

The Fifth Mission

CHAPTER XIX

AS TOLD BY GEORGE OSWALDSON

Can any one overpraise the charms of Bournemouth? Is there another such watering-place in England? If I were a poet, nothing could afford me fairer scope for my verses than the pine-clad chines, full of natural beauties and rich odours. If I were an artist it would be long ere I could exhaust the subjects for my canvas—no greener vales, no bluer skies, no more romantic walks could be found from John o' Groat's to Land's End. But I am neither poet nor artist—only plain insignificant George Oswaldson, and I never want to enjoy a holiday more than I can do here. In the morning I take my bath, not in a few inches of cold water, but out in the glorious sea, as blue as the sky itself. Then after I have heartily breakfasted, I stroll out again from my lodging in St Michael's Road, past the Mancetler and Glencraig boarding-houses, out on the West Cliff, and thence down to the pier. For the princely sum of twopence I can hear one of the best bands in England, and enjoy the spectacle of the hundreds of holiday-makers who tramp round and round the shelters, all in their summer's best. When I am tired of studying this trudging humanity I need only walk a few yards to reach a smart little sailing-boat, and bargain with its owner for a run across the bay among myriads of other white sails. If I want to tempt the deep further, there lie the *Brodrick Castle* and the *Monarch*, ready for the cruise round the Isle of Wight or to the Channel Islands. In the evening, when the sun has lost its fervour, the winter-gardens, full of choice flowers and enchanting music, offer many attractions; and, as I turn homewards, Bournemouth goes to sleep under the crescent moon, and I, wearied with pleasures, do likewise. No, there is not another watering-place in England dare enter the lists against Bournemouth!

To me 19—promised to be an eventful year. Indeed, the crisis of my fortunes must shortly come. I was even now expecting to hear the result of my final examination for the London B.A. Much depended on this result. Should I fail, nothing remained but to pack up my few belongings and migrate to the States. Should I succeed, an honour-able career lay in front of me.

I must make my position clearer. Both my parents died shortly after my birth, and Fate handed me over to the care of an uncle—a well-meaning man, I know, but hard, terribly hard—a Scotsman. No man could have taken more pains with my moral welfare, nor shown me in a more pointed manner how well the devil caters for the British public, and how ready he is to thrust his menu under our notice. I am certain that, if all my uncle has told me be true, he will have heaven pretty much to himself.

Business men generally lack the power of appreciating anything devoid of business interests, and have no sympathy with the young, who would prefer a profession to trade. My uncle wished me to enter his tea-house in Glasgow, and threw out gentle hints that I might get something worth having at his death if I stuck to the business. I, however, refused. We quarrelled, and as he had money and I had none, the odds were strongly in his favour. After a long struggle he agreed to allow me one chance, on condition that if I failed I should enter his business. I was loath to consent to this condition: but I went to London to read for my degree, intending, if successful, to become a schoolmaster.

Neither the matriculation nor the intermediate gave me much trouble, and I was congratulating myself that Fortune was smiling on me, when an unexpected calamity upset my reading and threw me into a state of nervous alarm.

My uncle married again!

It would have seemed bad enough had the lady alone been the question. But she, too, had been married before, and she brought a little son with her to the house in Glasgow. She was a scheming woman, and she worked upon my uncle's affections so completely that not a particle of his regard was left for me. "Home" soon became a mockery, and I came to look back upon the past with a yearning that was almost unbearable. More than once I felt madly inclined to put an end to my existence, and find myself a new home in the Shadowland, far from all daily annoyances.

After this domestic calamity my prospects underwent a change. My uncle's love faded away, and he grew to regard me as an encumbrance, and a useless piece of furniture which wanted removal. At last he told me that, did I fail in my examination, there lay before me, not business, but emigration, with just money enough to keep me alive for a few months. Then, it seemed, I must be claimed either by the purlieu of the West, or by the grave!

The examination was in July. In August, with a small cheque in my pocket, I managed to run down to Bournemouth, to have a breath of fresh air after my hot weeks of study in the south-east of London. It was twenty years since we had so hot a summer. My landlady remembered the last.

Bournemouth had had a splendid season, every house in the town crammed with visitors, and with the exception of one thunderstorm, no rain had fallen from the fourth of August till the fifteenth of September. What wonderful memories old women have!

Tramp! tramp! tramp! Fat women, old women, thin women, young women, all kinds of women pass in front of me. The men do not interest me so much. You see, my uncle had always warned me against women—they were the devil's satellites, and most of them had the evil eye. This was before he married. Since then I have spared no pains in looking into women's eyes to see where the evil lies.

Here comes a girl with a queer eye—such a queer eye, the lid half drawn over the pupil. But there is no evil in it. And here (jingle, jingle,—why do they all wear such a profusion of bangles to rattle as they walk?) come three girls arm-in-arm, with smart, upright carriage, and frank, daring eyes. I see no evil in these.

Look at this girl as she approaches, all in white except for a large crimson hat. Why crimson? To suit her complexion? She has beautiful dark eyes, but they are not evil. She is a shop-girl, I am sure. Look at the two large buttons on the back of her dress; they have the very air of saying, "What can we do for you this morning?"

Here come a troop of servants—yes, they must be servants. How slovenly their walk is! Look at their dresses buttoning up the back, their large boots, their watch-chains at the breast. Their eyes? Oh, brown and grey, mere openings in a rather shiny surface. Evil? Why, good gracious no!

I grow quite weary in trying to discover something to bear out my uncle's statement. The eyes of these women are perhaps not saintly, but certainly not evil.

A canvas awning has been spread over the place where the band plays, but arriving too late to obtain a seat beneath it, I have to be content in my post of observation outside, squashed in between a stout matron and a nervous little lady who is knitting—who knows what. It is hard to describe in its present stage—possibly a comforter, or a portion of baby's clothing. I give it up, and rivet my attention on the passers-by; for some still defy the relentless sun. I may make them uncomfortable, but it does not conceal their best clothes from those sitting down. How I envy these folk their apparent thoughtlessness as to the future!

“My future,” I muse, “is black enough. At the best, if I have passed, I shall be a slave, working on and on at the beck and call of generations of small boys—saving a few pounds a year, if I am fortunate, against the inevitable loss of strength and power which waits for us workers like a hideous bogey.”

I am busy studying the face of a pretty girl—the first undeniably attractive girl I have seen to-day—when a figure looms across my vision and blots her out.

Muttering an expression that would have convinced my uncle of my utter profligacy, I glance up and recognise one of my fellow-lodgers in St. Michael’s Road.

“What the deuce does he want with me,” I grumble.

“Sorry to interrupt your meditations, Mr Oswaldson,” he says, in the grave voice little men of the dapper kind so often assume, “but this telegram arrived half an hour ago, and guessing you were here and thinking you might want it, I brought it with me.”

Last night I had snubbed this little man to check his advances, sufficiently to offend him, and his was a type to require good solid reason for taking offence. Why had he taken this trouble to do me a good turn?

“Much obliged,” I murmur. Yet on taking the yellow envelope I feel an ominous premonition of its contents.

“Failed in mathematics, Simpson.” It was from my tutor.

“Bad news?” queries my fellow-lodger gently.

How could I swear at a man who speaks so sympathetically? “It is so bad that it couldn’t be worse. What do you think of that?”

There is such a bitterness in my answer that it appears ruder than I meant. My sympathiser heaves a sigh, whether for my sorrows or my manners I know not, and turning slowly on his heels walks down the pier.

What am I to do? Drown myself at once and be done with it? The blue water looks too pretty to hurt much. Or go to Glasgow and beg to be taken into the business in *any* capacity? Or pack my belongings and get on the first liner from Southampton to New York. I spring from my seat, somewhat scattering my neighbours as I do so, and without waiting to see them pick themselves up, I return to my lodgings.

All the pleasure in life disappears. I realise the gulf between myself and these careless crowds. The Christy minstrels easily winning their cheap applause, the cabbies gossiping with the policeman, the hearty boatmen—every one has probably a home and occupation, however poor it may be.

I could eat no luncheon, and lay on my bed, uselessly planning and thinking, till at four o’clock another telegram:

“Your uncle died this morning, heat apoplexy. Oswaldson.”

The shock of the news, coming as it did on the top of the first disaster, was terrible. Man as I was, I gave way to a fit of hysterical crying.

Unsympathetic, stern, cautious as my uncle had always been, he was yet all I had to care for, all I could call my own. And now that he was dead, gone in an instant, I felt the loss as keenly as if we had lived closely united on the most affectionate terms.

Death was indeed my enemy. In my infancy he took from me both my natural protectors, and now, when I was almost helpless, alone and unknown, he had taken even the poor reliance left to me. I had no need to think of my financial prospects; there was but one—pauperism.

I knew not a penny of my uncle’s money would be mine, it would all pass to his wife, my implacable enemy. What could I do with Lw, my scanty wardrobe, and a small library of

valueless books. I had no trade, no references, no business training, I knew myself to be medically unfit for enlistment, and did I turn to the West, I had not the strength for the rough ranch life. Truly my case was a puzzling one, even to a good mathematician well up in all the problems men have been fools enough to work out. And I am no mathematician, merely a fair classic, with the unpractised qualities of most men who revel in such studies.

But pauperism need not mean the workhouse. There were other byways down which paupers may wander—which should I choose? Some professions were open to me, after all. A crossing-sweeper's life might not be so bad as it looked—even a burglar's life does not always end in gaol—even—even—but I stopped short. Desperate enough to take my own life, I yet could not lay hands on another.

Weary with trouble, I left my almost untasted supper, and wandered out into the delicious cool of the evening. Quite by force of habit I found myself in the winter-gardens, and instinctively directed my course to the building whence issued strains of music. Going to my usual corner, I threw myself upon a lounge and watched the crowd with almost my old interest. Then I fell asleep and dreamed.

In my dream I was still in the building, but upstairs, ensconced in a snug post of observation, watching the moving masses. And down the gallery, swaying to and fro, keeping time to the music, now quick, now slow, I saw a ghostly figure—a yellow-haired man with a short ragged beard and pale blue eyes, such eyes as seek death and may not find it. So haggard, so spectral a being seemed strangely out of place in the gaudy assembly. Then the blue eyes met mine and I shivered, and shrank in cringing fear into my corner, for I knew that he had some terrible secret influence over my fate, and that it was an influence for evil.

