and emblem of treachery—above all, the treachery of man. And this was an eccentricity on which my client congratulated herself. Hubert's lips were one thing, and those of this cold spinster quite another.

She ascended to her own room, and an hour later I sat at the foot of her bed and watched her sleeping, and the dream phantoms I called floated in through the window.

CHAPTER XVI

AT THE ST JACOB'S HALL

After long consideration, and changing her mind half a dozen times over the matter, Miss Woodward decided to attend the meeting, and to alter her style of dress for the occasion. It was a double victory for my client, and had been marvelously easy in the gaining. Before proceeding, I must say something about what had lately been passing through me, for I, who was all mind, can hardly say "through my mind."

From my first introduction to Diaphernes, until the close of my first mission, I had been solely dominated by love for my master, and thirst for distinction in his service, with a bitter hatred of all outside his rule. At times the remembrance of my own earthly wrongs and of Crawley Langton almost drove me to frenzy—I would fain have sought every corner of the universe to find and torture my enemy. At other times, I was a prey to a kind of lethargy mingled with sadness. These moments grew more frequent, and I seemed to fall under some adverse influence, which accompanied me to the earth and became more clearly defined in the course of the second mission. I almost disliked the evil I was doing, and longed to be free. It grew into a pining for liberty, and, like all who experience woes themselves, I learned to sympathise.

Once, as I was watching my client in her room, I actually turned to leave her free from baleful promptings. A message of warning from Diaphernes came to remind me of my pledge—and I offered a moment's resistance before my feeling changed, and I returned with all my being glad

with the joy of my strange servitude. Again I loved Diaphernes and wrought the harder for his sake.

A while after, I was again moved with sadness, and fell into a state of despondent indifference. I hated my mission, and shrank from the name of my master, and I cried for death. But the revulsion of feeling came again, and I set myself to the task of winning the soul of Ida Temple to atone for my momentary defection.

Enough—let me return to the mission itself.

The meeting of the spiritualist society to which my client and her aunt had been invited was held in the larger room of St Jacob's Hall, near Buckingham Palace Gate. It was an excellent, fashionable and central spot for the headquarters of the society. And the society itself was fashionable just then. As a rule, its meetings were extremely well attended.

On the evening of which we speak there were perhaps four hundred people present, mostly gentlemen, with a sprinkling of ladies. I cannot say that the latter were prepossessing. They were almost, without exception, bony, ill-shapen, anæmic women, short-sighted, and wearing very unbecoming spectacles on their unhealthy faces.

I have said ladies were in the minority. Gentlemen filled the larger part of the hall, and strange specimens they were, too. Old and young, some smartly, others shabbily dressed, with shiny, ill-fitting clothes—a curious collection of human beings indeed. By 8.30, the room was full, not a seat vacant, and the temperature rose, the air became hotter, more stifling, more humidly suggestive of packed humanity.

There was a glare of electric light, not becoming, merely brilliant, emphasising the pallor and general defectiveness of the faces present. Entering the hall with my beautiful client, whose attractive figure and fair face caused a turning of heads, I was at once impressed with the uninteresting nature of the audience. Ida Temple seemed curiously out of place among these people.

Yet, instead of seeming wearied or disappointed, her eyes searched the crowd eagerly. The seats reserved for her and Miss Woodward were in the centre of the room, and to reach them they had to pass down a long line of chairs. On their way, the girl leaned on the back of one chair for an instant, and a young man whom I recognised as Murchison glanced quickly round. A quiet look of intelligence was interchanged, too quick to attract Miss Woodward's attention, and when they sat down the aunt had no idea that the good-looking young man whose eyes were respectfully scanning her face was other than a perfect stranger to her niece. In spite of her aversion to his sex, she did not object to his scrutiny—in fact, she rather enjoyed it. After all, there were men *and* men, and this did not seem like one of the common order; he was handsome, distinguished-looking, and possibly intelligent. Then, too, he appeared to be broad and tall, and there was woman enough in her to appreciate the sign of strength. Her feeble old heart fluttered at this stranger's evident attention as it had not done for very many years. All around, there was a hoarse murmur of voices like the rumbling of the breeze in an old-fashioned chimney, or its moaning among the rafters. But the sound ceased suddenly when Professor Thirroul stepped on to the platform, and, with a bow, commenced his harangue. Episodes, concerning Madame Joan Urquhart of Reves, a clairvoyant of enormous reputation, figured in the commencement of his speech. He mentioned that she had successfully answered questions put to her by eminent men relative to their absent friends, and had given them full particulars about those deceased, such as were impossible to have been hinted to her beforehand. One gentleman, having lost an uncle, for whom he had entertained great affection, questioned her about this relative and his present state. She gave a perfect description, both physical and moral, of the chief characteristics of the

deceased in this world, then she stated that he was at present in a land full of flowers and fountains, but she could not tell its name. He was recognisable, only his features were no longer those of mortals. Furthermore, he was very happy, and would not wish to return to earth.

All this nonsense appealed to my sense of humour; I saw so keenly the absurdity of these clairvoyants pretending to commune with us, and claiming power over those fifty times more powerful than their puny selves. But, by the mass of those present, it was received with faith, and not a little awe.

In all, the first speech lasted an hour, during which time the worthy professor was careful not to allow the sensational element to wane. I noticed how absorbed Miss Woodward became, as he proceeded. The subject was not wholly new to her; she had read articles upon it with the avidity she always displayed towards any out-of-the-common proceedings. In her enjoyment, she had forgotten the observant stranger, and only remembered him when Professor Thirroul left the platform.

To her surprise, as she looked round, the gentleman left his seat and slowly came towards her, much hampered in his progress by the close rows of chairs. Halting in front of Ida, he made some commonplace remark, but he spoke with a quiet deference that pleased the strange old lady.

"Evidently a man of good breeding and of no ordinary talent," she thought, and actually smiled as her niece spoke.

"Auntie, may I introduce Mr Murchison, our secretary?"

The young man bowed.

"I hope Miss Woodward did not think me unpardonably rude," he said. "I know I did stare harder than etiquette allows, but I had an excellent excuse."

