

CHAPTER XVI

TWO VISITORS

Instinctively Ella drew closer to Jack, nestling at his side, as if for the sake of the near neighbourhood. Graham advanced towards Madge, placing himself just at her back, with a something protective in his air—as if he designed to place himself in front of her at an instant's warning. While Ballingall moved farther towards the window, with that in his bearing which curiously suggested the bristling hairs of the perturbed and anxious terrier. And all was still—with that sort of silence which is pregnant with meaning.

Without in the stillness, there could be plainly heard the fumbling of the latchkey, as if some one, with unaccustomed hands, was attempting to insert it in the door. Presently, the aperture being found, and the key turned, the door was opened. Some one entered the house; and, being in, the door was shut—with a bang which seemed to ring threateningly through the little house, causing the listeners to start. Some one moved, with uncertain steps, along the passage. A grasp was laid from without on the handle of the sitting-room door. They saw it turn. The door opened—while those within, with one accord, held their breath. And there entered as strange and pitiful a figure as was ever seen.

It was the “ghost's wife,” the woman who had so troubled Madge, who had done her best that afternoon to keep her outside the house. She was the saddest sight in her parti-coloured rags, the dreadful relics of gaudy fripperies.

When they saw it was her, there was a simultaneous half-movement, which never became a whole movement, for it was stopped at its initiatory stage—stopped by something which was in the woman's face, and by the doubt if she was alone.

On her face—her poor, dirty, degraded, wrinkled face—which was so pitifully thin there was nothing left of it but skin and bone, there was a look which held them dumb. It was a look like nothing which any of them had ever seen before. It was not only that it was a look of death—for it was plain that the outstretched fingers of the angel already touched her brow; but it was the look of one who seemed to see beyond the grave—such a look as we might fancy on the face of the dead in that sudden shock of vision which, as some tell us, comes in the moment after death.

She was gazing straight in front of her, as if at some one who was there; and she said, in the queerest, shakiest voice:

“So, Tom, you've brought me home at last. I'm glad to be at home again. Oh, Tom!” This last with the strangest catching in her throat. She looked about her with eyes that did not see. “It seems a long time since I was at home. I thought I never should come back—never! After all, there's nothing to a woman like her home—nothing, Tom.” Again there was that strange catching. “You've brought me a long way—a long, long way. To think that you should see me in the Borough—after all these years—and should bring me right straight home. I wondered, if ever you did see me, if you'd bring me home—Tom. Only I wish—I wish you'd seen me before. I'm—a little tired now.

She put her hand up to her face with a gesture which suggested weariness which was more than mortal, and which only eternal rest could soothe—her hand in what was once a glove. When she removed it there was something in her eyes which showed that she had suddenly attained to at least a partial consciousness of her surroundings. She looked at the two girls and the two men grasped together on her right, with, at any rate, a perception that they were there.

“Who—who are these people? Whoever you are, I’m glad to see you; this is a great night with me. I’ve seen my husband for the first time for years and years, and he’s brought me home with him again—after all that time. This is my husband—Tom.”

She held out her hand, as if designating with it some one who was in front of her. They, on their part, were silent, spellbound, uncertain whether the person to whom and of whom she spoke with so much confidence might not be present, though by them unseen.

“It’s a strange homecoming, is it not? And though I’m tired—oh, so tired!—I’m glad I’m home again. To this house he brought me when we were married—didn’t you, Tom? In this house my baby was born—wasn’t it, Tom? And here it died.” There came a look into her face which, for the moment, made it beautiful; to such an extent is beauty a matter of expression. “My dear little baby It seems only the other day when I held it in my arms. It’s as if the house were full of ghosts—isn’t it, Tom?”

Her eyes wandered round the room, as if in search of some one or of something, and presently they lighted upon Mr. Ballingall. As they did so, the whole expression of her countenance was changed; it assumed a look of unspeakable horror.

“Charles Ballingall!” she gasped. “Tom—Tom, what is he doing here?”

She stretched out her hands, seeming to seek for protection from the some one who was in front of her—repeating the other’s name as if involuntarily, as though it were a thing accursed.

“Charles Ballingall!”

Slowly, inch by inch, her glance passed from the shrinking vagabond, until it stayed, seeming to search with an eager longing the face of the one who was before her in the apparently vacant air.

“Tom!—what’s he doing here? Tom! Tom! don’t look at me like that! Don’t, Tom—for God’s sake, don’t look at me like that!” She broke into sudden volubility, every word a cry of pain. “Tom, I’m—I’m your wife! You—you brought me home! Just now!—from the Borough!—all the way!—all the long, long way—home! Tom!”

The utterance of the name was like a scream of a wounded animal in its mortal agony.