When I looked again he had disappeared. No—there he was again, his pale wicked face peering from behind a palm, like one contemplating a crime and greedy in anticipation of it. His eyes were fixed on the girl who sat in front, and I knew that he meant her harm. Again he vanished, and I looked for him in vain. Then a cold moist hand touched my cheek—all the lights in the building gave one flare and died out. I was left alone in the dark with the horror. I felt a cold breath on my cheek, and, with an agonising effort at escape, I plunged forward and was awake.

* * *

A man in a snuffy coloured knickerbocker suit was sitting contemplating me half-a-dozen yards away. There was something in his expression that worried me; we both seemed to have a dim puzzled reminiscence of a former meeting. What tricks memory plays us, and to what petty devices it sometimes stoops!

I strove earnestly to recall when and where I had met this man—his watery eyes with curiously fair lashes, his overhanging brows, the highly developed perceptive group in preponderance over the reflectives—I have dabbled in phrenology—the thin, narrow jaw. All the while I stared at him, he stared at me. So we played this fool's game, like two new schoolboys, wishing to speak, yet afraid to be the first.

Taking advantage of a lull in the music, I hazarded a remark.

“Pardon my rudeness in staring,” I exclaimed, swinging my feet off the lounge to the ground and sitting up. “I am under the impression that I must have met you at some period of my existence, but when and where I cannot for the life of me remember.”

The man started at the sound of my voice. It seemed to give him the cue he sought, and he replied, not without cordiality:

“Why, bless my soul, you must be George Oswaldson.”

“Yes,” I replied, still in a maze.

“Don’t you remember Jack Andrews, who shared a study with you at Giggleswick?”

Now I have it! This snuffy coloured man was one of my old schoolfellows, rather a scapegrace I remembered, but a good enough fellow for all that.

“I should think I do remember you!” I replied, giving his hand such a hearty shake that he winced. “And how goes the world with you? Upon my word it does me good to run against some one who knew me in my palmier days!”

“Eh? why—what’s wrong?” There was not exactly a pleasant glitter in Andrews’ eyes. They used to be bold, truthful eyes; now there seemed a nasty cunning underlying them. “Is it financial trouble or domestic affliction?”

“Both.”

At this he grew so eagerly interested that I was astonished. Why on earth did he look like that as if he wanted to probe my character to its depths? Did he think I was a drunkard, or a cut-throat, or did he fancy I was going to ask him for money?

“Down on your luck?” he said. “Damn queer thing luck is, isn’t it, Oswaldson?”

“Yes, luck’s a queer thing” I agreed. “I never had much, though, so I can’t discuss it. Luck has never been at home when I paid my morning calls.”

“You don’t say so, George! I’m sorry to hear it, ‘pon my word I am. I’ve had my bad luck too. When I left Giggleswick I went West, to that most ungodly hole, the State of Oregon—does your geography hold good for that?”

“Oh, I know where Oregon is, right enough.”

“Well, if you know where it is, take the straight tip and don’t go. It’s a hell-trap. Like a green-horn I went out with a thousand pounds capital, invested it in a ranch, had fever and Heaven knows what, lost half my stock, and couldn’t raise enough money to keep me in tobacco. I led a dog’s life for two years, and came back, broken in health and pocket. At my wits’ end I reached London, looked for work and found none—at least none that I could do. Pen-driving may have charms for some, but it has none for me. Well, George, pardon me if I’m too familiar, but I feel like your pal over again—I was at the end of my tether and was thinking of a trip to the next world when my luck changed.”

Andrews paused—and a spasm of sudden pain convulsed his features, leaving me more perplexed than ever.

“Your luck changed—yes,” I said, trying to keep up an air of indifference, for I saw that several people were watching us attentively.

“Yes, it changed.”

“For your financial or moral good?” The question slipped from me I knew not why. I felt it was a mistake. Andrews’ face became livid.

“Moral good—what in thunder do you mean?” he hissed, as if it hurt him to articulate.

“Oh, never mind, go on—I was only chaffing”; I tried to laugh, after a perceptibly awkward pause. “The tide turned, and—?”

“And I am no longer in dread of starvation,” he whispered, leaning his face close to mine. “I no longer think of the workhouse, or of begging, or of a crossing in the city, but—” He paused, and I watched him suspiciously. He trembled all over. Had my question struck the keynote of a guilty conscience? Was he afraid of any one in this vast assembly? Or was he mad?

“But you are afraid of some one or something,” I said, for I was determined to probe the mystery to its depths.

“Yes, George, I am,—horribly, hideously afraid. So afraid that a nightmare is nothing to it. Do you believe that there is a devil, and can he be incarnated in the form of a wealthy philanthropist? Does Satan ever leave hell and wander in our midst, a man visible to mortal eyes, on the lookout for victims to carry out the damnable ideas of his brain? Do you believe this?”

Yes, the man was mad! What could I do? To begin with, it was best to humour him.

“Yes,” I said soothingly, “of course, of course. We all know of the eccentricities of Satan, his many hobbies and the delightful facility his ethereal condition offers for gratifying them. Why, I dreamt I saw him only a few minutes ago; he was a tall thin man with a yellow beard and very pale blue eyes.”

I stopped, for Andrews’ expression made me turn sick and cold, as he stared at me with dilating eyes, and a look that I hope never to see again on mortal face. Then he said, with a forced smile:

“Oh, you know all about him.”

“About him?” I asked.

“Why, the *Chief*—*him*, of course.”

“The devil, you mean?”

“Yes, the devil if you like; it’s the best name for him. Are you fooling, or was he really here?”

“Who do you mean? Are you crazy?”

“No more than you are. That’s enough! Is he here?”

We were playing at cross questions with a vengeance; one of us must be mad or drunk.

“I don’t know anything about the Chief, or what you call him. Who or what is he?”

Andrews had recovered his composure and replied drily:

“For a man who doesn’t know a person you described him awfully well.”

A grim foreboding seized me. “Are dreams always nothings?” I wondered. It was my turn to tremble now.

“An autumnal evening, evidently,” said Andrews, with a hoarse laugh, as he noticed it.

“Colds are catching,” I said, snappishly enough. “There, don’t let’s quarrel, Oswaldson,” he replied almost affectionately. “Times change, and we with time, I know—but, hang it all, you can’t have choked off *all* fellow-feeling and *all* wish to talk over Giggleswick affairs.”

“We are both in trouble; what’s the good of talking of dear old times that won’t come back?” I answered.

“You are in trouble then—really?”

“I am pretty well. If you want to know, I am left in the world with a few pounds and not a living friend. Pretty critical, isn’t it?”

“But you are one of us?”

“One of us?” I repeated mystified. “What do you mean?”

“Look here, George Oswaldson,” he said sulkily, “you may as well be candid. Why can’t you admit that you know the Chief, if I do? I am one of his satellites—so there, you have me on toast.”

“But I’m in a fog,” I exclaimed, “the man I described was a figure in a bad dream I had just before I awoke and saw you. There was not any actual person.”

“You are very cautious, George, but I’m too old for such gammon. Why tell a lie about it?”

A sudden idea came to me. I might derive some benefit from solving this mystery—so for perhaps the first time in my life I diverged from the truth and resorted to crooked tactics.

“Well,” I said firmly, looking him so full in the face as to cause him to shift his gaze uneasily, “I have met the Chief—but I am not yet one of you.”

Andrews breathed hard.

“You have met him and yet have not joined. How is that?” Then he muttered, but I heard, “Odd—odd—I thought the Chief never failed.” Aloud he added, “But why didn’t you join? There must be some extraordinary reason.”

“Because,” I interrupted, “I was a fool!”

Andrews laughed aloud.

“Ha, ha!” he shouted, “a fool. You’re a smarter chap than I should have thought, George; the world has sharpened your wits. You refuse a tempting offer—such an offer—and call yourself a fool. What a joke! Why don’t you laugh?”

“Because I’m in no laughing mood,” I retorted, “and because I may yet join.”

“You don’t say so?”

“I do.”

“Well, that’s all right. The Chief will be here shortly—in fact, we expect him any moment; and a fresh member is wanted. Bad business, that of our last departure—but there, of course you haven’t been sworn in, and I can’t talk about it. There’s a vacancy, at any rate.”

“Anything in it?” I asked carelessly.

“Yes—why, didn’t he tell you?”

“No—that is—not exactly. What’s the figure?”

“For a complete success £100, for any attempt, if proved genuine, £50, additional of course to the £200 a year stipendiary as member.”

“How many are you now?”

“Only three.”

“And your full complement?”

“Four.”

“It’s a small society evidently.”

“Yes—and select.”

“Select?”

“Yes, and with a binding oath.”

“I see—once in, no getting out.”

“Not until Davy Jones lays his hand on your shoulder and says ‘Come’; then you leave the league without much time to say good-bye. Davy Jones won’t be kept waiting.”

My temperament is, I think, peculiar, at least for a Scotsman. I am impulsive, and wholly reckless of my own personal safety. I have always been ready to enter any escapade, regardless of consequences, for sheer love of excitement. My father’s nature was, I believe, the same. So in my present case, with little to lose and a prospect of starvation, I was not loath to jump at such a means of support—and Andrews’ mysterious warning rather attracted than deterred me. A secret society removed from the drudgery of everyday routine, and emolument into the bargain!

“If you are in earnest, I am,” I said. “I am willing to join your club as soon as possible; will you arrange it for me?”

“For auld lang syne, George, I will; and for the good of the cause I will.”

“Why, you are a bit of an enthusiast,” I laughed.

“Every one becomes so. It is *his* influence.”

Our conversation was interrupted by the band striking up the national anthem. This being a polite reminder that the evening’s entertainment was over, we exchanged cards and retired to our

respective abodes. Thus ended the first link in the strange chain which was to envelop me so closely during my stay at Bournemouth.