Miss Woodward was softening rapidly.

"I feel quite flattered, I assure you," she said, with something grotesquely like a coquettish simper. "But do please tell me your reason."

"But you may be offended."

Hubert was standing in the easy attitude of one well used to ladies' society; his insincerity seemed to me so clearly stamped upon his face that I wondered others did not comment upon it, till I recollected that "society" men and women probably had not keen eyes for their common failing.

"Tell me!" she persisted.

"I was assuring myself," he answered gravely, "that you would make an excellent medium. One rarely meets one wholly in sympathy with our friends in spirit-land."

Miss Woodward's countenance brightened visibly. "He really is a very nice young man," she thought; adding aloud, "Do you truly think so?"

"Yes—truly, Miss Woodward. I may say I am convinced of it." Then, lowering his voice as he observed some people near at hand paying unnecessary attention to the conversation, "One has only to glance at some faces to read rare spirituality—sympathy—earnestness—a mind different from the ordinary type—but, perhaps this subject is distasteful to you. I know many people find it so."

"Oh no, Mr Murchison! I take a great interest in anything capable of enlarging our minds and extending our ideas. I think you are in some way connected with this society, you said?"

"I am the secretary, that is how I met Miss Temple."

"And do you usually have such a large gathering?"

"Indeed, yes. Sometimes we can hardly find standing room. But would you like me to point out to you some of our more distinguished patrons?"

The young man's chivalrous attention was winning its way. Miss Woodward felt twenty years younger in mind; perhaps all men were not such degraded creatures as she had imagined.

She readily acquiesced, for like most ladies who love to be considered "select," she was slightly inclined to what ordinary people call "snobbishness."

Murchison smiled at her evident eagerness.

"Do you see the lady over there—in green?" he whispered; "she is the wife of Lord Edcastle; the one to the left with the mushroom-shaped hat is Sir Ralph Mahony's eldest daughter."

Miss Woodward was delighted. The heavy atmosphere of the room became precious since it could be breathed in common with these. Lady Edcastle, the friend of royalty!

"Dear me," she murmured. "What a refined person Lady Edcastle is. One can see that she inherits the good old blue blood of England."

"Not from her father," rudely ejaculated a man on Miss Woodward's right, "the over-fed old brewer, nor from her mother, the—"

But Murchison tactfully intervened and drew off his new friend's attention, just as she was turning, bristling with wrath, upon the discourteous interrupter. Then the conversation was stopped by Professor Pitkins's appearance on the platform.

For another hour the audience was treated to accounts of supernatural occurrences gathered from strictly authentic sources, and brimming over with unadulterated horror. Most of them concerned apparitions whose only delight and occupation was to appear in tangible form and terrify nervous men and women into fits.

I myself, a denizen of the spirit world, knowing what a rare and difficult matter such materialisation is, could afford to be amused at the idea. Doubtless the stories were told in perfect good faith, arising either from an overwrought condition of brain, or the supremacy of a stronger will commanding the imagination of a weaker. When the last word had been spoken and the meeting dispersed, we mingled with the crowd, passing slowly towards the door-way; a cold rush of air came in from the outside.

Murchison attended the two ladies until the last moment. "Permit me," he said gallantly, helping Miss Woodward to struggle into her intricate and antiquated cloak-garment. He did not speak to my client, but had Miss Woodward perceived the look and pressure which accompanied the final handshake, she might have changed her mind concerning this most desirable "secretary."

"Only think, my dear," she said gleefully to Ida that night, as they sipped their coffee in front of the drawing-room fire, "of my being a probable medium. Yet, do you know, I *have* always felt in touch with the nobler elements. On one occasion I thought your mother spoke to me; she seemed to say, 'Lizzie, Lizzie, don't read by that light, you will hurt your eyes!' She was always so anxious about my sight, poor dear."

"What do you think of the secretary?" said Ida with a carelessness that was almost overdone.

"A most charming young man—not a bit like most of his sex. Clever undoubtedly, and well-mannered, and so wonderfully correct in reading character. But," with a return of her asperity, "he is a man! Dear, dear, what a pity."

"Are you still so bitter, auntie?" asked the girl, with a winning smile, as the firelight kissed her cheeks and the crimson band at her throat, and darkened by contrast her hair and eyes. She was a nymph of the night indeed.

Miss Woodward frowned. She had almost been trapped into a weakness, and womanlike, tried to get out of an awkward position.

“My opinions are of course unaltered,” she said sternly. “I can’t imagine why I endured seeing so much of this Mr Murchison, except, indeed, that it opens the way to something I have long desired.”

“And that is—?”

“Don’t be inquisitive, Ida. There is nothing so detestable as an inquisitive person. You never learnt such an odious habit in this house, I am sure.”

“I beg your pardon, auntie. I really didn’t mean to be inquisitive, and of course I have no wish to ask about anything you do not want to tell.”

“Sensibly spoken, my dear. But,” the old lady went on as if half ashamed, “as you are so sensible, I think I may tell you. I want to attend a séance.”

There was a moment’s silence, broken only by the ticking of the clock and the beating of the two hearts, the elder throbbing with anxiety, the younger with triumph. The yellow flame burned and flickered, uncertain as a woman’s word, while the coals glowed red and the grey ashes slipped through the bars. Then a half cinder fell with a noise, and my client answered, as if recalled to the present by the sound:

“I am sure Mr Murchison would arrange a séance on your behalf, if it is not too great a favour to ask of him.”

“My dear! He is a man, and men were only intended to accommodate us. Don’t be ridiculous.”

The old lady sat severely upright, she was wrestling with the prejudices of her whole life. Could she set aside her antipathy towards man, even for a moment? Like most staunch upholders of a fanciful doctrine, she had quite a circle of disciples, women past their prime, either embittered by circumstances or wilfully eccentric. She had been the leading spirit among them. Seeing that all her associates respected her, and in a great measure drew their inspiration from her, any sudden change of attitude would surely cause a panic, and might lead to the dispersal of the Men Haters’ Club which she had initiated. If she accepted a favour from Murchison—and it became known—the proof of her degeneracy would be complete.