The four onlookers witnessed an extraordinary spectacle. They saw this tattered, drabbed remnant of what was once a woman, whose whole appearance spoke of one who tottered on the very borders of the grave, struggling with the frenzy of an hysterical despair with the visitant from the world of shades who, it was plain to her, if not to others, was her companion—the husband whom, with such malignant cruelty and such persistent ingratitude, she had wronged so long ago. She had held out her hands, her treacherous hands, seeking to shelter them in his; and it seemed as if, for a moment, he had suffered them to stay, and that now, since she had realised the presence of her associate in sin, unwilling to retain them any more in his, he sought to thrust them from him; while she, perceiving that what she had supposed to be the realisation of hopes which she had not even dared to cherish was proving but a chimera, and the fruit which she was already pressing to her lips but an Apple of Sodom, strained every nerve to retain the hold of the hands whose touch had meant to her almost an equivalent to an open door to Paradise. With little broken cries and gasping supplications, she writhed and twisted as she strove to keep her grasp.

“Tom! Tom! Tom!” she exclaimed, over and over again. “You brought me home! you brought me home! Don’t put me from you! Tom! Tom! Tom!”

It seemed that the struggle ended in her discomfiture, and that the hands which she had hoped would draw her forward had been used to thrust her back; for, staggering backwards as if she had been pushed, she put her palms up to her breasts and panted, staring like one distraught.

By degrees, regaining something of her composure, she turned and looked at Ballingall, with a look before which he cowered, actually raising his arm as if warding off a blow. And, when she had breath enough, she spoke to him, in a whisper, as if her strength was gone.

“What are you doing here?”

Ballingall hesitated, looking about him this way and that as if seeking for some road of retreat. Finding none, making a pitiful effort to gather himself together, he replied to her question in a voice which was at once tremulous and sullen.

“Tom asked me to come. You know, Tom, you asked me to come.”

He stretched out his arm with a gesture which was startling, as if to him also the woman’s companion was a reality. There was silence. He repeated his assertion, still with his outstretched arm.

“You know, Tom, you asked me to come.”

Then there happened the most startling thing of all. Some one laughed. It was a man’s laugh—low, soft, and musical. But there was about it this peculiar quality—it was not the merriment of one who laughs with, but of one who laughs at; as though the laugher was enjoying thoroughly, with all his heart, a jest at another’s expense. Before it the man and woman cowered, as if beneath a rain of blows.

After it ceased they were still. It was plain that the woman was ashamed, disillusioned, conscious that she had been made a butt of; and that, in spite of all appearances to the contrary, she was still among the hopeless, the outcast, the condemned. She glanced furtively towards the companion of her shame; then more quickly still away from him, as if realising only too well that, in that quarter, there was no promise of hope rekindled. And she said, with choking utterance:

“Tom, I never thought—you’d laugh at me. Did you bring—me home—for this?”

She put up her hands, in their dreadful gloves, to her raddled, shrunken face, and stood, for a moment, still. Then her frame began to quiver, and she cried; and as she cried there came that laugh again.

The note of mockery that was in it served to sting Ballingall into an assertion of such manhood as was in him. He clenched his fists, drew himself straighter, and, throwing back his head, faced towards where the laughter seemed to stand.

“Tom,” he said, “I’ve used you ill. We’ve both of us used you ill, both she and I—she’s been as false a wife to you as I’ve been friend. Our sins have been many—black as ink, bitter as gall. We know it, both of us. We’ve had reason to know it well. But, Tom, consider what our punishment has been. Look at us—at her, at me. Think of what we were, and what we are. Remember what it means to have come to this from that. Every form of suffering I do believe we’ve known—of mind and of body too—she in her way, and I in mine. We’ve been sinking lower and lower and lower, through every form of degradation, privation, misery, until at last we’re in the ditch—amidst the slime of the outer ditch. We’ve lost all that there is worth having, so far as life’s concerned, for ever. The only hope that is left us is the hour in which it is appointed that we shall die. For my part, my hope is that for me that hour is not far off. And, as I’m a living man, I believe that for her it has already come; that the scythe is raised to reap; that she’s dying where she stands. Have you no bowels of compassion, Tom—none? You used to have. Are they all dried and withered? There’s forgiveness for sinners, Tom, with God; is there none with you? You used to be of those who forgive till seventy times seven; are you now so unforgiving? You may spurn me, you may trample on me, you may press my head down into the very slime of the ditch; you know that these many months you’ve torn and racked me with all the

engines of the torture chambers: but she's your wife, Tom—she was your wife! you loved her once! She bore to you a little child—a little baby, Tom, a little baby! It's dead—with God, Tom, with God! She's going to it now—now, now! While she's passing into the very presence chamber, where her baby is, don't abase her, Tom. Don't, Tom, don't!"