CHAPTER XX

A LUNCH AND A VISION

A week had passed since my meeting with Jack Andrews, and my little store of money had so far diminished, that I was doubting whether to wait a few days, or make tracks at once for Southampton. However, the fascination of Bournemouth prevailed, and refused to let me go. The tramp of the pleasure-seekers on the pier, the sound of the band, the breeze over the water, the very blueness of the sea, itself conspired to hold and influence me.

So a whole week passed, bringing no good tidings, but a confirmation of my worst fears. My uncle's wealth was left in bulk to his wife, not a penny, nay, not the fraction of a penny fell to my share.

"We are very sorry for you," the widow wrote, "but after all my husband did for you in his lifetime you ought not to expect more. Your education was a great expense, and I am sure he was always liberal to you in the way of pocket-money."

She didn't say she would be pleased to see me, if I dropped in for afternoon tea, for instance. Perhaps she was afraid of my appetite; or perhaps she did not want to waste hospitality on one who could not repay it.

I began to sum up affairs for the hundredth time—fifteen pounds in my purse, a few clothes and other poor sundries. What next? Await Jack Andrews' pleasure or decamp to the States?

Thinking deeply, I halted by the wayside—in other words, opposite the door of the club, and about a dozen yards away from the pier entrance. I tossed for it; the penny came down head—Bournemouth won. I turned on my heel and strolled off along the beach, determined to see Jack Andrews without delay.

I ascended St Joseph's Steps towards the West Cliff Hotel. It was one o'clock, and, as I guessed, I found him at luncheon. He looked in better spirits than when I had seen him last—less careworn, more sprightly. With a smile that was almost jocular he bade me "sit down and lay in"—an invitation I was not slow to accept, thinking of a humble piece of bread and cheese in St Michael's Road.

"Pretty girl, that," he observed, nodding towards a table across the room. Following the direction of his glance, I encountered the eyes of a girl certainly not more than twenty years of age.

"Yes," I said in a half whisper, "she is pretty."

"I hope," he continued with something like a sigh, "the Chief won't come across her." Then in the half-absent manner that had puzzled me before, he added as if to himself, "She is too young. Let her be for a bit."

"What the deuce are you jabbering over?" I asked, taking another look at the girl. Yes, she was pretty—even very pretty; nothing insipid or dollish, but a prettiness approaching actual beauty. Her golden hair—natural golden, too—hung in curls over a compact forehead; her eyes were blue-grey, her nose short and straight, her chin clearly defined without prominence. I also noticed that she was plainly dressed in dark blue, showing off her fine figure to perfection; and as she rose to greet a gentleman who entered, I realised that she was just the ideal height for a woman.

She had other friends with her—so even if she wished it she could not indulge in a *tête-à-tête* with the newcomer. Opposite her sat a girl somewhat resembling her in expression, but shorter and less striking, with almost black hair.

I was wondering if they were sisters, when Andrews spoke. “Do you know who that is with them?” he asked, drumming on the table with his fingers and trying to catch the newcomer’s eye.

“No—how should I?”

“Nothing—I only thought you might.” He kept on drumming a peculiar rattling sound, beginning with the Little finger and running along to the thumb, three times—loudly, softly, and then very loudly. After a moment the stranger turned his head and surveyed him leisurely.

“No,” I thought, “I never saw you before; I don’t want ever to see you again.” Men may be ugly and yet pleasing—there may be a nice expression and a redeeming smile. But this man’s ugliness was repulsive. “Who is he, then?” I asked.

“Tom Tombs. Not a pretty name, but it rather suits his profession,” and Andrews gave one of those hoarse chuckles that led me to doubt his sanity.

“Tombs?” I said, as quietly as I could. “An undertaker, I suppose?”

Another chuckle, more hideous than before.

“Not exactly, in the arbitrary meaning of the word—but—he—belongs to the Society.”

I grew interested. This Society had a peculiar style of members. “The girl—who is she?” I asked, finishing my meat and leaning back to wait for the next course.

“Miss Freeman. You see the other girl?”

“Yes.”

“You’d hardly imagine they were sisters. Some men admire the dark one most. She is not so lively—rather reserved—but in her style as pretty.”

I noted the name; and persuading myself it was ridiculous to hope to know them—I, the poor outcast, they beautiful and doubtless wealthy—I turned the conversation from the subject.

We talked for some time before I broached the actual purpose of my visit.

“Will you join, at once—to-night?” he asked. Then added, after a prolonged study of my face, “I don’t advise you, mind, as a friend. The other evening I spoke differently, partly because I thought I’d rather have you enrolled than a stranger—and partly because I read your face wrong. You seemed so desperate—so unlike the Oswaldson I knew at Giggleswick—I thought you might suit us. You know there is no going back once you learn the secret—to be one of us you must kill your conscience, and—” his voice shook and sank to a hiss, his face paled, and his eyes gleamed like points of steel—“by your deeds you hold your life at stake. If you fail in what *he* tells you, you incur his wrath, which is terrible; if you succeed you damn your soul. You will have money enough, but you will be a slave and more wretched than a squalid gutter-boy. Think well!”

He sank back exhausted and waited for my reply; there were beads of perspiration on his forehead.

Then a curious sensation stole over me, carrying me far away from all human neighbourhood, to a nameless place wrapped in a blinding mantle of mist. I seemed to float on clouds, thousands of miles away from the busy world, alone, yet not alone, for in the fog two figures were dimly visible. One was that of a woman—I could see the long hair falling to her waist, the other was like that of a man. But such a man—superhumanly tall, unnaturally coloured! The woman seemed to assume an attitude of pleading, and pointed in my direction. The great man shook his head angrily and motioned her away. Then she placed a hand on his shoulder with a sudden movement that he had not time to avoid. As she continued to plead he seemed for a moment

irresolute—but just as I expected to see him yield and let her pass, he was stirred by sudden fury, and shook off her hand. Then to my horror he sprang at her with a savage gesture of his long arms, and tried to seize her by the throat. They swayed to and fro like those engaged in a struggle for life, and I was astonished at the strength of the woman, for the man could not thrust her aside. I struggled hard to move, to go to her assistance; but seemed glued to the spot without the power of speech or motion. How long the fight lasted I knew not, but slowly and surely the huge man prevailed. His great hands sought her throat; he would murder her, and I must see him do it. One more struggle, and all was blank. The fight was over, and the combatants gone mysteriously as they came. I felt the cold mist cut into my flesh, the damp settling on my limbs. Again a figure loomed before me. I recognised the murderer, and, strangest of all, I was no longer repelled by his appearance. Perhaps, after all, she deserved it! I remembered the words of Otway, “Every woman is at heart a rake.” A lurid light through the mist formed a halo round the strange man’s head. I saw his face—and then again lost consciousness.

“Been having a nap, sir?”

There was nothing supernatural about this voice, nothing spectral in the portly figure from which it proceeded. I rubbed my eyes and found myself still sitting at the table in the hotel room, and a waiter regarding me with a broad smile of amusement.

“Where’s my friend?” I asked.

“Gone out an hour and more, sir,” he replied, pocketing a shilling which I slipped into his hand. I felt very foolish, and blamed the two glasses of excellent claret in which, after my week of low living, I had indulged.

“He left this note for you, sir. ‘The gentleman,’ says he, meaning you, ‘is having a nap, he’s a bit done after a long walk. So don’t let him be disturbed!’ With that off he goes. A nice gent is Mr Andrews, very much liked by every one here, sir.”

“Indeed!” I said, heeding the contents of the note more than the fellow’s chatter. “Well, I had a long nap. Good-day!”

Leaving the hotel, I returned to my lodgings, thinking over the message from Jack Andrews as I went.

“Be here at 8.30 this evening.”

And, as I determined to obey, I fancied I heard a sob, a long sob as of great sorrow, coming from a knot of pine-trees on the cliff. But when I looked in that direction, I saw nothing but the trees, and their grotesque shadows on the yellow soil.

CHAPTER XXI

THE REASON OF THE BROTHERHOOD

Punctually to the second I presented myself at the West Cliffe Hotel, and was shown into Room 36.

Before my strange dream I had hesitated whether or not to listen to Jack’s friendly warning, and I had felt more than half influenced by it. But after the dream I wavered no longer. I felt a strange wild longing to plunge into the mysteries of this unknown society, for weal or woe. So I decided to take the final step and leave the rest in the hands of fate.

The room into which I was shown was a kind of drawing-room, plainly but comfortably furnished, with dark green leather chairs, a round mahogany table in the centre, and a sofa under

the window, also the usual complement of the usual pictures, indispensable, from the proprietor's standpoint, to satisfy the artistic cravings of his guests.

Leaning against the mantelpiece, with an air of easy indolence, stood the man I was already beginning to hate, the man I saw in the dining-room in company with the pretty Miss Freeman— If I thought him repulsive then I did not retract my opinion now. Somehow I was assured the dislike was mutual—for in the quick glance we exchanged I read distrust and aversion at once. The other stranger was more prepossessing—a slight, fair young man with close-cropped light hair, blue eyes, and a fair moustache.

He wore a light grey suit eminently becoming to his sunburnt complexion. Andrews, rising from his seat on the couch, shook hands and introduced me to his companions.

“Mr Tombs—Mr Oswaldson.”

My enemy—for my quick imagination had already advanced him to that dignity—gave me a cold handshake, allowing his fingers to remain in mine for the briefest time possible.

“Mr Dowson—Mr Oswaldson.”

This grasp was much more cordial, though the blue eyes remained hard and keen and the lips compressed.

No one spoke, and there was an awkward silence, unbroken till Andrews offered me a cigarette. Then an odd impulse came over me, and I blurted out:

“How did you get to know the Freemans?” I addressed the remark to Tombs, and an angry wave reddened his sallow face. I thought he was on the verge of telling me to mind my own business, but, controlling himself, he only said casually:

“Met them quite by chance on the pier.” “Did you speak without an introduction?” “Why not? Girls like them aren't particular.” This raised my anger. He was plainly a man of the type I most thoroughly abhorred—a man of the world who regarded all women from his own vilely low standpoint. I was puzzled to know why girls like Miss Freeman should condescend to be seen talking to him, and remembered an axiom of my uncle's that “women always liked the biggest blackguards best.” I felt I must say something, so went on, as carelessly as I could between puffs of smoke:

“If you rate the Freemans' company at such low value, I wonder you cared to address them—at Least on such a public spot as the pier.”