“If I attend a séance it must be kept private—mind, my dear, *strictly* private.”

The girl guessed the reason at once.

“You need not fear any indiscretion on Mr Murchison’s part, I know,” she retorted, a little too warmly, rising and leaning her arm on the mantelpiece.

“Oh, have you any foundation for that statement?”

“No, auntie, except, of course, his official position in the society, and intuition. It was a fairly strong, reliable face, I thought,” she concluded, with a yawn.

“Yes, I thought so too. Well, it is bed-time now—we must talk this over to-morrow. *Au revoir!*”

CHAPTER XVII

THE POWER OF HYPNOTISM

Up to this point I had found my task easy: indeed, beyond the suggestion about the séance, there had been nothing for me to do. So I did not expect to meet any serious difficulty as I prepared to accompany the ladies to Murchison’s rooms.

A thick yellow fog, like foul wet linen, hung over London. Traffic was well-nigh suspended, and the electric light all but useless. There was a choking dampness in the air, and poor old Miss Woodward coughed incessantly. The progress of their motorcar was irritating in its slowness,

and she became so short-tempered and fidgety that I feared she might decide to abandon her visit. Once, when Ida made some allusion to the draught blowing through the ill-fitting window, the reply she received was so savage and unladylike, that I began to wonder what success I should have had if the aunt and not the niece had been my charge. Even as I wondered, I felt a sudden grasp on my shoulder, and before-I had time to think of defence, I was violently precipitated out of the vehicle into the steaming road.

My astonishment at the attack was so great that I must have wasted a few seconds in bewilderment, then realising that serious opposition was on foot, I rushed back to my station. As I got to my client's side, I heard her aunt exclaim:

"It's tomfoolery, after all, Ida. Tell him to return—I don't think I'll go on."

The girl was yielding. Indeed, I was only just in time. "Tell her she must go on," I whispered, pressing my left hand hard on her fair forehead; "that all is arranged—that if she fails this time, she will never get another opportunity."

But my client proved an unwilling listener. She was tired, and a little nervous, and more than half inclined to withdraw from the expedition. What had seemed a feasible means of overcoming her aunt's prejudice, now appeared unpractical and even dangerous. Fear of discovery, terror lest any mishap should occur and her aunt be injured, joined with the pricking of a late awakened conscience, and she leaned forward to call to the driver.

I persevered, and a desperate struggle took place in that narrow vehicle. Feeling that hand again on my shoulder, I gripped it above the wrist, and throwing out my right arm, found the rest of the impalpable interfering form. I knew it was that of Sagatheela, who met my attack by pressing her other hand on my mouth, forcing my head back from my client's ear. But I placed my right leg between her two feet, and I clutching her, we both fell together. The floor of the vehicle offered no obstruction to our ethereal forms, and we sank through to the ground. So the remainder of the controversy was left to the girl's free will; but I was overjoyed, on regaining my place, to find that she had been swayed by me.

"Ha, ha, Sagatheela!" I laughed, "I am still the stronger."

"Oh, Agonostes," she sighed, though I could not see her, "will thine eyes never be opened to thine own perversity? Oh, if I could but compel thee to see and understand!"

And before I could finish the mocking sentence half formed on my lips, she slipped through my grasp and passed away, leaving me alone.

The car was still pursuing its way, and Miss Woodward leaned back resignedly against the cushions.

We rolled down empty street after empty street, only meeting here and there the flash of a policeman's lamp in the sombre mist, or some half-befogged street light glimmered obliquely in at the window as we plunged again into the yellow obscurity. The solemn voice of Big Ben rang out from afar, and I thought of the slime of the river, and how one Paul Penruddock had contemplated it in his hours of suffering; and all my hatred and revenge welled up afresh. I gloated over the victim at my side—a woman, heartless, beautiful, and wealthy, dead to all pleasure, belonging to an intriguing sensual society outside the world of human sorrow and striving—corrupt in its luxury and ever under the surveillance of Diaphernes. It was revenge, and it was sweet and satisfying.

In my exultation I twined my fingers in her hair and thanked my master for the hour.

At last! The car drew up at the door of Murchison's abode, and the driver muttered, "Thank 'Eaven for this 'ere mercy!" as he managed to make out the number on the door. Miss Woodward shivered and drew her shawl closely about her as she stepped across the damp

pavement—everything was so cold, so foul, so unnaturally silent, with nothing to be seen except the fog. The outlines of the motorcar were almost lost, and when she slipped the fare into the driver's hand, it seemed to Miss Woodward as if he were a being from another world, while his voice as he growled, "Trust a bloomin' lidy to give a pore cove no more than his fare," might have come from across the sea.

Both the ladies were glad to see the door open, and to be once again in the land of the known. The electric light was most dazzling after the outside darkness, and their eyes blinked and strained as they ascended the staircase.

As I have already described Murchison's room I need not revert to it, except to observe that a heavy curtain now divided it into two distinct parts.

As they crossed the threshold, their host came to meet them. There was nothing about him to suggest the element of the weird. He appeared, on the contrary, the very embodiment of cheery hospitality, in perfect harmony with the blazing fire, the snug room, and the dainty waiting table of refreshments.

"How good of you to come, Miss Woodward!" he exclaimed, helping her off with her cloak, and scarcely able to repress a start at the sight of the odd masculine attire it had covered. "I scarcely flattered myself that you would do me the honour on such an uninviting evening."

Miss Woodward smiled—such a smile as seldom relaxed the lines of that rigid mouth.

"Of course I have," she said; "you know, ladies keep their promises sometimes."

Murchison glanced at his fiancée, whose eyes seemed to say, "Go on—all's well!"

"Shall we have some tea, Miss Woodward?" he went on politely, as the old lady was warming her hands by the fire. "I am sure, after your drive—and a most unpleasant one it must have been—you will be glad of something to help you forget it."

"Thank you, you are very considerate," said the old lady aloud, adding half to herself, as if oblivious of his presence, "how very different from most young men!"