He threw out his arms with a gesture of such frenzied entreaty, and his whole figure was so transformed by the earnestness, and passion, and pathos, and even anguish with which he pressed his theme, that at least the spectators were cut to the heart

"I know not," he cried, "whether you are dead or living, or whether I myself am mad or sane—for, indeed, to me of late the world has seemed all upside down. But this I know, that I see you and that you see me, and if, as I suppose, you come from communion with the Eternal, you must know that, in that Presence, there is mercy for the lowest—for the chief of sinners! There is mercy, Tom, I know that there is mercy! Therefore I entreat you to consider, Tom, the case of this woman—of she who was your wife, the mother of your child. She has paid dearly for her offence against you—paid for it every moment of every hour of every day of every year since she offended. Since then she has been continually paying. Is not a quittance nearly due—from you, Tom? If blood is needed to wash out her guilt, she has wept tears of blood. If suffering—look at her and see how she has suffered. And now, even as I stand and speak to you, she dies. She bears her burden to the grave. Is she to add to it, still, the weight of your resentment? That will be the heaviest weight of all. Beneath it, how shall she stagger to the footstool of her God? All these years she has lived in hell. Don't—with your hand, Tom!—now she's dying, thrust her into hell, for ever. But put her hand in yours, and bear her up, and stay her, Tom, and lead her to the throne of God. If she can say that you've forgiven her, God will forgive her too. And then she'll find her baby, Tom."

It was a strange farrago of words which Ballingall had strung together, but the occasion was a strange one too. His earnestness, in which all was forgotten save his desire to effect his purpose, seemed to cast about them a halo as of sanctity. It was almost as if he stood there, pleading for a sinner, in the very Name of Christ—the great Pleader for all great sinners.

The woman, this latest Magdalene, did as that first Magdalene had done, she fell on her knees and wept—tears of bitterness.

"Tom! Tom!" she cried. "Tom! Tom!"

But he to whom she cried did not do as the Christ, the Impersonation of Divine Mercy, did. Christ wept with the sinners. He to whom she pleaded laughed at her. And, beneath his laughter, she crouched lower and lower, till she lay almost prostrate on the floor; and her body quivered as if he struck her with a whip.

Ballingall, as if he could scarcely credit the evidence of his own senses, started back and stared, as though divided between amazement and dismay. Under his breath, he put a singular inquiry—the words seeming to be wrung from him against his will.

"Tom!—Are you a devil?"

And it seemed as if an answer came. For he stood in the attitude of one who listens, and the muscles of his face worked as if what was being said was little to his mind. A dogged look came into his eyes, and about his mouth. He drew himself further back, as if retreating before undesired advances. Words came sullenly from between his teeth.

"No, Tom, no—I want none of that. It isn't that I ask; you know it isn't that."

It appeared as if the overtures made by the unseen presence, unwelcome though they were, were being persisted in. For Ballingall shook his head, raising his hands as if to put them from

him, conveying in his bearing the whole gamut of dissent; breaking, at last, into exclamations which were at once defiant, suppliant, despairing.

“No, Tom, no! I don’t want your fortune. You know I don’t! All this time you’ve been dangling it before my eyes, and all the time it’s been a will-o’-the-wisp, leading me deeper and deeper into the mire. I was unhappy enough when first you came to me and spoke of it—but I’ve been unhappier since, a thousand times. You might have let me have it at the beginning, if you’d chosen—but you didn’t choose. You used it to make of me a mock, and a gibe—your plaything—whipping boy! To-night the lure of it has only served as a means to bring us here together—she and I!—when you know I’d rather have gone a hundred miles barefooted to hide from her my face. I don’t know if there is a fortune hidden in this house or not, and I don’t care if behind its walls are concealed the riches of Golconda. I’ll have none of it—it’s too late! too late! I’ve asked you for what I’d give a many fortunes, and you’ve laughed at me. You’ll not show, by so much as a sign, that you forgive her—now, at this eleventh hour. There’s nothing else of yours I’ll have.”

In reply, there came again that quiet laughter, with in it that curious metallic quality, which seemed to act on the quivering nerves of the two sin-stained, wayworn wretches as if it had been molten metal. At the sound of it they gave a guilty start, as if the ghosts of all their sins had risen to scourge them.

From her demeanour, the laughter, diverting his attention from Ballingall, had apparently turned to address the woman. In accents which had grown perceptibly weaker since her first entering, she essayed to speak.

“Yes, Tom, I’ll get up. If you wish me, Tom, of course I will. I’m—tired, Tom—that’s all.”

She did get up, in a fashion which demonstrated she was tired. The process of ascension was not the work of a moment, and when she had regained her feet, she swung this way and that, like a reed in the wind. It was only by what seemed a miracle that she did not fall.

“Don’t be angry—I’m tired—Tom—that’s all.”

In her voice there was a weariness unspeakable.

Something, it seemed, was said to her—from which, as Ballingall had done, only in her feebler way, she expressed dissent.

“I don’t want your money, Tom. It’s so good of you; it’s like you used to be, kind and generous. You always did give me lots of money, Tom. But—I don’t want money—
—not now, Tom, not now.”