The fellow's eyes glared—he looked as if he wanted to swear—and I was glad to realise that he hated me as much as I hated him.

“Oh, confound it!” he said, flicking a tobacco-ash from his sleeve, “no one knows me down here, so I'm not very particular.”

“Nor apparently are they.”

I could not restrain the words, and Tombs started like an angry bull.

Andrews and Dowson drew nearer, one from the window, the other from the table where he had commenced to write, and Jack intervened. “Come now, you two, don't fight already. Why, you've only been introduced about three minutes! Let the ladies alone. If it will satisfy you, George, I'll guarantee their respectability. As to letting a stranger speak to them, why, this isn't London; it's done at every seaside place all over England, in the holidays. It doesn't involve a society acquaintance afterwards, and chaperons go in the background for July and August. If Tombs has different ideas—why, he has every right to express them, provided no insult is intended. Don't be an ass, George!”

In spite of this conciliatory effort on Andrews' part, Tombs scowled darkly at me, and I met his scowl with a decidedly contemptuous smile.

So matters remained, and no one feeling inclined for more conversation, we kept our thoughts to ourselves. It was half-past nine, and the wonderful "Chief" had not come. Had he any intention of coming?

I crossed the room and looked out of the window. A glorious evening! There were a few clouds, but the crescent moon peeped out between and threw a narrow streak of light across the sea. The road was brightly illuminated and almost as clear as day. Swarms of people tramped up and down in the pleasant coolness. Just as I was listening to the whistle of a steamer crossing the bay, a slight disturbance behind attracted my attention, and I turned quickly round to confront—the Chief.

Never—never till the grave itself engulfs me, can I forget that meeting! For the man standing on the threshold in a light grey suit and cap to match was the figure I had seen in my dream in the winter-gardens—the vampire of the gallery—the harbinger of my evil destiny. Here then was the Chief—and I understood what Andrews meant when he spoke of the devil. The others, who were prepared for his coming, were almost equally disconcerted. Jack, pale and trembling, was the first to acknowledge his greeting; the others slowly followed his example. Then my turn came.

"Who is this?" Nothing to show if the speaker were pleased or otherwise—a cold, impassionate voice. The blue eyes set in the white face scanned me steadily.

"Who is this, and why is he here? Tell me!"

Andrews came to the rescue.

"He is an old friend of mine, sir—George Oswald-son, adventurer, who, being just as we were when you took pity on us, desires to enter your service."

"His qualifications?" the cold eyes fixed me still.

Jack answered for me.

"The same—despair, and no alternative but suicide."

"Is that so, Mr Oswaldson?"

"It is, sir," I replied with an effort. "All my worldly goods amount to ~i5 and two suits of clothes. I have neither relations, friends, nor prospects except emigration, which means starvation; or that which my friend has just mentioned."

"Come here. Let me examine you."

I knew I was trembling when I walked up to him, and sat down in obedience to a sign. Something cold was laid on my forehead, and I was at his mercy. Quickly and carefully he examined the formation of my cranium, passing from group to group of affective or intellectual faculties. Now and then the fingers paused, and they seemed to sink into my brain and drag from it a mute confession of its own defects.

No one spoke during the examination. The three men stood watching intently.

"You are not my style," came the measured words at last. "Your disposition is not in sympathy with mine, nor is your character firm enough to endure the dangers which beset the lives of others."

Thinking he was about to dismiss me, and rendered desperate at the prospect of losing, as it seemed, my only chance of earning bread and cheese, I seized him by the arm.

"Only try me, sir! I will prove faithful to the utmost in any charge given to me." It seemed pitifully weak and cringing, thus to go almost on my knees to ask a favour, yet I could not do otherwise. But I might as well have pleaded to a spectre from Hades, as to this bloodless man with the lacklustre eyes. Did he hear me, or were his ears incapable of conveying sound to his brain. Would he answer, or were those white lips to remain irresponsive?

The glare of the electric light under which he stood added to his death-like appearance. The cheeks looked more cadaverous, the eyes more weird. Strange shadows crept from the walls and dosed around me, and the Chief's appearance seemed at moments oddly mingled with that of the copper-coloured murderer in the mist. Many other deluding fancies gripped my imagination, as I stood and waited hungrily for his answer.

Greedy faces, with leering eyes and wicked fangs, hung round the walls, the tawdry picture-frames gave birth to ungainly monsters, the furniture creaked mournfully, and the smell of blood, fresh, newly spilt blood, assailed my nostrils. Yet he answered not.

The room whirled around. My companions' faces were distorted into apish countenances awry with spite and malice—a veil of darkness fell over me—suddenly a flash of blinding brilliance forced upon my notice these words:

“IS THY SOUL THINE OWN TO BARTER?”

I know not if I saw or heard them; they stung my smouldering conscience as the lash stings the back of some recalcitrant animal. For a moment a fire burned within my bosom, the memory of bygone vows to adhere to truth, virtue, and beauty. But the dispassionate voice of the Chief broke the silence, and the impulse, with the phantom forms, was gone.

“George Oswaldson!”

I was fully awake, keen, and attentive in an instant. The suspense was terrible.

“George Oswaldson, by your own desire you came here to-night, with the intention of joining the Brotherhood of the Women Haters?”

There was a death-like silence, suggestive of grim horror, and awful foreboding of what was to come. For men like these, the title of “Women Haters” could be no empty sound.

Was it the face of a man on which I looked, or that of some evil thing?

He spoke on. “Ten minutes ago I had no desire to admit you to the secrets of our Society, but I have changed my mind. I believe that your temperament is such that you could, work yourself up to any degree of resentment under certain circumstances—even to that extremity of hate which inevitably ends in murder.” The last word had a violent effect on all present. The fear on my companions' faces gave way to a wolfish greedy cruelty. Their jaws tightened like those of brutes till the muscles stood out in lumps, their lips grinned savagely, their eyes flashed in hideous glee. “Murder!” It came out with a hissing sound and was prolonged till the whole room echoed “Murder.” The moon went behind a cloud, the stars shrank away, and everywhere, from beach to cliff, from pinewood to sea, echoed the long, low whisper, “Murder!”

As for me, I lost all power to speak, to retract, to fly ere it was too late. I had to listen as the even, metallic voice went steadily on:

“For the last time—do you wish to join us?”

Something like the heated poisonous breath of some loathsome creature seemed to pour into my left ear. Conscience made one feeble struggle—but I crushed it down and said firmly, “I do.”

“You understand that once in possession of our secrets, nothing cancels your membership except death?”

And once more my better self strove to assert its right and keep me out of this bondage. And again that something breathed into my left ear. I thought of the money, the means of living—and assented.

The Chief turned to the others, and raising his hand with an impressive gesture, cried in a new, ringing voice of command:

“Gentlemen, you will take this man to you as a brother.”

And the voices replied in unison:

“We will!”

The Chief went to the door of the room and stepped out cautiously into the passage, leaving us four together. No one spoke, but I felt the eyes of the three upon me, till he re-entered with an almost silent tread, carrying an oil-lamp in his hand. The chimney of the lamp was removed, both wicks lighted, and Andrews thrust a long, pencil-shaped piece of steel, fitted with a glass handle, into the flame. For minutes—to me it might have been hours—we stood and watched him at his task.

When the end of the iron was heated to the Chief’s satisfaction, I was bidden to seat myself at the table and rest my face upon it. This was more than I bargained for, and a grim spirit of resistance arose in me. But at a sign from the Chief I was gently seized by Tombs on the right hand and by Dowson on the left, and pushed into the chair he indicated.

“Don’t be alarmed, Mr Oswaldson,” the terrible man said in a soothing tone, so different to any of his former phrases that I wondered anew; “we are not going to cause you any injury beyond the trifling momentary pain which this iron will inflict. It is a preliminary which all the brotherhood have willingly undergone, and which will be a lasting sign of your enrolment in our service.”

“Ah—h!” I had not clenched my teeth firmly enough to prevent that cry of weakness escaping; and in truth the smart was acute enough. The Chief, however, spoke on:

“Now, gentlemen, since our new brother bears the insignia of the skull upon his body, and has thereby become pledged to the secrecy of our society, we may unfold to him, step by step, the nature, work, and object of the fraternity of Women Haters, of which, as he knows, I am the head, the prime instigator, treasurer, secretary, president, and life and soul besides; while you, gentlemen, perform the useful function of limbs, yet each one liable to be amputated for the safety of the body. You, George Oswaldson, will now swear in presence of us all, by the God who made you, by the life in your body, by the soul which came from the darkness and will go back thither, that you will faithfully carry into execution, to the letter, every order of any sort received from me. That, even in the fear of sudden and awful death, you will never swerve from your purpose, nor divulge any secret of our Society, nor the names of your fellow members. Do you swear?”

Can you imagine in what frame of mind I heard these words? If I had been in my ordinary senses, less wrought up to overwhelming excitement, less in awe of this singular, terrible Chief, I believe I should have even then, at any risk, refused the awful oath. But alas! I was no longer the George Oswaldson of a week ago. I had yielded my will and could only obey in trembling. The moments that followed burned into my mind as the branding iron into my flesh. I was the helpless victim of my surroundings, the plaything of the night and of the hour, as, unresisting, I passed into my bondage. Word by word, syllable by syllable, I followed him as he pronounced the oath. It was done. I was bound to him irrevocably.

Andrews was sent to see that there were no eavesdroppers in the passage; and then the mission of the brotherhood was revealed to me in all its hellishness.