The meal was an immense success. The tea was most delicious, full of the very aroma of the far East. Never had Miss Woodward tasted crisper buttered-toast, nor more luxurious strawberry preserve. The man, the food, the conversation, the fire, the room were so wholly at variance with her expectations, that she found herself wondering if she were in a dream. Her mind was carried back to the days of her youth, when, girl-like, she had liked unconventional tea-parties; and the wave of memory made her very sad.

"Why, auntie, how silent you are!" The girl's voice recalled her from her musing.

"I beg your pardon, Mr Murchison," she said apologetically, "I was so busy listening to my niece's prattle that I forgot my own conversational duties."

There was a note of sarcasm in the words that made Murchison mutter: "Queer old cat! I believe she is jealous of Ida!" But with the courtesy which seemed as second nature to him, he said aloud, "Are you feeling in the mood for our séance?"

He could have laughed aloud when the old lady's eyes opened like gooseberries.

"It is incredible," she said, "that such a very earthly young man can have any sympathy with the occult world."

"I admit the incongruity," he replied, with a smile, "but, irreconcilable as it may seem, I am full of sympathy—simply bubbling over with it."

"How wonderful!" said the old lady, leaning back in her chair, and gazing at him without a doubt as to his sincerity, "when will you commence?"

"As soon as you are ready, Miss Woodward."

"I am ready now," she said. But she was inwardly apprehensive, and noticed the change in his face as he crossed the room to the bell. Before, he had been cheeriness personified, now he seemed to have grown stern. The cloth removed, at a word from Murchison, the three drew up their chairs to the little round table. It was then that he put his first and only question to Miss Woodward.

"Have you any knowledge as to how these séances are worked?"

"None whatever," she replied, and he carefully concealed the satisfaction her answer gave him.

Fixing his eyes steadily on hers, he slowly issued his instructions.

"I want you," he said, "not to take your eyes off mine, be perfectly passive, and let me, as it were, look into your brain. Do you understand?"

The old lady felt uneasy. The whole room seemed to have undergone a transformation, the fire had dwindled down and the electric lights had been replaced by an oil lamp. It was so gloomy that it made her shiver.

"I—am rather nervous," she said. "*Must* you look at me so? You frighten me."

Murchison merely indicated by a nod of his head that she must obey. The silence was intense. My client was but an observer of the drama, enjoying rather than otherwise the spectacle of her aunt humbled into submission by a man. A clock outside struck nine. No other sound broke the awed hush, and the power of Murchison's gaze grew and grew; it absorbed all his energy, and little by little did what was required of it.

His victim lost all strength of resistance. She had a horrible idea that the man's eyes were getting larger and larger, more and more brilliant, and would continue to do so until they pounced down upon her and swallowed her up. She became unconscious of the room, of the furniture, of herself—of everything except those eyes. An irresistible lethargy stole over her as the coils of a serpent wind themselves round the helpless body of its prey. If her life had been at stake she could neither have moved hand nor foot. Her last thought seemed to be "Am I a medium, and is this the spirit-world?" Then Murchison gently removed the hand he had been for a few minutes resting on her forehead, and turned with a sigh of relief to Miss Temple.

"I think she is safe for the present, but it was hard work."

"You haven't killed her?" queried Ida, a little anxiously, peering into the white old face. "No, no, dear; don't worry! She has merely succumbed to the influence of mesmeric force and is in a state of torpor. I can arouse her quite easily."

Feeling my opportunity had arrived, I drew closer to my client, and breathed into her ear:

"Perhaps your aunt can answer questions?"

Miss Temple started slightly.

"Could you make her speak?" she asked Murchison.

"Why?" he said a little sharply. "What do you want to know?"

"But *can* you?" she persisted, smiling up in his face.

"Yes, I think so," he replied hesitatingly. Deep down in his breast the remains of a conscience sometimes troubled him. A flicker of the fire emphasised the rare beauty of Ida's face, but he could not help remarking how little pity there was in it, only eagerness and a little curiosity. She would be a cool-headed surgical nurse, he caught himself thinking.

Now she laid two fingers on her aunt's pulse. "It is quite regular," she whispered.

"Do you know her normal pulsation?" asked the man.

"Oh yes, quite well! I love dabbling in doctoring. Now ask her something."

"Well, what shall it be?"

"Oh, anything. Her age—only be quick."

“All right! She won’t come to until I allow it. Miss Woodward,” he suddenly adopted a hard, high monotone, “please inform me of your age.”

There was no change in the peaceful outline of her face as she answered as calmly as if it were a most ordinary question, “I am seventy-two.”

“Is that correct?” asked Murchison of Ida.

“Yes—go on—another.”

When was your birthday?”

“March twenty-third.”

“Is that right, Ida?” Murchison felt possessed by a sudden interest, as if it might lead to something.

His fiancée nodded affirmatively.

I should have been feeble indeed had I not used the time to further my own object. Placing my arm round Ida’s slim waist, I was about to whisper in her ear again, when a soft hand pressed upon my lips and I was drawn irresistibly backwards. The walls, the chair, the table, seemed to recede rapidly, my body seemed to be weighted with flesh, heavy and helpless. How long the backward motion would have continued, I knew not. Suddenly I remembered the promise of Diaphernes and sent forth an appeal for help.

It came. Nerved with new strength, I checked the movement and brought myself resolutely to a standstill, then, with a sudden movement, freed myself from that soft encompassing arm, so that my swift sandals bore me back unhindered to the side of my client.

Not an instant too soon.

She was just considering if it would not be well to let her aunt be awakened without further risk.

“Nonsense,” I said. “All girls want to know their future—yours rests with her.”

“Nay, heed him not!” I heard the persuasive accents of Sagatheela. “Spurn his false counsels. God before the devil always.”

“Pooh!” I sneered, “you are no child to heed such drivel, or else the devil is another name for common sense.”

“Sometimes people blame common sense when it is the devil’s doing,” continued my enemy. And I felt that my client leaned to her rather than to me. Her soul was sliding from my grasp. It meant victory for one of us within a moment, and, at this crisis I could not help wondering at the woman’s own ignorance of the contest for her soul.