Something else was said, which stung her, for she clasped her hands in front of her, with a movement of pain.

“I—didn’t wish to make you angry, Tom—I’m—sure I didn’t. Don’t speak to me and look at me like that, don’t, Tom, don’t! You don’t know how it hurts me, now—that I’m so tired. I’ll go and fetch your money if you wish me—of course I will, if—you’ll show me—where it is. I’ll go at once. Upstairs? Yes, Tom—I don’t think I’m—too tired to go upstairs, if—you’ll come with me. Yes, Tom—I’m—going—now.”

The woman turned towards the door hastily.

With a swift, eager gesture, in which there was something both mysterious and secretive, Ballingall addressed the four onlookers, the spellbound spectators of this, perhaps, unparalleled experience in the regions of experimental psychology. He spoke beneath his breath, hurriedly, hoarsely, with fugitive sidelong glances, as if before all things he was anxious that what he said should be heard by them alone.

“He’s going to show her where the fortune is!”

The woman opened the door.

CHAPTER XVII

THE KEY TO THE PUZZLE

He stood, for a second, with the handle of the open door in her grasp—as if she was glad of its support to aid her stand. Then, with a quick glance backwards, as of pleading to the one who exercised over her so strange a spell, she tottered from the room. She continued speaking as she went, as if deprecating the other's wrath.

"I shall be all right—in a moment—if you don't—hurry me at first. I'm only slow because—I'm a little tired. It'll soon go, this tired feeling, Tom—and I'll be sure—to be quicker when it's gone.

Ballingall hung back as she passed from the room, seeming, from his attitude, to be in two minds whether to follow her at all. The others, as if taking their cue from him, seemed hesitating too—until Madge, with head thrown back, and fists hanging clenched at her sides, went after her through the door. Then they moved close on Madge's heels—Bruce Graham in front, Ballingall bringing up the rear.

The woman was staggering up the stairs, with obvious unwillingness—and, also, with more than sufficient feebleness. It was with difficulty she could lift her feet from step to step. Each time she raised her foot she gave a backward lurch, which threatened to precipitate her down the whole of the distance she had gained.

Madge's impulse was to dash forward, put her arms about the unfortunate creature's wrist and, if she needs must go forward, bear her bodily to the top of the stairs. But although, at the pitiful sight which the woman presented, her fingers tingled and her pulses throbbed, she was stayed from advancing to proffer her the assistance which she longed to render by the consciousness, against which she strove in vain, that between the woman and herself there was a something which not only did she dare not pass, but which she dare not even closely approach. Over and over again she told herself that it was nonsense—but a delusion born of the woman's diseased and conscience-haunted brain. There was absolutely nothing to be seen; and why should she, a healthy-minded young woman, suffer herself to be frightened by the vacant air? But in spite of all her efforts at self-persuasion, she allowed a considerable space to continue to exist between herself and the trembling wretch upon the stairs.

Slowly the queer procession advanced—the woman punctuating, as it were, with her plaintive wailings every step she took.

"Tom! Tom! Tom!" She continually repeated the name, with all the intonations of endearment, supplication, reproach, and even terror. To hear her was a liberal education in the different effects which may be produced by varieties of emphasis.

"Don't hurry me! I'm—going as quickly as I can. I—shall soon be at the top! It's so—so steep—a staircase—Tom."

At last the top was reached. She stood upon the landing, clinging to the banisters as she gasped for breath. Her figure swayed backward and forward, in so ominous a fashion that, halfway up the staircase, almost involuntarily Madge stretched out her arms to catch her if she fell. But she did not fall—nor was she allowed much time to recover from her exertions.

"I'm going—if—you'll let me—rest—for just one moment—Tom. Where do you wish me to go?"

It seemed as if her question was answered, for she gave a shuddering movement towards the wall, and burst into a passion of cries.

“No, Tom—not there! not there! not there! Don’t make me go into our bedroom—not into our bedroom!”

The command which had been given her was apparently repeated, for, drawing herself away from the wall, she went with new and shuddering haste along the passage.

“I’m—I’m going! Only—have mercy—have mercy on me, Tom! I don’t wish to anger you, only have mercy, Tom!”

The bedroom in front of the house was the one which was occupied by Ella. It was towards this room that the woman was moving with hurried, tremulous steps. Her unwillingness to advance was more marked than before, and yet she seemed urged by something which was both in front and behind her, which she was powerless to resist. They could see she shuddered as she went; and she uttered cries, half of terror, half of pain.

And yet she advanced with a decision, and a firmness, and also a rapidity, which was unlike anything she hitherto had shown. On the threshold of the room she stopped, starting back, and throwing out her hands in front of her.

“It’s our bedroom, Tom—it’s full of ghosts! Ghosts! Ghosts! Don’t make me go into the bedroom, Tom.”