“Our duty to the cause,” the Chief commenced, facing us full, as we stood like a row of schoolboys opposite their master, “is to root out from the world all such women as are unprofitable to mankind. You shudder—poor, untried weakling as you yet are! Listen! Long ago, the company of women gave me pleasure. As you have perhaps done, I saw much of them; I was willing to believe that they were beings of a slightly better nature than man! I fancy I admired and respected them. Everything fair and good seemed to belong to them, and I—well, I was different then, too.” The words seemed almost forced from him; for the first time I detected a

subtle change of expression in voice and manner, which he speedily subdued. "Then things changed. A series of dreams showed me the falsity of such primitive delusions. I saw, in ungarished nakedness, the baseness, vileness, and treachery innate in woman. And then there came to me the voice of a master, bidding me to enter into his service of Revenge; take up the flaming sword, and go forth, with the watchword of *Eden*, to purge the world of this plague. So the grandest mission that has yet fallen to the lot of man has been appointed to me. Do you wonder that I am proud of it? So I move, and, by the power that is given to me, I know the women of whom the world must be rid; and I never hesitate. From town to town I go, marking here and there, and sending secret word to each member of the brotherhood of what he must do. If he fails, and is captured by the law of the land, he knows that he himself must bear the penalty in silence: if he escapes he receives half the reward of success, provided I am satisfied that he has done his best. For me, I know I am safe, so hidden in mystery is my dwelling-place that not one of the brethren could betray me if he would. I am with you when you least expect it, and what you do I have sure means of knowing. You have given your will to mine, and over a distance of miles I can convey to you clearly what you must do. Never hesitate, or I shall know it. If you dream of rebellion, I shall know it too. For your reward you will receive an annual income of £200 paid quarterly at an address which I will allot to you: for every task fulfilled £100, for every *bona-fide* attempt £50 I may tell you that it is very rarely that a brother has been captured, and then only when he failed to obey my orders to the letter. So, above all, be fearless. My methods are simple yet untraceable. And that, I think, is all," he said, dropping suddenly from the oratorical to the conversational style. "I see it is nearly midnight, and our worthy friend the landlord has some scruple about respectable hours. Mr Tombs will tell you what you have to do at present; and here, Mr Oswaldson, is your first cheque. I daresay you will find it useful, together with the address of your future headquarters. Good-night, gentlemen." And with a curt nod to each the Chief was gone.

For a few moments we remained talking, about Bournemouth amusements chiefly, for I do not think any of us dared to speak of the Chief. Andrews mentioned that he was to leave Bournemouth next day, Dowson that he must go the day after. Neither mentioned his destination. So Tombs and I alone were to remain. I managed not to shake hands with Tombs, got out of the room, and once under a lamp, stopped to read the Chief's instructions: "Clarendon Hotel, Waterloo Road, S.E. Call there on September 30th and await orders."

It was the eighteenth of August. I had more than a month free, and with money enough to live in comfort. Free! Yet a slave, in the service of surely the vilest society that ever tainted the earth.

Somehow, out there under the stars, I could not realise it. I tried to pray to the God whose name I had so recklessly used, to pity and forgive me. And I swore another oath that never, at any cost, would I perform any of its awful work. Yet I had no scruples about the payment I had received. I needed it sorely, and the grim possibility of cheating this vampire out of his blood-money pleased me for the moment.

Suddenly a cold blast of wind swept past me and stung with its chill. Again I was in a world of phantoms. The broad white road assumed a weird, unreal aspect; the silent pines began to bend to and fro, with a cry in the rustle of the leaves. The sea darkened, and the waves lapped hungrily at the shore. The baying of a dog made me start in terror, and the moonlight danced in grotesque circles round my feet. From nowhere came a thrilling whisper—"Think not to cheat the brotherhood"; and it was in the unforgettable voice of the Chief. Turning fearfully, I expected to see him gazing at me between the trees or leaning against the white wall around the edge of the

cliff. I did see a shadowy figure crouching behind a seat and peering at me through the woodwork. Was it—no—not the face of the Chief?

“Ah! Mercy! Help! Take it away!”

A cruel, sinister face, lean and copper-coloured, inhuman and devilish. It left its hiding-place and advanced towards me in the moonlight.

“Christ, help me!” I cried.

The figure stopped, the face seemed convulsed with pain—and another figure, slight, womanly, and shadowy, seemed to glide between us. Then both disappeared.

I turned, and with a sickening fear at my heart, ran till I found refuge in my lodging in the St Michael’s Road.

CHAPTER XXII

AGONOSTES TAKES UP THE TALE

Of all the souls I have been bidden to win for my lord and master, for few have I toiled as I did for the soul of George Oswaldson. All the clients I had previously had to deal with I helped me by their natural tendencies—they listened willingly, if not greedily, to my words. Ida Temple and Ralph Webster would have always turned to me rather than to Sagatheela—and it was the same with others—but not with Oswaldson.

There was no deep flaw in his character, no tendency to vice; not even the desperation of crime as an alternative to his crushing poverty swayed him wholly. He was not given to slander or sensuality, but, to my misfortune, was strongly inclined towards a high ideal of honour and manliness. If I could have tempted him to drink or gaming, I might have ruled him; but I could not. He was a simpleminded, conscientious man, reckless at times, and, unlike most Lowlanders, wildly romantic. In this I saw his weak point and played on it.

My campaign opened with a success—I over-powered Sagatheela in a struggle which, for some reason or other, my client was permitted to witness. He was a Scot, and endowed with a portion of what they call “second sight”—so that, on occasions, his mortal eyes could win a glimpse behind the veil, and this troubled me—for I loved to work under cover. Yet I thwarted him here—for I met him as a man.

The first success was followed by several failures—then I gained another ascendancy, and he allowed himself to be sworn into the society. I thought I had conquered, but then followed a worse defeat. This extraordinary man still dared to *pray*—and while he could do so, the hands of Sagatheela were stronger than mine. But could Sagatheela fight the new admixture of the mortal and immortal?

As George Oswaldson returned from the meeting, I went a little ahead, and instinctively becoming aware of an antagonistic presence, I sought refuge in one of the wooden shelters.

Whether through Sagatheela’s influence or not I know not—I became a source of the utmost terror to my client. The humour of the situation struck me, and I was about to enjoy it to the full, when he uttered those awful words! In an instant I was helpless in the grasp of Sagatheela, who thrust me from the path as easily as if I had been an evil dream—and I had perforce to leave her victorious.

Early next morning Oswaldson finished his breakfast—a more substantial meal than he had latterly had—and strolled down towards the sea. It was a glorious morning, and all Bournemouth laughed in the sunlight.

Leaning against the seat at the foot of St Michael's Road, facing the bay, and thinking of nothing but the beauty and gladness of her surroundings, he saw Bertha Freeman, the younger and taller of the two sisters. There was an unconsciousness, an unaffectedness about her that magnified her prettiness into beauty.

George Oswaldson stopped about a hundred paces off, and, under the time-worn pretext of lacing his boot, was able to spend a good minute and a half in observing her.

The girl, suddenly aware that she was no longer alone, turned round and looked at him with wonder in her blue eyes—and a quick thrill of a new sentiment passed through the heart of the young man.

It was absurd—meaningless—yet his steadfast and admiring gaze fell to her dress before that look: and then deliberately travelled back to the pretty face again. He finished his boot, and urged by impulse, advanced nearer—the barriers of etiquette were forgotten; he came to a halt, coloured to the roots of his hair, tried to say something and forgot it in the saying, and finally, with much stammering, blurted out—“Ex—good-morning—oh—excuse—er—would—you tell me the time?”

There was a sudden flash of merriment in the blue eyes, though the bright lips remained demurely grave as she replied, “Oh, certainly—it has struck eight o'clock.”

Summoning up all his courage, he continued:

“It's delightfully cool—the weather, I mean,” he said, as nervously as if he *could* mean anything else.

“Yes, it is—” she answered—then half to herself, with the slightest emphasis on the last word, “very cool.”

George started. Was her innocence mere finished coquetry?

After a few more ordinary remarks, which she answered quietly and without giving him the slightest hint to remain or to depart, he grew bolder, and asked if he might walk with her along the cliff.

“And my sister will come too—yes, with pleasure,” Miss Freeman replied, at the same time beckoning to a girl at the door of the Pendennis Boardinghouse.

The elder girl attracted him less—and during their stroll, such conversation as took place was confined to the other two; she took no part in it.

How much one of the three enjoyed that short ramble through almost fairy-like surroundings, it would be hard to describe. He was transported from the torments of hell his soul had been enduring for the past hours, to paradise, with an angel for guide and companion!

Whenever she looked to her right, she met the eyes of the young man filled with adoring admiration. Was she pleased? Perhaps. Girls like to enjoy the widening influence of their beauty. If they stopped to consider before exercising their power, perhaps hell would not be so thickly populated with their victims.

Yet I must acknowledge that Bertha Freeman felt some of the responsibility of her charms. She saw much to like in the simple-hearted youth who had stammered and stuttered—there was something refreshing in the deferential, un-modern air he assumed towards her that rendered him rather *distinguê*. But he was a mere acquaintance, and she had no intention of letting him make any mistake in the matter.

This I soon discovered; so, doubtless, did Sagatheela, and rejoiced thereat. For Oswaldson's peace of mind, it might have been well if he had found it out; but he did not. They chatted about their respective homes (poor George had to invent one for the occasion); they talked of London and the shops, in which he began to manifest a sudden interest; its theatres, about which he did

not care to converse. (What right had his ideal to display such worldly tastes?) It brought back his doubts as to her sincerity, visions of possible lovers, of foolish badinage and cheap glitter. Then the elder Miss Freeman remarked that they often had several "boys" to tea on Sundays; and "boys" conveyed to George's mind a sharp pang of jealousy.

He wanted to ask if any of them found favour in her eyes—were they handsome or rich—but he dared not—yet.

The hour passed all too quickly, and as he watched the girls returning to the Pendennis for breakfast, all the reality and the pleasure of his life seemed to be concentrated in the slim, blue-frocked figure, with its crown of golden hair. Only in the zenith of youth can man's love live in day-dreams wholly; when the heyday of boyhood is over, he looks on the practical side of things with eyes more critical and less generous.

George had not reached the age of scepticism—he was hardly more than a boy, and less worldly wise than many boys. A certain Scotch canniness warned him against dissipation—as he would have said, there were things in which the devil had the best of the game, and these he avoided. Otherwise, he was innocent and unsuspecting as a child.

Is it likely, I can hear some one question, that this level-headed youth should act in such an inconsistent manner—fling himself headlong into a criminal society, and try to rush into an intimacy with a strange girl seen during a seaside holiday?

Inconsistent perhaps, but it is the inconsistencies of life that are true.