“Do not wreck a life’s happiness for a whim,” I cried. “Think of Hubert—for her words must nearly concern him too.”

Slowly and meditatively she yielded, and I heard the well-known sigh of anguish. “Again—again—oh, Agonostes, wilt thou always prevail?”

“Yes,” I exulted, “for eternity. By man’s own choice my master is stronger than thine.”

“ ’Tis a lie, and thou knowest it!” she retorted, with a fine scorn in her voice. “Yes, ’tis hard to bear the shame and the struggle of it. Oh, Agonostes, didst thou but know all!”

I laughed aloud at this outburst, and my mirth made the very shadows quiver. Yet the man and woman heard it not. Ida was speaking, and she was half-frightened at her own proposition—“Ask her what she means to do with her money.” The man took a step backwards.

“Why?” he asked, trying to speak naturally. “Why should you ask such a question?”

“For both our sakes, Hubert. I want to hear about her will.”

“Ah!” The man’s face hardened, the power of her beauty crushed fear, pity, manliness, everything that restrained him. He became her tool, and, Adam-like, he fell. But surely never

since Adam did a sinner give himself so voluntarily to his fate. I listened with the self-congratulation of a conqueror to his next words:

“Yes, I understand. Miss Woodward, you are rich?”

“Yes.” There was no alteration in the intonation.

“To whom will you leave your money?” A look of pain became visible on the victim’s face, her eyebrows contracted, her eyes pleaded for pity. She seemed to wrestle with the words drawn from her unwilling tongue. Once I thought she would stop, my client thought so too, and nervously gripped her lover’s hand. The strain of the moment was intense, the darkness of the room deepened, and the shadows assumed weirder forms, but it was too tense to last. Relief came.

“If Ida marries she inherits nothing. If she remains single she receives half, the other half to go to the Dogs’ Home.”

That was all. The old lady relapsed into her previous state of passiveness. The eccentricity of the last clause would doubtless have been amusing at another time, and in other circumstances—but as it was, its humour was too grim to please. To the listeners it was of the gravest import—it meant a lifelong old maid or else a pauper bride.

Murchison, like most worldlings, was quick and decided in action. No sooner had he heard her speak than, beautiful and fascinating as Miss Temple was, he knew she would be worthless to him if she came to him dowerless. It would spoil all the promising prospects of his future. The girl seemed half to read what was passing in his mind, and it added to the misery and indignation caused by her aunt’s words. Her breast heaved with ill-suppressed anger, and the wild gleam of excitement hung in her bright eyes, while a strong flush changed the pallor of her cheeks. A woman of her temperament, driven to bay, is apt to be dangerous, and I noted with pleasure the cruelty in her tightened lips and the flash of her teeth as she burst out passionately:

“Oh, it’s a dastardly will!”—the delicate nails crushed into the tender palms—“it is outrageous—and to think she is my aunt! Oh, it is hard!” The voice wavered, and I thought she was on the verge of tears. However, she controlled herself, and said, “Why can’t you say something, Hubert, instead of staring like that?”

Murchison smiled—not quite the pleasant smile to which she was accustomed.

“What am I to say?” he asked, tugging at his moustache, and shifting from one foot to another. “You heard what she said. What can I do?”

“You are a man. I wish I were one!” she cried fiercely. “Surely a man’s brain could meet all emergencies. Think of something, quick!”

Again that smile made her turn cold and apprehensive. She felt frightened, sick. Murchison said coolly, “You forget—it is woman’s wit that is supposed to find its way through all difficulties.”

The girl’s eyes flashed. She was about to answer him with the scorn he deserved—for even her infatuation could not misread his hesitation—when she suddenly paused, and with a complete change of expression, due to my interference, she leaned forward and looked at him long and hard. Then her words broke ominously through the silence of the room, and a strange yellow flame flickered up in the fire as if in answer.

“Isn’t she in your power? Make her change it!” (How I laughed at Sagatheela’s fruitless efforts!)

Murchison only stared for a moment. He was seeing his fiancée in a new light, and the revelation was somewhat staggering. But time pressed, and again he yielded to the woman’s insistent will.

“Yes,” he said, “I believe I can. It’s rather an awful thing to do, but, by Jove, Ida, you are worth it. What do you suggest?”

Sagatheela tried to intervene.

“She has been kind to thee,” she murmured, “stay, before this has gone too far.”

“Rather think of thy lover,” I put in.

“All her care of thee as a helpless and deserted child—a girl whom she tended with a mother’s devotion—of home, comfort, everything. Ingratitude is indeed base in the sight of God. Turn back!”

“Half her income to a Dogs’ Home!” I reminded her. “If thou wilt obey her unreasonable whims, she will estimate thee as equal to a dog! And she might yet change and leave it all to dogs.”

“Or to thee, from love won lovingly. Try the better way.” How eager Sagatheela could become in extremity.

“Hesitate,” I said, “and lose thy lover!

“Be patient,” urged Sagatheela, “and save thy soul.”

“Thy soul or thy lover?” The words rang in her ears.

“Thy soul!” pleaded Sagatheela.

“Thy lover!” I cried in passionate frenzy.

Again she chose—her lover. I heard a long, low wail as of a woman whose very heart was torn by sorrow—and Sagatheela glided sadly away as the girl said quickly:

“Make her, force her to draw up another will. She may not live long—she is much feebler than she used to be.”

“But how about witnesses? There must be at least two. Whom can we find?”

The girl pondered a moment.

“It doesn’t much matter whom we have, so long as you are here. Let me think. Ah!” as I insinuated a suggestion, “I have it now. Auntie will come here, you mesmerize her, and then we send for a lawyer. You know she never would employ a lawyer, so that anybody will do—that is to say, any one we can trust. Auntie will tell him under your influence that she wishes to draw up a new will. He will do it and you can make her sign it.”

“What a brain you have!” the man said enviously. “But you have still forgotten the witnesses.”

“Indeed I haven’t. I know the very people.”

“And they are

“Hush! It is quite time you roused auntie. See me to-morrow evening, and we will settle everything.”