But the propelling force, whatever it might have been, was beyond her power to withstand. She gave a sudden, exceeding bitter cry. Turning the handle, she flung the door right back upon its hinges. With a peal of laughter, which grated on the ears of those who heard almost more than anything which had gone before, she staggered into the room. As she disappeared they stopped, listening, with faces which had suddenly grown whiter, to her strange merriment.

“This is our bedroom—ha! ha! ha!—where you brought me when we were first married! Why, Tom, how many years is it since I was here? Ha, ha, ha!—I never thought I should come back to our bedroom, Tom—never! Ha, ha, ha!”

All at once there was a change in her tone—a note of terror. The laughter fled with the dreadful suddenness with which it had come.

“Don’t, Tom. Don’t! Have mercy—mercy! I’ll do as you wish me—you know I will; I’ll—get your money. Only—I didn’t know—you kept it—in our bedroom—Tom. You didn’t use to.”

So soon as the laughter, fading, was exchanged for that panic cry, Madge hurried after her into the room—the others, as ever, hard upon her heels. The woman stood in the centre of the floor, looking about her with glances of evident bewilderment, as if seeking for something she had been told to look for. She searched in vain. Her eagerness was pitiful. She looked hither and thither, in every direction, as if urged to the search, she feared, in speechless agony, the penalties of disobedience. All the while she kept giving short, sharp cries of strained and frenzied fear.

“I’m looking! I’m looking, Tom, as hard as I can, but—I see nothing—nothing, Tom! I’m doing as you tell me—I am—I am—I am! Oh, Tom, I am! But I don’t see your money—I don’t! I don’t! If you’ll show me where it is, I’ll get it; but I see nothing of your money, Tom! Where is it?—Here!”

She moved towards the wash-hand stand, which was at the side of the room.

“Behind the washstand?”

She lifted the piece of furniture on one side with a degree of strength of which, light though it was, one would not have thought that she was capable. Getting behind it, she placed against the wall her eager, trembling hand.

“But—your money isn’t here. There’s nothing but the wall. Take the paper off the wall? But—how am I to do it?—With my fingers!—I can’t tear off with my fingers, Tom. Oh, Tom, I’ll try! Don’t speak to me like that—I’ll try!”

With feverish haste she dragged the apologies for gloves off her quivering hands.

“Where shall I tear it off?—Here? Yes, Tom, I’ll try to tear it off just here.”

Dropping on her knees she attacked with her nails the wall where, while she remained in that posture, it was about the height of her head—endeavouring to drive the edges through the paper, and to pick it off, as children do.

But her attempts were less successful than are the efforts of the average ingenious child.

“I can’t, Tom, I can’t! My fingers are not strong enough, and my nails are broken—don’t be angry with me, Tom.”



“I can’t, Tom, I can’t! My fingers are not strong enough, and my nails are broken—don’t be angry with me, Tom!”

She made frantic little dabs at the wall. But her endeavours to make an impression on the paper were without result. It was plain that with her unassisted nails she might continue to peck at it in vain for ever.

Madge turned to Mr. Graham.

“Have you a pocket-knife?”

Without a word he took one from his waistcoat pocket.

Not waiting for him to open it, she took it from him with an action which almost amounted to a snatch. With her own fingers she opened the largest blade. Making a large, and under the circumstances curious circuit, in order to reach her, leaning over the washstand, touching the woman on the shoulder, she held out to her the knife.

Shrinking under Madge’s finger, with an exclamation she looked round to see who touched her “Take this,” said Madge. “It’s a knife. With its help you’ll be better able to tear the paper off the wall.”

She took it—without a word of thanks, and, with it in her grasp, returned to the attack with energies renewed.

“I’ve got a knife, Tom, I’ve got a knife. Now I’ll get the paper off quicker—much quicker. I’ll soon get to your money, Tom.”

But she did not get to it. On the contrary, the process of stripping off the paper did not proceed much more rapidly than before, even with the help of Mr. Graham’s knife. It was with the greatest difficulty that she was able to get off two or three square inches.

The disappearance, however, of even this small portion revealed the fact that the paperhanger who had been responsible for putting it into place, instead of stripping off the previous wall covering, as paperhangers are supposed to do, had been content, to save himself what he had, perhaps, deemed unnecessary trouble, to paste this latest covering on the previous one. This former paper appeared to have been of that old-fashioned kind which used to be popular in the parlours of country inns, and such-like places, and which was wont to be embellished with “pictorial illustrations.” The scraping off, by the woman, of the small fragments of paper which she had succeeded in removing, showed that the one beneath it seemed to have been ornamented with more or less striking representations of various four-footed animals. On the space laid bare were figures of what might have been meant for anything; and which, in the light of the last line on Mr. Ballingall’s manuscript, were probably intended for cats and dogs.

With these the woman was fumbling with hesitating, awkward fingers.