Besides, he was desperate, he had me for his prompter—while the romantic faith of his father's nature was developing under the gentler influence of Sagatheela. Yes—I smiled when I saw this. Besides, he was young—and when was youth either stable or rational? Ten days before he was in the abyss of misery—now his soul was soaring among the fleecy clouds of the August morning. In imagination, Bertha Freeman was already his bride—no consideration of parents, of ways and means, of anything, only that sweet home in which they could be together, far from the din and bustle of other people. There is nothing she desires that he will not give her, dainty dresses, picturesque hats, fragrant flowers, jewels. He suddenly remembered she wore none, not even a ring. Of course she would want a carriage—he gravely considered the colour of the footman's livery. For himself he wanted nothing but the right to gaze into those blue eyes.

The acquaintanceship so oddly struck up on the cliff was not dropped. There were really very few nice young men at Bournemouth, and as Oswaldson was undoubtedly "nice," the Freeman girls were not sorry to avail themselves of his company and escort. The elder remained reticent—the younger always bright and chatty. They sat in comfortable spots he chose among the pines or on the sand, accepted his opinions, and listened to his anecdotes, in a manner most soothing to a young man's vanity.

When he told them of his Scotch home he would quaintly drift into the local dialect, so that they often laughed outright—but always good-humouredly, so that he could join them. Speaking of his lonely days in his uncle's house, an unconscious pathos in his voice appealed for sympathy; and he received it, which was most wonderful and beautiful of all. He was not the first man who had mistaken kindness and pity for love.

Whether the conversation were merry or serious, his eyes in their admiration seldom left the mobile face of the younger girl. What a perfect profile, what tiny wayward curls! And those eyes, were they ever the same? Yesterday they were pensive, to-day laughing—sometimes they would soften with a strange light, and then his heart beat faster and he vowed to win or die.

But she would never accompany him without her sister. One day, by a rare chance, the elder girl having wandered off to gather heather, he found her alone and asked her to go for a sail. She

refused, with a smile of half-mischievous pity. Another day he met her going to post a letter, and the same request met with the same answer, but no smile. Oswaldson went home and worried over it all night.

It was the last days of August. They remember it at Bournemouth, for the sun surpassed all its former achievements; the “oldest inhabitant” never remembered anything like it.

The Freemans and Oswaldson directed their steps towards Alum Chine. The white beach walk was not comfortable even for men in their flat soled shoes; for women it was simply abominable, the daintily-shod feet sinking until the high heels disappeared, and sand does not respect the stocking! Each stride became an effort, and the knowledge that they were hot and had ceased to look their best was not without effect on the feminine temper. Angels that those girlish figures may sometimes appear, yet they are all daughters of Eve, and inherit much from her intercourse with my master.

On the occasion in question the sand was more pervading than ever. The heat was stifling, the very breath of the sea choked. And the Freeman girls vented their discomfort on my unhappy client.

Nevertheless, so infatuated was he, though writhing under their rebuffs, that he consoled himself by remembering how he had heard that nothing was more uncertain than the temper of a girl in love!

“For goodness sake, Mr Oswaldson, do let us sit down! I’ve had quite enough of this wretched walking.” His ideal shook the sand from her little foot impatiently.

“Where then?” he asked, feasting his eyes on the yellow hair, and longing to kiss the lips that were so pretty even in their pouting.

“Oh, here, there, anywhere where the sun isn’t! Under the cliff, that will at least protect our backs. Oh, don’t stand staring, *please*—I’m being baked alive!”

George was rather surprised at the last burst of pettishness, but, deciding that anger enhanced her beauty, was not hurt, only hurried to choose a resting-place.

He found one under the cliff, and there they subsided—the girls against the great brown wall, he lying at their feet, in such a position that he could now and then get a glimpse of her face, without quite dislocating his neck! He watched her playing with the sand, letting it dribble through her fingers, shyly laughing as she sprinkled a little on his coat. It was so innocent, so guileless—he let her tease him, and loved to watch the movement of the delicate white hand.

“A penny for your thoughts?” she asked at last, her eyes brimming over with mischief.

It was a thrilling moment. In an anxious voice, lowered so that her sister might not hear, he said:

“Do you—really—wish—to know?”

It was unmistakable. She coloured, while her sister, who evidently had heard, gave a short cough that was suspiciously like a note of warning.

He was about to repeat the question, and more emphatically, when she suddenly leaned forward with the lightest of laughs, and with her stick tilted his hat over his eyes. Before he could recover, her sister spoke:

“When do you intend to leave Bournemouth, Mr Oswaldson?”

“I have not made up my mind.” Then he added to Bertha, with a faint lingering expression, “It all depends upon circumstances.”

“Where do you go then?” pursued the elder.

“Oh, back to London, I suppose.” His tone was not complimentary—he was wondering why the Creator allowed two girls in a family.

“You will come and see us perhaps—we live at Blackheath.” It was a “society” tone, without the faintest shade of cordiality in it. Oswaldson decided that the dark girl could be exceedingly disagreeable when she liked.

“Of course I will,” he said eagerly enough. After all it *was* an invitation, though it might have been differently given. Again, to the younger, he added, “If you care to see me.”

She smiled indulgently. “We are always glad to see our friends.”

“Then you classify me in the list of your friends?” Perhaps, for the instant she forgot the rôle she meant to play—perhaps the spirit of mischief, or perhaps her evil genius from Monelpisia predominated. At any rate she did not answer, only let their eyes meet, and he thought it was enough.

He was too wholly intoxicated to perceive a figure, dark and sinister, threading its way along the beach towards their corner; or to notice the flash of anger that for just one second prevailed in the eyes of the elder sister—he saw nothing but Bertha’s glance, and felt that at last they understood each other.

“You haven’t given us your address,” she was saying gently. Before he could reply, her sister broke in:

“Really, Bertha, he isn’t going to-day—are you, Mr Oswaldson? And I expect you know lots of girls in London, and won’t care to burden yourself with two more to call upon. Isn’t that so?”

She looked at him very straight, very resolutely—and there was something in her face to make him afraid. He only muttered helplessly:

“No, I assure you, my circle of lady acquaintances in London will be strictly limited to you.”

“Ah—so you say—Mr Oswaldson.”

“And so I mean!” He did not wish to be rude, but it was, to say the least of it, abruptly spoken.

“Sh! Sh!” interrupted Bertha, shaking her finger with a delightfully tantalising gesture and then laying it on her lips. “Don’t bite her head off!”

“I thought you approved of men with tempers, Miss Freeman?”

“So I do, but,” with an arch laugh, “I prefer them at a distance.”

The encouragement in her eyes would have fired the heart of a more experienced man than Oswaldson.

Stretching out his hand, he laid it caressingly on hers—and she, still smiling down at him, let it stay.

Her sister looked round and frowned; there was an ominous pause before she spoke.

“Did you tell Mr Oswaldson we expect father and mother down here at the end of the week?”

Bertha bit her lip confusedly—my client attributed it to bashfulness.

“No,” she said—there was a hardness in her voice which puzzled him, and she disengaged her hand and busily thrust her fingers into the loose sand, “I didn’t think it would interest him.”

“By the way, Bertie,” the dark girl went on, “you heard from Tom to-day. When is he coming?”

There was no mistake now. The colour that sprang to her cheeks made the blood leave Oswaldson’s.

“Tom—is that your brother?” he tried to say lightly, but he hardly knew his own voice.

There was a pitying softness in his ideal’s eyes—but she did not speak. Her sister did, with a kind of solemn triumph in her tone.

“Her brother? Oh, dear me, no! her fiancé.” This was a grand point for me. Those few words did more to influence George Oswaldson’s soul than any I could have breathed into his ears. Bravo—what a check for Sagatheela!

During the following few moments of silence, the dark girl wondered what he would say or do. The boyish face was drawn with pain, and the troubled eyes seemed like those of a far older man.

Then he spoke with an effort—a few words of formal well-wishing. He did not go away however—and the conversation became fitful and meaningless.

Just as they started to go homeward, the figure I have already mentioned, and which had been watching the whole scene from a distance, unobserved, came forward. It proved to be Oswaldson's particular aversion, Tombs. Even his arrival was a relief. He looked from one to the other and laughed—gratingly and coarsely.

"If you are walking towards the West Cliff, I will come too—unless," here he pretended to notice Oswaldson for the first time, and with a look warned him not to claim previous acquaintance—"unless I am *de trop*. I'll clear out if you prefer it."

But Miss Bertha assured him they would be glad of his company—and paired off with him, leaving the other two to follow.

George retained but a vague recollection of that walk afterwards, he answered his companion's remarks wholly at random. There had been a mighty fall of hope, and he had not yet cleared his mind of the debris.

When they halted before the house, however, he heard Tombs say:

"Then you will be at the end of the road, just by that seat, at ten o'clock sharp. Now, don't fail!"

She laughed lightly.

"Oh, I always keep appointments. *Au revoir*."

With an aching sense of humiliation Oswaldson left them. He did not even say good-bye, nor glance back at the trim figure that paused for a moment in the gateway with a pitying, remorseful look at his slowly retreating form. I believe that at that moment Bertha Freeman was nearer to tears than she ever had been before, or was often likely to be again.

CHAPTER XXIII

A SOUL SAVED

The sun continued to beat on sea and shore—Bournemouth was making its fortune. The visitors idled, smoked, sewed, knitted, flirted, read, slept—all agreeing that summer was summer this year—just as if it had never been so before.

Through all the changes that the sun and moon brought to pass, George Oswaldson lay sleeping.

Tired with the heat, broken in soul and body, after a pretence at a meal, he flung himself on his bed, all dressed as he was, and fell into a heavy sleep, I myself the watcher of his slumbers.

If I had been the sole controller of his mind, with no one to oppose me and give him contrary advice, I could have filled his soul with dreams of vengeance, so that he would have wakened ready to seek out and slay the girl who had hurt him so sorely, but—always "but"—I had not only to contend against his natural tendencies, in themselves generous, but also against the advantage they offered to Sagatheela. I knew she was present, though I could not see her—the rubbing of the dark sandals on my feet conveyed a warning of peril.