* * *

When Miss Woodward awoke from her torpor she gazed in a dull, vacant way at the four eyes fixed so earnestly upon her. It was some moments before she realised what they were. At first they hung above her in space, glowing like lamps, then the outline of faces and bodies grew around them, and they were no longer nameless, disconnected things, but human eyes—and slowly, very slowly, she identified them. Memory reasserted itself—the room, the chair, tables, and curtain—then she suddenly recollected why she had come there.

“What has happened?” she asked eagerly.

“You have been in a state of clairvoyance, Miss Woodward” said her host, coming to her side, “and a better subject I have never seen.”

The old lady scanned him closely.

“Do you really mean it, Mr—er—”

“To be sure. What did you feel like?”

Miss Woodward shook her head sorrowfully.

“I can’t recollect. I only feel like a person just awakened from a long dreamless sleep. Please tell me something of what has occurred.”

“Why,” said Murchison, leaning back easily in his chair, “it was like this.—Obeying my instructions to the letter, you allowed yourself, so to speak, to decentralise. Your soul left your body and undertook a journey. You told us of many strange things, of wanderings in a very beautiful land with bright sunshine and far-stretching meadows, you described minutely the occupation and the clothing of its inhabitants. Some you found engaged in pursuits such as ploughing, others spent their time in playing tunes on wonderful instruments whose names you could not ascertain. You talked with one of these people who told you she had only just found her freedom, and had been lately an inhabitant of this earth.”

Miss Woodward interrupted in bewilderment:

“Can this be true?”

Murchison put on an expression of injured dignity, and my client half uttered an ejaculation of rebuke.

“Your niece will corroborate me, I think,” said the man gravely.

“Is it true, Miss Temple ?

The young lady inclined her head stiffly. “Certainly,” she said. “Auntie, I wonder at you questioning Mr Murchison’s word.”

“I beg your pardon, Mr Murchison,” said Miss Woodward, in puzzled self-defence. “But it seems so odd that I said it all, and can’t recollect it.”

However, before she took her departure, her incredulity wore off, and she even persuaded herself she had seen and heard the things suggested.

“I don’t know how to thank you, Mr Murchison,” she said.

“Pray, don’t mention it, Miss Woodward,” he responded gallantly. “I am amply recompensed for the little trouble I took, if you were pleased.”

“It was delightful!” she said. “It is not often I am so well entertained. Now, you must come round and see us!”

“I shall be most happy!” he replied, while Ida could hardly believe her ears.

“Yes, old lady, I won’t forget your invitation,” murmured Murchison, as the door of the motor-carriage shut with a bang.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE SPIRIT IN THE LITTLE BACK ROOM

Several weeks passed, bringing no important change. Murchison paid a formal visit one afternoon, and had later been invited to dinner. On each occasion Miss Woodward received him cordially, and by her demeanour, betrayed only too well the power he had gained over her. In fact, she agreed with everything he chose to say on all subjects but one—and that one was marriage. She clung tenaciously to her belief that no woman should marry before thirty, and few after it, giving as a reason the unhappy married lives many of her family had led. Above all, she held to her intention of forbidding matrimony to her niece absolutely, once and for all.

“Marriage,” she said, gazing into the fire, “may suit a few, not the majority of us. As for you, Ida, I forbid you ever to do so foolish a thing. Do you hear me, child? I forbid you.”

“I don’t want to marry, auntie,” she replied, uttering readily the lie I put into her mouth. And there for the time being the matter had ended.

All the while the conspirators’ plot was progressing. A lawyer had been found in the person of an old schoolfellow of Murchison’s, a man of limited means and a still more limited circle of clients, with a wife and many children, and a daily growing dread of the Bankruptcy Court. A promise of a few hundred pounds made him only too glad to fall in with Murchison’s proposal, and he readily consented to be as silent as the grave.

One evening my client was sitting in her boudoir, gazing pensively into the fire. It was a habit of hers from which she seemed to derive an extraordinary amount of pleasure. I sometimes wondered why, knowing how genuinely unimaginative she was. Yet in the red coals she saw pictures, faces of friends and enemies, labyrinths and turnings, even prophecies. “I must poke it again to see what changes come,” she said, suiting the action to the word. The roof of a very beautiful cavern fell in with a crash, the walls, staggering under the debris, tottered on their foundations, leaned forward, and sank almost noiselessly into a shapeless mass; then, as if striving for a fresh lease of existence, agitated by some invisible agent, they swayed to and fro. With a convulsive effort they threw from their midst a curious black ember, in shape remarkably like a coffin. The girl drew her little foot back hastily as the missile almost touched it.

“What can have caused that?” she said; adding with a shudder, “What a funny shape? What can it mean?”

I took up my station at her side.

“It means,” I whispered, “Death.”

“Nothing of the sort,” and I recognised Sagatheela’s tones again, “it merely means danger.”

“Yes,” I acquiesced easily, “danger of being thwarted, therefore take heed to strike first.”

“Nay,” said Sagatheela, “pause lest thou cast thyself into the pit that has no bottom. If thou carry out the evil intentions thou hast been weak enough to harbour in thy bosom—beware.”

“If thou wouldst turn coward when one bold stroke would win all,” I argued, “then beware indeed!”

The girl seemed perplexed. She leaned back in her chair, and her brows contracted.

“I wonder what I had really better do?” she murmured half aloud.

“Is it not true?” I ventured to whisper insinuatingly, “that Miss Woodward has a weak—a very weak heart?”

The girl shuddered and tried to think of something else, but I went on ruthlessly:

“To those so afflicted, death often comes quickly—a sudden shock—”

“Oh, I mustn’t—I mustn’t! I can’t think of such horror,” she cried wildly, hiding her face in her hands, while her glossy hair gleamed in the firelight like polished ebony.

Sagatheela interfered to reassure her.

“Then banish the painful thoughts, ease thy misery by falling on thy knees and confessing the sin meditated to Him, the Forgiver.”