“Cat—dog? I don’t—I don’t understand, Tom—I see, Tom,—these are the pictures of cats and dogs. I’m blind, and stupid, and slow. I ought to have seen at once what they were?—I know I ought. But—be patient with me, Tom. Which one?—This one? Yes, I see—this one. It’s—it’s—yes, Tom, it’s a dog’s head, I see it is.—What am I to do with it? Press?—Yes, Tom, I am pressing.—Press harder? Yes, I’ll—I’ll try; but I’m—I’m not very strong, and I can’t press much harder. Have mercy!—have mercy, Tom! Say—say you forgive me—forgive me! but I—I can’t press harder, Tom—I can’t!”

She could not—so much was plain. Even as the words were passing from her lips, she relinquished pressing altogether. Uttering a little throbbing cry, she turned away from the wall, throwing up her arms with a gesture of entreaty, and sinking on to the floor, she lay there still. As she dropped, that gentle, mocking laugh rang through the startled room.

CHAPTER XVIII

MADGE APPLIES MORE STRENGTH

Was it imagination? Or was it fact? Did some one or something really pass from the room, causing in going a little current of air? With startled faces each put to the other an unspoken query.

Which none answered.

The woman lay there, motionless, her exceeding stillness seeming accentuated by the sudden silence which filled the room. Bruce Graham, moving forward, took her up in his arms, as if she were but a feather's weight. His knife fell from her nerveless fingers, tumbling to the floor with startling clatter. Madge picked it up. Her voice rang out with clarion clearness—the voice of a woman whose nerves were tense as fiddle-strings.

"I'll see if I cannot press harder. This mystery must be solved to-night—before some of us go mad; if pressing will do it, it shall soon be done—if there's strength in me at all."

There was strength in her—and not a little.

She went on her knees where the woman had been; and, as she had done, fumbled with her fingers where the paper had been scraped from the wall, peering closely at it, as she did so.

"A dog's head, is it?—it doesn't look as if it were a dog's head to me, and that's not because I'm stupid. It's to be pressed, is it?—Well, if pressing will do it, here's for pressing!"

She exerted all her force against the point to which the woman had been directed.

"It gives! It gives!—something gives beneath my thumb: it's the knob of a spring or something—I'm sure of it."

Turning, she looked up at Graham with flaming cheeks and flashing eyes.

"The spring is sure to be rusty. It will need all your strength. Try it again.

She tried again.

"It does give—it does! But whatever it is supposed to open is not likely to act now that the wall has been repapered. Some one go and fetch the hammer and the chisel from downstairs—we'll try another way."

She glanced at Jack, as if intending the suggestion to apply to him. But Ella clung to his arm, which perhaps prevented him from moving with the speed which might have been expected.

"Will no one go?" cried Madge. "Why, then, I'll go myself."

But that Bruce Graham would not permit. Swiftly depositing his still unconscious burden on Ella's bed, he went in search of the required tools, returning almost as soon as he had gone.

"I think, Miss Brodie, that perhaps you had better allow me to try my hand. I am stronger than you."

She gave way to him unhesitatingly.

"Drive the chisel into the wall and see if it is hollow."

He did as she bade him. A couple of blows put the thing beyond a doubt. The chisel disappeared up to the hilt through what was evidently but an outer shell. Madge continued to issue her instructions.

Break the wall in! It's no use fumbling with dogs' head in search of hidden springs—with us it's a case of the shortest road's the best. Whatever's inside that wall has been there long enough to excuse us if we're a little neglectful of ceremonious observances."

In a few minutes the wall was broken in, the ancient woodwork offering no resistance to Bruce Graham's vigorous onslaught. A cavity was made large enough to thrust one's head in. Madge stopped him.

"That'll do—for the present! Now let's see what there is inside!"

She went down on her knees the better to enable her to see, Graham moving aside to give her room. She thrust her fair young face as far into the opening as she could get it—only to discover that she was obscuring her own light. Out it came again.

"Give me a light—a match, or something. It's as dark as pitch in there."

Graham gave her a box of matches. Striking one, she introduced it into what was as the heart of the wall.

"There is something in there!"

She dropped the match. Fortunately it went out as it fell.

"It's the hidden fortune!"

She gave a gasp. Then in an instant she was on her feet and was hastening towards the recumbent figure on the bed.

The woman still lay motionless. Madge, bending down, caught her by the shoulder, forgetful of all in her desire to impart the amazing news.

"Your husband's fortune's in the wall—we've found it there."

Something on the woman's face, in her utter stillness, seemed to fill her with new alarm. She called to the others.

"Ella!—Mr. Graham! Jack!" Her voice sank to a whisper; there was a catching of her breath. "Is she dead?"

They came hastening towards her. Jack Martyn, stopping halfway, looking round, startled them with a fresh inquiry, to which he himself supplied the answer.