No one came to arouse Oswaldson. In those happy, careless days he had fallen into the habit of having his supper left in the parlour, so that he took it when he happened to come in and felt inclined for it. He slept on, unmissed; and this is what he dreamed:

It seemed to him that, hastily putting on a Norfolk jacket and knickerbockers, without waiting to find a cap, he stepped out into the road and made for the cliff. Glancing at his watch he saw it was late—almost midnight. The solemn sound of a church clock filled him with a sudden indefinable dread, and he hurried on, almost expecting to find himself pursued by some one or something.

Drawn by an irresistible force, he descended St Joseph's Steps, all the while feeling sure that he was not alone, but followed by something evil. There was no one in sight, yet there was a sound of footsteps as if hundreds of people were running over the loose sands—running away from some great and terrible danger.

To his right the headland of Swanage jutted out, a towering height fringed with ragged rocks that glowed curiously in the moonlight, here a pointed naked crag, there a flat islet covered with shiny seaweed—and there again—merciful Heaven! some strange brown object half hidden in the water, like a great brown serpent waiting to strike. The cliff sides were seamed with precipices, and from each one a phosphorescent light showed forth grotesque shapes that made him shudder with their foulness. To the left the shores of Boscombe sloped away, and the sand gleamed yellow and unbroken.

Urged on by unseen hands, he went down to the water and stepped into a boat which was waiting. With nervous hands and apprehensive glances he seized the oars and shot out from the beach to the open sea.

Every object on the shores he passed stood out in the moonlight, magnified beyond recognition. St Joseph's Steps seemed alive with skeletons that gnashed their teeth after him, and fought and scrambled among themselves with sharp, cracking screams, for foothold on the slender ladder. Gradually the stars seemed to take shape, and hang in mid-air with demon faces; great rocks that were never here in the day-time sprang mysteriously from the sea and loomed ahead. The waves swelled, the wind increased, and howled in his ears, while the white spray hissed against the cliffs. Then followed thunder and lightning, while the whole sea boiled up like a great cauldron of whirlpools. There was full danger on all sides. Now he was balanced on the crest of an angry wave and menaced by the things that peopled the air—again he was down in the trough of the sea, in a yawning pit filled with horrors—and this not once but many times. Finally, he lost an oar; and flinging himself into the bow of the boat, covered his face, only to feel himself, and the frail craft with him, going down, down, into the cold water that tried to drown him and could not.

"Surely," he gasped, "death will be merciful and end my torture." As he spoke, the choking sensation vanished, and a sudden hush supervened, and the natural warmth of his limbs came back. A delicious half slumber fell upon him—he experienced a happiness as great as his previous misery. Visions of the most perfect kind—green valleys, fragrant flowers, glittering streams, gentle-faced girls singing and dancing and beckoning to him—filled all his imagination. He was lying on a bed of soft grass and daisies, near a rippling stream, and shaded by wonderful trees, where gay-plumaged birds fluttered and sang with a hundred different voices. As he looked, the waters of the stream appeared to collect in one spot, where they rose into a fountain tall as the trees and bright as new silver—and forth from the arch of it stepped a maiden of the most radiant and dazzling fairness.

Her eyes were so sweet and kind that he felt no fear, only admiration and an instant glow of love. He fell on his knees and begged her to take him for her knight, let him follow her, serve her, and above all, protect her from the men of the evil world. She smiled—oh, such a smile, and leaning forward, gently laid her hand on his forehead and smoothed back his hair. At her touch

the happiness of the gods flooded his soul, and he cried aloud for very love and joy—and at his cry there leaped into each face the spirit of recognition, and they saw in one another George Oswaldson and Bertha Freeman.

Recognition in her face gave place to pity—and a change took place; she was gone, and instead, in her place, with folded arms and changeless countenance, stood the Chief of the Brotherhood.

“To-morrow,” rang the metallic voice, “she dies! She is mine to love, mine to kill, and her soul is mine. Will you save her? To-morrow she dies!”

He raised his voice so that the woods and skies re-echoed it—and my client awoke with a start.

But the effect did not wear off. He heard a woman singing beneath his window:

“Honey, my honey—oh come, my love to me.”

He had met his love in dreamland and plighted his troth. Was she, then, to die? By Heavens, no! not if his life could save hers. His heart was full of the glory of impending sacrifice, and I knew again that Sagatheela was strong.

He sat lost in thought. Suddenly there flashed into his mind a dim recollection of an arrangement between Miss Freeman and “that hateful brute,” as he politely designated Tombs.

Now Tombs was a member of the Brotherhood, and for the work of the Brotherhood—ugh!—remained at Bournemouth. Also, Tombs was not a man to indulge in mere flirting with a girl like Bertha Freeman, neither susceptible enough to fall in love nor sensual enough to please his beastly nature; so why did he seek her company? Why, did he stay in Bournemouth at all. The Chief, George remembered, had handed Tombs also a packet. Of course it might contain his quarterly stipend, yet—somehow he did not think it did. There was only one other and most horrible alternative—Bertha Freeman elected for death by the will of the Chief—Tombs the chosen instrument!

The cry that burst from his lips summoned Sagatheela to his side, not me. Acting upon impulse—her influence, for mine was as nothing—he seized his hat and dashed madly from the room.

Desperate plans rushed through his mind as he hurried along the road, now filled with couples taking their after-supper constitutional. More than one turned to look at him, for such a pace was not customary in ease-loving Bournemouth on a night when it was almost too warm to go to bed, and the candles collapsed in their holders. At the foot of the road he collided with a choleric old gentleman, and heard a candid opinion of himself expressed in choice language. A few yards farther on he ran over a little boy. Feeling that in this case he had gone perilously near to a coroner’s inquest, and wishing to think without further mishaps, he crossed the road and sat down on a grassy eminence that overlooked the bay.

A silver path like the, wake of an unseen ship divided the dark water into two parts. Now and then a red or green light gleamed far out at sea, and the lamps were still twinkling on the promenade. But the pier was in darkness, and the pleasure-seekers were turning homewards. His thoughts were not in accordance with the peace of the night. He was trying hard to be calm, to act wisely—and among a host of more or less impracticable ideas, one alone stood out as feasible, and that only to be carried out if his cruel tormentor, Fortune, favoured him for once.

It required, at least, prompt action. With an earnest prayer to Heaven to help him, he sprang up, and incautiously stepping on a loose stone, slipped with a crash into the road, to the edification of a group of rowdy passers-by. But nobody offered to play the rôle of good Samaritan, so, a good deal shaken, but fortunately uninjured, he picked himself up, and made the best of his way to the West Cliffe Hotel.

The hotel porter eyed him superciliously, and Oswaldson, standing on the lowest step, weary, excited, and shrouded in white dust, with a rent in his nether garments, hardly presented an imposing appearance.

In answer to his enquiries for Mr Tombs, the porter looked him over carefully, wondering was he mad, or only drunk. “ ’Ere’s a go,” he soliloquised, “broken down and ’elf off ’is ’ead with beer, or may be trouble. A chap with such a phiz could do a murder, I reckon. It makes me creep.” Then aloud, “You wants to see him?”

Point number one scored for George. Tombs did live here.

“Is he in?” he asked eagerly.

“No, he ain’t—gone to the club like ’e always does, and won’t be back for ’alf an hour, I expect. Will you leave a message?”

“No, let me wait in his room. You needn’t look at me like that, I’m not a burglar, though I daresay I don’t appear very respectable. I came a bit of a sprawler in the road—tripped over a stone.”

Rather amused, and muttering something about a “balmy cove,” the porter led the way along the well-furnished hall and up the stairs to the second landing, when he knocked, “just to make sure,” as he said, at Room 42, and receiving no answer, ushered Oswaldson in.

My client’s heart beat fast as he looked round. It was a good-sized room, with bay-windows opening towards the sea. The bed stood in an alcove. The other furniture consisted of a few cane chairs, a round table covered with writing materials, a sofa littered with manuscripts, a few books, and a small black trunk bearing the initials T. T. in white lettering. The little clock on the mantelpiece showed that it was 11 P.M. Time was flying, and unless he could do something at once his visit was useless.

First, he wanted to get hold of the packet given to Tombs by the Chief. Would he leave it in his room? How was it to be recognised? for he had only had a glimpse of it. He remembered that Tombs had worn a Norfolk coat, and slipped the letter into the breast-pocket. Also he had noticed as a curious fact that the envelope was a bright yellow, an unusual colour that he believed he would know again. There was a Norfolk coat hanging on the door. He searched that first. Then with catlike steps and light fingers—expecting every moment to hear the door creak and to confront his enemy—he went through the pockets of other clothes and underlinen, and passing over nothing, not even collars, he thoroughly overhauled the chest of drawers. He glanced at the dock. Ten minutes were gone. There was a step in the corridor, it came nearer, it stopped at the door—then, oh, thank Heaven, moved on.

He turned to the trunk, the manuscripts, the papers on the table—no, it was nowhere to be seen. In despair he was about to give it up and quit the room when something he had not observed before, attracted his attention. It was a Bible. Mere curiosity and the oddity of the idea, led him to pick it up. It was ridiculously light for its size.

His eyes sparkled—it was a cunningly made dummy, after all. Five minutes of the half-hour he had counted on remained. He sought like a frenzied man for the opening. Two of the minutes elapsed before he discovered it. It swung open almost unexpectedly at last, and he had his reward. For, gleaming wickedly in the electric light, lay the light bright yellow packet.

He opened it quickly, transferred the contents to his own pocket, replacing the wrapper where he found it, and hurried out.

“I can’t wait any longer,” he told the porter. “Never mind any message, I’ll see Mr Tombs myself to-morrow.”

“All right, governor,” said the man sleepily.

Again Fate helped Oswaldson, for Tombs returned another way from the club, and they did not meet. George's flight home was even swifter than his exit. He locked himself into his room, and carefully spread out and perused the fatal sheet.

“EVERYWHERE YET NOWHERE.

“August 10, 19—

“To THOMAS TOMBS, Esq.,
“Member of the Brotherhood of the
Persecutors of Eve.

“By the will of Providence it is decreed that the next to fall under the vengeance of the Haters of Eve is Bertha Emma Freeman, youngest daughter of Thomas Freeman, M.D., of Sunny Oaks, Blackheath. This girl, young in years, is old in all the qualities which rendered her mother Eve abominable; and so is selected, through my humble instrumentality, to die the death. Learn then, O faithful servant, that she is to be found—in company with her equally accursed sister, who only awaits her turn—at the West Cliffe Hotel, Bournemouth.