“Fool!” I hissed, and I struck at my enemy to drive her off. “Fool, always a meddler, why comest thou on such a futile errand? This woman is by nature mine, and will never listen to thee; depart then, and leave me the spoils of the easy victory that must be mine.

A soft hand, the hand whose touch I had come to know and hate, was placed gently on my shoulder—and the low voice said:

“Thou overratest thy strength, Agonostes. Immortal as thou art, thou art not alone among immortals. I too have an endless life, and I knew thee when thou wert still Paul, and in sorrow. How different art thou now!”

“Yes, thanks be to Diaphernes, I am!” I cried in a thrill of savage joy. “I was weak then, but I can hold my own against thee now! And what of thy boasted love and care for that same Paul? Didst thou not watch him suffer, starve, and die? How now?”

“I strove for Paul even as I strive for Agonostes,” was the reply; “and for all that was, or was not, thou shouldst blame the devil and his agents, and not me.”

“Oh, cease such babbling!” I thundered, and turned again to my client.

“The happiness of thy life,” I told her, “lies in the hands of one woman, and she would rob thee of all that woman claims as her best right. She can, and will, strip thee of all things unless thou submit. Is this justice? And wilt thou surrender passively? Wilt thou yield, or win, thy lover? Why should she live to spoil two lives? And is it a question of living? A shock *might* kill her—but who says it *will*?”

Throughout the afternoon and evening, Ida Temple could not drive the thought from her mind. Her aunt, noticing her unwonted silence, enquired its cause with solicitude, but only received an abrupt reply. So the old lady sighed, and sat still, her hands on her lap and her eyes gazing into vacancy—wondering perhaps why God made her niece so beautiful and yet so cold, so unresponsive.

I felt my success was assured when my client, bidding her aunt a curt good-evening, retired upstairs and wrote a note to Hubert Murchison. It was not a letter—only a few words in a clear bold hand, written on fragrant delicate paper that would convey to him more clearly than any words the personality of the writer. The message was such as made me laugh at Sagatheela, for I could read Death between the lines.

* * *

Two evenings later, the party of three met again in Murchison’s room. Everything, even to the buttered toast, was the same as on the previous occasion, and the room was even cheerier and more comfortable. Ida never remembered having seen Miss Woodward in a lighter or happier mood. Her conversation was most versatile; she chatted on politics and education, soared to discussion concerning ethereal bodies, and gravely debated on the theories of Darwin. She never flagged, but talked on merrily, pausing only to taste the crisp toast or drink the delicious tea served in the tiny cups of real Worcester.

Murchison never ceased to interest her. She was always discovering some new side to his nature, and that something more likeable than all before. He was not only a spiritualist, evidently, but a scholar—a politician—a prince among entertainers—a man with a vast assortment of fascinating hobbies. There was no subject of which he did not seem to have some knowledge, and she could only admit to herself that he was a most wonderful young man.

By the time the table was cleared and the chairs duly arranged opposite the heavy baize curtain, she felt that she would like to own this young man as her son. She was beginning to be sorry she had said so much to him on the matrimonial topic. Perhaps no one would be better fitted to train Ida in the way she should go Miss Woodward’s way—than this very clever young man.

Her thoughts had reached this point when she became conscious of his gaze fixed on her. She at once looked up, and their eyes met. Again it was a repetition of the other evening, and she

gradually fell away into a heavy sleep, far away from the room or from any cognisance of its occupants.

When she was in the depth of the mesmeric trance, dead to all that was passing around her, Murchison beckoned to my client, who left the hearthrug where she had been standing, and came at once to his side.

“Quick!” he said. “Be quick and arrange the chairs for our visitors. They were to be here at eight, and it is on the point of striking. Now, whatever you do, don’t show any signs of agitation.”

The girl shrugged her shoulders with a slightly scornful smile.

“Do I look agitated?” was all she said.

“No,” admitted the man. “I can’t say you do. But—quick, darling. Ah, here they come.”

A sharp ring below, and the heavy tread of skirt-hampered feet told the sex of the first visitors. In a moment the door opened to admit them. One was a middle-aged dame with ruddy cheeks, pale blue eyes, and a distinctly inquisitive cast of nose, scarcely the sort of person one would have brought into a delicate business, had not a closer observation shown that one of her eyes, as evidenced by the whitish opaqueness of the retina, was practically sightless—probably through cataract, whereas the other was myopic and defective. The other visitor, a prim little person in methodistical black attire, was short-sighted also, and moreover almost stone deaf. Consequently, there was nothing much to fear from either witness. Ida had chosen well. Murchison, with his unvarying courtesy, stepped forward to greet them as they entered. He had first taken the precaution to cover Miss Woodward’s eyes with a large pair of blue spectacles.

Everything seemed perfectly regular to the two ladies, and they were quite willing to accept Ida’s prettily-anxious explanation that “dear auntie was worried and tired, and, she feared, not at all well.”

The lawyer then arrived, a colourless, shabby little man, above all things palpably poor; and the “how do you do’s” and preliminary commonplaces being over, they assembled at the larger table.

The lawyer approached the old lady, and in a suave voice asked whether she still wished the document to be drawn up. Neither of the witnesses observed the cool steady gaze that their host never removed from Miss Woodward’s face. Nor did they notice that her words came with an effort, as if she was trying to leave them unspoken and could not. In a slow, almost stammering voice she said:

“Yes, I wish to make my will, believing before God that my days are almost at an end.”

The witness who was not deaf changed colour a little at this speech. She was an old acquaintance of Miss Woodward, and had always regarded her friend as such a hale and hearty old lady. In a certain unpleasant manner it reminded her that she herself was no longer young. She winced, and said with a dry little cough:

“Why, Lizzie, you ye many long years before you yet. We women aren’t so frail as we used to be.”

Miss Woodward did not even glance at the speaker, but replied in the steady voice of a soulless automaton:

“I have come to the end of my span of life. I know it. That is enough.”

The words came slowly and almost painfully, and my client looked at her aunt with something like terror lurking in her eyes. The tension of the whole proceeding was terrible for any whom its issue concerned deeply. Murchison kept outwardly calm, but his soul was fretted with feverish anxiety.