"By George!—I say!—where's Ballingall?—Why, he's gone!"

CHAPTER XIX

THE WOMAN AND THE MAN

Yes—the woman was dead. Ballingall had gone—and the fortune was found.

Put in that way, it was a curious sequence of events.

Indeed, put in any way, there could be no doubt about the oddity of the part which the woman had played.

Medical examination clearly showed that death had come to her from natural causes. She must, the doctor said, have been within a hand's breadth of death for, at any rate, the last twelve months. He declared that every vital organ was hopelessly diseased. Asked if the immediate cause of death was shock, he replied that there was nothing whatever in the condition of the body which could be regarded as supporting such a theory. In his opinion, the woman had burned out, like a candle, which, when it is all consumed, dies. Nothing, in his judgment, could have retarded the inevitable end; just as there was nothing to suggest that it came one instant sooner than might, in the natural course, have been expected.

That was what the doctor said in public, at the coroner's inquest.

He listened to them when, in private, they told him the strange story of the night's adventure, pronouncing at the conclusion an opinion which contained in it the essence of all wisdom, for it might be taken any way. The gist of it was this. Very probably for some time before her death,

the woman had been light-headed. When people are lightheaded they suffer from hallucinations. It was quite possible that, in her case, those hallucinations had taken the form—literally—of her injured husband. It was on record that hallucinations had taken form, in similar cases. It was a perfectly feasible and reasonable theory which supposed that the woman, wandering, a homeless outcast, in the streets of London, delirious, premonitions of her approaching dissolution being borne in upon her in spite of her delirium, would turn her dying footsteps towards her one-time home, to which, as her behaviour in forcing herself on Madge plainly showed, her thoughts had recently returned. Nor, under the circumstances, was there anything surprising in her delusion that her husband had led her there.

It was when asked to explain how it was that she had hit upon the hiding-place of her husband's fortune—hit upon it, as it seemed, altogether against her will, that the doctor became oracular. But even here he was not without his hints as to the direction in which an explanation might be found.

He pointed out that our study of the science of mental psychology was still in its infancy. But, even so far as it had gone, it seemed to suggest the possibility of what has come to be called telepathic communication between two minds—even when the whilom owner of one of the minds has passed beyond the confines of the grave. This sounded a trifle abstruse. But as the doctor professed his inability to put it any clearer, they had to take his statement as it stood, and make out just as much of it as they were able.

As for Ballingall's pretensions to having shared the woman's hallucination—if hallucination it was—the doctor pooh-poohed them altogether. The man was as mad as the woman, and madder; and an impudent rogue to boot. Where was he? Let him come forward, and allow himself and his statements to be scientifically tested. Then it would be shown what reliance could be placed on anything which he might say.

But where Ballingall was, was exactly the problem which they found insoluble. He had vanished as completely as if he had never existed. The presumption was, that while they had been absorbed in watching Madge's efforts to carry on the work of discovery from the point at which the woman had left it, he had sneaked, unnoticed, from the room and from the house. The curious feature was that they were unable to agree as to the exact moment at which he could have gone. Bruce Graham declared that he was in the room when he went to fetch the hammer and chisel, and that he was still there when he returned. Madge protested that he was in the room when she ran across to the recumbent figure on Ella's bed. If so, since Jack discovered his absence within less than a minute afterwards, it was during that scant sixty seconds that he made good his escape.

Why he had gone at all was difficult to say. One might have thought that after what he had undergone during his search for the fortune he would hardly have disappeared at the moment of its finding. He had suffered so much in looking, that he had earned at least a share, when at last it was brought to light. Such, certainly, was the strong feeling of its actual discoverer. He stood in need enough of money; that was sure. Why then, at what from one point of view might be described as the very moment of his triumph, had he vanished?

He alone could tell.

They could only give wild guesses. Nothing has been seen or heard of him from that hour to this. They put advertisements for him in the papers, without result. Then, as they felt that living the sort of life which he probably was living—that is, if he was living at all—it was within the range of probability that a newspaper would never come his way, and that he would never glance at it if it did, they distributed handbills broadcast through the slums of London, beseeching him

to apply to a certain address, and offering a reward to any one who could give an account of his proceedings after the night on which he had taken himself away.

To those handbills they did receive answers—in abundance. There were evidently plenty of people who were willing, nay, anxious, to lay their hands on that reward, just as there seemed several Charles Ballingalls with whom they were acquainted. But no one of them was the Charles Ballingall. More than once they thought they had chanced on him at last; the stories told were such very specious ones, and they followed up the trail till it proved beyond all manner of doubt to be a false one. When the Charles Ballingall to whom it referred was unearthed, he proved, in each and every case, to be not in the least like theirs.