“If thou hast indeed obeyed my will, and art in full sympathy with my influence, though miles may separate us, thou wilt have sought her out before this reaches thy hands.

“Learn, then, to know her well; exert thyself to please her, gain a foothold in her regard, flatter and increase her vanity. Profess to be wealthy—this goes far with all her sex. Take her out, treat her well—see thou hast no rival—then prepare the end.

“Over the heather that surmounts the hill above Dursley Chine there is a grey path—it leads to the brink of a precipice, full a hundred and fifty yards above the beach. If thou standest there, thy feet will be on a projecting ledge. Also, thou wilt be hid by two full-grown beeches, on either side, and screened from prying eyes. Is not the spot well chosen, my servant? Thou shalt bring this girl hither—openly, and in the morning, and of her own free will; force her not, rather wait her inclination. She is courageous enough, the edge will allure rather than repel her, and a very small touch will do the rest. Act with decision. Raise an instant alarm, be outspoken, helpful, and above all brokenhearted. Remember, she *would* not be restrained, she *would* see the cliff over the very edge for herself. A small bruise obtained in the useless effort to save her would serve thee well. Be wise, and there is no danger—and thou knowest where to find the gold that shall be paid to thee within the week.”

It was not signed. This was all. The cruelty and hatefulness of it was revealed to the man who sat there staring at the paper, too sick at heart to think of rest or sleep. For more than an hour he remained in the same despondent attitude, his chin resting on his hands, racking his brain for a chance of saving her.

At one moment it seemed to him that he should inform the police; yet he hesitated. It meant such hateful publicity, and again they would not believe his wild story, and act wisely and in time. No—he would try to see and warn the girl first.

Little sleep visited Oswaldson as he tossed uneasily on his bed all night. I slipped my hand from time to time over his forehead—it was burning. Hard as I struggled, and Diaphernes must have known it from my frequent appeals for aid—straining myself to my utmost, never leaving that bedside, Sagatheela was stronger still.

If I gained his ear for a moment, she would win his attention back the next. Her low laugh of happiness at each new advantage goaded me to fury.

When immortal meets immortal in such a struggle, such violence of force is used as would put to scorn the puny efforts of mere mortals. Yet no personal harm can be wrought, other than thrusting aside or hurling to a distance, for our flesh does not tear, nor our blood flow. We spirits fight for *time!*

So all my attacks on Sagatheela led to nothing more than brief temporary advantage—a gain of a few paltry moments. Throughout the night we plied each other sore—she prevailing.

It was not till seven o'clock that Oswaldson slept. Then nature gave in, and he did not open his eyes until a maid came to the door and told him that breakfast was nearly cold.

He sprang up with a start. How late it was, how much there was to do! He dressed, snatched a hurried morsel, with small regard for the laws of mastication, and set off for the Pendennis.

No sooner had he started than he became aware of a strange feeling of indecision. The Chief had used no idle threat; the power of that tremendous oath and that all-pervading influence was dragging at his soul once more.

He began to be sceptical about the use of his mission. What a fool he was to take all this trouble, to expose himself to this risk, for a girl who had played skittles with his heart merely *pour passer le temps*.

Why in the name of common sense should he do it? He remembered the Chief's certainty of his own methods—if the doom was so inevitable, why delay it? Why not let her die now—and get it over? It would be a d— good thing.

Just as he got to this last stage, I felt assured of victory, and leaped into the air with joy.

And I believe Oswaldson would have slunk sullenly homewards, assuring himself that it was no affair of his, when some perverse accident—or influence—showed him the figure of Bertha Freeman coming towards the gate, and looking, I doubt not, divinely fair in his eyes.

His simple unselfish love swelled up in a torrent and swept aside the current of mere will. I heard Sagatheela's soft laugh of content as he walked up straight to the girl.

“Miss Freeman, may I speak to you for a moment?”

She looked startled at his earnest tones, and wondered what he could have to say. Did he mean to accuse her of robbing him of a life's happiness—or merely to beg for her love? But she was a kind-hearted girl, and really sorry for the mischief she had thoughtlessly done—so in an unusually gentle manner she consented. At the sight of those blue eyes looking so kindly into his own, he grew hot and cold all over, he could hardly restrain a love appeal, and began muttering some incoherent some-things that made her wonder if the heat had affected his brain.

So long as she remained cool he was embarrassed, but when she got tired and a little cross, and rather sharply told him she had an appointment to keep, he found his cue, and broached the subject without any further to-do.

Miss Freeman, I heard you promise to meet Mr Tombs at 10.30,” he began, but she interrupted icily:

“Is not that my business, Mr Oswaldson?”

It was clear to her that he was suffering from a bad attack of jealousy; she had known men affected in that way before.

“I know it is, but forgive me, Miss Freeman, I only want to be of service to you. Don't—for God's sake, *don't* go out with him.”

The suspicion that his brain was turned *began* to make her uneasy. She saw a new expression in the eyes usually full of adoration of herself, misread it, and instinctively moved away *a few steps*.

“You think I am mad!” he cried, raising his cap to brush away the perspiration. “But you need not be afraid of me—it is he—that man Tombs—he will kill you.”

She was certain of his madness now, and felt faint and weak with fear. But with a great effort she made a show of composure and said, forcing a laugh:

“Aren’t you drawing it rather strong, Mr Oswaldson? I confess I have never discovered anything of the hired villain, the stage assassin—you know the sort of style—about Mr Tombs. In fact, I really don’t believe he would kill a fly.”

Most men when driven to extremes have a trump card to play. George Oswaldson had—it lay in his pocket. He quickly put the momentous letter into her hand, only saying:

“Please read that.”

She was on the point of doing so when a third person came upon the scene. It was Tombs himself.

A death-like silence fell on them. Bertha Freeman looked into the faces of the two men and realised that the fate of both lay in the paper she held. Tombs did not speak—but the expression in his eyes was one to make her tremble.

Hatred of Oswaldson—germinated at their first meeting and since developed into a full-grown, dominating passion, terror of discovery—for he was a coward and suffered from the craven, abject fear to which only such natures as his descend; rage at finding himself balked on the verge of success, all sufficed to turn Tombs into a pitiful object enough. He stood and cringed, he lost alike self-control and self-respect—and when at last he spoke, it was to give himself utterly away.

“Have you read it, Miss Freeman?” he asked, his voice shaking.

“Not yet. Does it refer to you?” The girl was herself again, and faced him dauntlessly, her words ringing with a scorn that made him wince.

He put aside her question with another.

“Did he say so?”

“If you mean my friend Mr Oswaldson, he did.”

George’s heart leaped at the way she said “my friend.” Oh, it was well worth it—he could die gladly now, thinking of the look she gave him.

“I did,” he said, and the men confronted each other. “I not only said that it referred to you, but I explained something of the contents.”

Tombs’ sinister face went ash-colour.

“You stole it from my room last night?”

“Well—yes, I did!” He could even smile.

“Do you know you are a thief?” blustered Tombs.

“Then, don’t you think you had better give me in charge?”

Oswaldson went up in the girl’s estimation; he was a finer fellow than she had thought, and had evidently risked a good deal for her sake. The paper almost burned her fingers; with a woman’s curiosity she longed to make herself acquainted with the strange secret it evidently contained. Tombs only answered Oswaldson’s question with an oath. This was George’s chance.

“Kindly remember you are in the presence of a lady,” he said. “If you swear again I shall think of referring the matter to the police.”

“You will have some difficulty in finding them.”

“I assure you they will be found quite soon enough for you.”

“What do you insinuate?”

But several people were stopping in the road to find out the cause of the altercation. Bertha scarcely knew what to do. She was too keenly interested in the matter to waive the issue. On the other hand, things were assuming an ugly aspect, with danger of publicity.

“I think, gentlemen,” she said, “I am entitled to an explanation. Supposing then, since we are no longer alone, we adjourn our meeting to the beach.”

Oswaldson acquiesced; but not so Tombs. As far as he was concerned, the game was up, and the sooner he left Bournemouth the better, so he trimmed his course accordingly.

“I do not wish to quarrel with any one, Miss Freeman, least of all with you,” he said in well-oiled accents. “I only came to tell you how sorry I was to cancel the appointment. Urgent business makes it necessary that I leave at once for London. Will you kindly pardon me?”

The girl was convinced; she nodded coldly, and without noticing his outstretched hand, addressed herself to George.

“Will you see me to the town, Mr Oswaldson?”

Before he could speak, Tombs struck in:

“I should like to have my letter, please, Miss Freeman. It can hardly interest you; besides, it is my private property, taken from my room in my absence by this gentleman.”

The sneering emphasis on the last word, coupled with a warning glance from Oswaldson, decided her. She refused point-blank.

Whether it was intentional or not I cannot tell, but Tombs certainly did raise his fist with all the appearance of a threat. Before he could lower it again, a hand clutched the collar of his coat, and he heard the quiet, stern command of the man he hated.

“Go away! And if you ever show yourself here again, it will be the worse for you. Also, you may tell the Chief that George Oswaldson is no longer one of his precious Brotherhood.”

This ended the matter as far as Tombs was concerned. An hour later he was speeding on his way to London, *minus* the letter, and with black rage gnawing at his vitals.

As for Oswaldson, he spent three hours in paradise that morning; and had it not been for the arrival of a young man in flannels whom she greeted as “Tom,” Bertha Freeman might have done something rash. As it was, they only parted with a pressure of the hands that meant a sincere and well-understood friendship.

* * *

And so my mission ended—in failure. My sandals gave me no more time, and with my tale of defeat, I was borne back speedily whence I came. Nevertheless, I have heard since that the Brotherhood was not to be robbed of its vengeance.

The steerage passengers on the outward-bound S.S. *Bristol*, lost one of their number overboard, on a dark night when the sea was running high. The only man near him at the time of the accident told a simple and probable story of vertigo induced by seasickness, and neither the captain nor any one else saw any reason to doubt his word.

But the immortal soul of George Oswaldson did not come into my keeping.