“Come, sir,” he said, touching the lawyer on the shoulder, “we must not waste time. Miss Woodward is very tired.”

Miss Woodward then proceeded to dictate in the same hard, high voice her “wishes”—which were speedily transcribed on the parchment. No one interrupted; with the exception of a needful word or two from Murchison, all in the room maintained an impressive silence. The deaf lady stood on the hearthrug, the inquisitive one—I can think of no term to suit her better—stood in front of her, and by her side was Ida. When the will had been drawn up and only the signature was needed to complete it, I leaned over the lawyer’s shoulder and read what he had written.

“This is the last will and testament of me, Elizabeth Anna Woodward, of Amber Park, Blackheath, in the county of Kent, spinster. I give, devise, and bequeath all my real and personal estate of every description to my niece, Ida Alicia Temple, absolutely, subject only to the following: I desire that the sum of £500 be paid within three months after my decease to the treasurer of the Dogs’ Home, Channings Road, Lee. Further, that the sum of £300 be paid within the said time to the Promoters of the Spiritualist Society.

Then followed some unimportant bequests to friends and servants. Finally:—

“And I hereby appoint Hubert Murchison sole executor of this my will, and revoke all previous wills by me at any time made, and declare this to be my last will and testament. In witness whereof, I hereunto set my hand, this day of in the year of our Lord one thousand nine hundred and

“Signed by the said Elizabeth Anna Woodward in our presence, who in her presence and the presence of each other hereby subscribe our names as witnesses.

“HARRIET SARAH PARKER of , spinster.
“MAUD JUBILEE JENKINS of , spinster.”

Murchison leaned forward and placed the pen in the old lady’s hand, guiding it on the sheet of paper. He explained the action by a confidential nod towards the witnesses, as much as to say, “She is a bit bewildered and needs help.”

Every one was looking at her, but never expecting anything unusual to happen.

Her hand was actually on the vellum and the pen had made a few strokes, when something occurred which was as unexpected to me as to them. The electric light went out, leaving the room at the mercy of the firelight, which shot up in weird blue flames. The wind howled and shrieked in the chimney like a thousand fiends in torment. To the horror of all present a violent agitation took possession of the baize curtain. It shook and strained as if under the influence of invisible hands, and the sound of many pacing footsteps was heard in the little alcove behind.

I looked eagerly at the spectators. In each face I read fear,—not fear of any ordinary degree, such as is evoked by an accident or hairbreadth escape, but absolute servile terror, fright that blanched the cheeks, froze the blood, and fixed the staring eyeballs. No one could speak or move. The two witnesses tried to scream for help and could not.

My client’s guilty conscience arose blank and awful. In vain I tried to stifle it. Sagatheela was there to accentuate it. “Pray,” I heard her say, “pray for God’s help in this awful moment.” And I believe the name of Christ was on Ida’s lips when I spoke in her ear, and she left it unuttered.

Anything was better than suspense—and I believe the first feeling was one of relief when the curtain was flung violently aside to disclose the horror beyond.

Even I, immortal as I was, quailed on seeing That which stood there—while Miss Woodward started out of her trance, uttered one little low cry, and sat still. There in the centre of the alcove,

the moonbeams streaming around it like a phosphorescent halo, stood, or rather crouched, for its back was bent and its hands rested on its wide-spread knees, as fearful a figure as I had ever seen in the great Avenue of Gloom itself.

It resembled neither man nor woman, but was grimly suggestive of both. With a low circular skull, eyes of lurid green, a wide distended mouth, and lips wreathed in a horrid mocking smile, the thing faced us in all its baneful wickedness. It might have stayed there a minute, possibly less,—long enough, at any rate, for it to be unforgettably imprinted on the minds of those who saw. The skin of the thing was of that sickly white usually attributed to leprosy. It shone with all the offensiveness of its putrescent nature.

What it was, whence it came, I knew not, nor could I form a better theory than that of its being some earthly elemental spirit, created by the internal gases of the earth, and made visible by the evil medium of some one in the room.

The time of its appearance must have seemed centuries long to those on whom it bent its bestial leer. It departed suddenly as it came, and the heavy curtains swung together.

The lawyer was the first to speak. He was nearest the electric chandelier, and sprang to it and pressed the button. He did this several times before his efforts were rewarded, and the room was illuminated once more.

Then looking around, he cried in a hoarse, strange voice:

“My God, what has happened? Let us all get out of this as soon as we can.”

And Hubert Murchison, ghastly pale, sprang to the side of Miss Woodward. The old lady lay back in her chair, her head hanging forward and sideways, and the jaw dropped low over her neck. There was no room left to doubt what had happened.

“She’s dead!” he gasped, as his auditors gathered round, and he pointed with shaking forefinger to the rigid face.

“It is the hand of God,” said the lawyer solemnly; so solemnly that two of those present bowed their heads. Then, gripping his host’s wrist, with hands as cold as the dead themselves, he pleaded: “Come, come—let us get out of this! It is awful, it is hell!”

And as if stirred to life by the words, with one accord they trooped after him out of the room, and into the biting cold of the street, leaving the place in the possession of Death and Mystery.

A few weeks later, inquests and inquiries satisfactorily staved off or satisfied, one at least of the group had come to view the tragedy with calmer eyes. No previous will could be found, and my client, as next-of-kin and with the half-signed document to prove intention, was heiress to the greater part of her aunt’s large fortune. She was only a little impatient that, in accordance with the prejudices of society, a decent interval must elapse before she fixed her marriage day.

I left her gazing reflectively into the great mirror in the boudoir where I had found her first, the sweet smell of violets hanging around her as of old.

“Yes,” she said to her laughing reflection, “I have no soul. I gave it to the devil, and he can keep it safe for me. It pays best after all.”

My sandals were pulling me onwards. I had won—and a less potent messenger might watch her now, as a small army can occupy a land wholly subdued by the victor. I took her in my arms and kissed the full red lips for joy and for their very beauty, and with that last tender farewell, leaped away and upwards, out of the bounds of the finite, hurrying to tell Diaphernes what I had done.