And so the presumption is that the man is dead. He was, probably, as the doctor suggested, more than half out of his mind on that eventful night; his sins had brought him suffering enough to have driven the average mortal mad. It is not unlikely that the strange things which then transpired, completing the work of destruction, robbed him of his few remaining senses; and that, at that last moment, when Madge Brodie announced her discovery of what he had sought with so much pain and with such ardour, the irony of fate which seemed to have pursued him, pressing on him still, had driven him out into the night, a raving lunatic, seeking anywhere and anyhow for escape from the burden of life which haunted him.

God alone can tell where and how he found it.

CHAPTER XX

THE FORTUNE

And the fortune?

This remark may be made—that had they not found it when they did there would very shortly have been nothing left to find. Mr. Thomas Ossington had chosen for the treasure-chest a simple opening in the wall, to which access had originally been gained by touching a spring. This spring had been concealed under what had probably been a picture of a dog's head; the fifth alternating dog's head on the right-hand side of the bedroom door. When you pressed it a door flew open.

But this primitive treasure-chest, if not entirely obvious to the world at large, was open to the rats and mice, and similar small deer, who had their happy hunting-grounds within the wall itself. The result was that, when the contents were examined, it was found that the bundles of bank-notes had been gnawed, in some cases to unrecognisable shreds; that meals—hearty ones of the cut-and-come-again description—had been made of parchment deeds, bonds, share certificates, and similar impediments; that coin—gold coin—had been contained in bags, which bags had been consumed, even to the strings which once had tied them. The coins lay under accumulations of dust, in heaps upon the floor. On several were actually well-marked indentations, showing that sharp, gleaming teeth had applied to them a stringent test before finally deciding that they really were not good to eat. A curious spectacle the whole presented when first brought to the light of day.

However, in but few cases had the damage proceeded to lengths which had rendered what was left absolutely worthless—discovery had come just in the nick of time. The Bank of England was good enough to hand over cash in exchange for the fragments of all notes of which there was satisfactory evidence that there had been once a whole. The various documents which represented property were none of them in a condition which rendered recognition altogether

impossible, and when it was once established what they were, for all intents and purposes they were as available for their original use as if they had been in a condition of pristine freshness.

Altogether the find represented a sum of something like £40,000. Not a large fortune, as fortunes go, but still a comfortable capital to be the possessor of. If fate only had been kind to him, and the men and women who formed his world of finer texture, Tom Ossington might have been as happy as the days were long.

Oddly enough, the real trouble came after the fortune was found. The difficulty was as to whom it belonged—not because the claimants were so many, but because they were so few.

It was Madge's wish that it should be divided between those who were actually present at the moment of its discovery, maintaining that such a division would be in accordance with both law and equity. Ballingall's continued disappearance resolved the number of these into four—Ella, Jack Martyn, Bruce Graham, and herself. The first rift in the lute was caused by Mr. Graham, he refusing point-blank to have part or parcel in any such transaction. He maintained that the fortune had been found by Madge, and that therefore, in accordance with the terms of the will, the whole of it was hers. In any case he would have none of it. He had felt, on mature reflection, that Ballingall's accusations had not been without foundation, that his conduct had been unprofessional, that he had had no right to share his confidence with anybody—that, in short, he had behaved ill in the whole affair; and that, therefore, he had no option but to decline to avail himself of any advantages which were, so to speak, the proceeds of his misbehaviour.

When she heard this, Madge laughed outright. Seeing that her laughter made no impression, and that the gentleman continued of the same opinion still, she was moved to use language which was, to say the least, surprising. It was plain that, beneath the lash of the lady's tongue, he was unhappy. But his unhappiness did not go deep enough to induce him to change his mind. When it was obvious that his resolve was adamant, and that by no means could he be induced to move from it, she announced her own decision.

“Very well; if the fortune's mine, it's mine. And if it's mine I can do what I like with it. And what I like, is to divide it with Ella and if Ella will not have half, then I'll not have a farthing either. And the whole shall go to the Queen, or to whoever unclaimed money does go. And you'll find that I can be as firm—or as obstinate—as anybody else.”

“But, my dear,” observed Ella, mildly, “I never said that I wouldn't have half. I'm sure I'll be delighted. I'll need no pressing—and thank you very kindly, ma'am.”

“I do believe, Ella,” returned Madge, with calmness which was both significant and deadly, “that you are the only reasonable person with whom I am acquainted.”

So it was arranged—the two girls divided the whole; which of course meant, as Madge knew perfectly, that Jack Martyn would have his share. As a matter of fact, Mr. and Mrs. Martyn have been husband and wife for some time now, and are doing very well.

And it is said—as such things are said—that Madge Brodie will be Mrs. Bruce Graham yet before she dies. It is believed by those who know them best that he would, give his eyes to marry her, and that she has made up her mind to marry him.

This being so, it would seem as if a marriage might ensue.

If such is the case, it appears extremely likely, if Madge ever is his wife, that, whether he will or won't, Bruce Graham will have to have his share.

She is as obstinate as he is—every whit.