

The House of Shame

By H. B. Marriott Watson

THERE was no immediate response to his knock, and, ere he rapped again, Farrell turned stupidly and took in a vision of the street. The morning sunshine streamed on Piccadilly; a snap of air shook the tree-tops in the Park; and beyond, the greensward sparkled with dew. The traffic roared along the roadway, but the cabs upon the stand rode like ships at anchor on a windless ocean. Below him flowed the tide of passengers. The dispassion of that drifting scene affected him by contrast with his own warm flood of emotions; the picture—the trees, the sunlight, and the roar—imprinted itself sharply upon his brain. His glance flitted among the faces, and wandered finally to the angle of the crossway, by which his cab was sauntering leisurely. With a shudder he wheeled face-about to the door, and raised the clapper. For a moment yet he stood in hesitation. The current of his thoughts ran like a mill-race, and a hundred discomfiting impressions flowed together. The house lay so quiet; the sunlight struck the window-panes with a lively and discordant glare. He put his hand into his pocket and withdrew a latchkey, twiddling it restlessly between his fingers. With a thrust and a twist the door would slip softly open, and he might enter unobserved. He entertained the impulse but a moment. He dared not enter in

that nocturnal fashion ; he would prefer admittance publicly, in the eye of all, as one with nothing to conceal, with no black shame upon him. His return should be ordinary, matter-of-fact ; he would choose that Jackson should see him cool and unperturbed. In some way, too, he vaguely hoped to cajole his memory, and to ensnare his willing mind into a belief that nothing unusual had happened.

He knocked with a loud clatter, feet sounded in the hall, and the door fell open. Jackson looked at him with no appearance of surprise.

“ Good morning, Jackson,” he said, kicking his feet against the step. He entered, and laid his umbrella in the stand. “ Is your mistress up yet ? ” he asked.

“ Yes, sir,” said the servant, placidly ; “ she’s in the morning-room, sir, I think.”

There was no emotion in the man’s voice ; his face wore no aspect of suspicion or inquiry, and somehow Farrell felt already relieved. To-day was as yesterday, unmarked by any grave event.

“ Ah ! ” he said, and passed down the hall. At the foot of the stairs he paused again, with a pretence of dusting something from his coat, and winced at the white gleam of his dress-shirt. Nothing stirred in the house save a maid brushing overhead, and for a while he lingered. He still shrank from encountering his wife, and there was his room for refuge until he had put on a quieter habit of mind. His clothes damned him so loudly that all the world must guess at a glance. And then again the man resumed his manliness ; he would not browbeat himself for the mere knowledge of his own shame ; and, passing rapidly along the hall, he pushed open the door of the morning-room.

A woman rose on his entrance, with a happy little cry.

“ George ! ” she said, “ Dear George, I’m so glad.”

She

She put up her arms and lifted her face to him. Farrell shivered; the invitation repelled him; in the moment of that innocent welcome the horror of his sin rose foul before him. He touched her lightly on the cheek and withdrew a little distance.

"I'm not a nice object, Letty," he faltered; "see what a mess the beastly mud has made of me. And look at my fine dress-clothes." He laughed with constraint. "You'd think I lived in them."

"Oh, dearest, I was so disappointed," said the girl; "I sat up ever so late for you. But I was so tired. I'm always tired now. And at last I yawned myself to sleep. Where ever have you been?"

The colour flickered in Farrell's face, and his fingers trembled on the table.

"Oh, I couldn't get away from Fowler's, you know. Went there after the club, and lost my train like a fool."

His uneasy eyes rose furtively to her face. He was invested with morbid suspicions, suspicions of her suspicion; but the girl's gaze rested frankly upon him, and she smiled pleasantly.

"That dreadful club! You shan't go there again for a week, darling. I'm so glad you've come. I was nearly being very frightened about you. I've been so lonely." She took him by the arm. "Poor dear, and you had to come all through London with those things on. Didn't people stare?"

"I will change them," he said abruptly, and turned to leave.

"What!" she said archly, "Would you go without—and I haven't seen you for so long." She threw her arms about his neck.

"For God's sake—No, no, Letty, don't touch me," he broke out harshly.

The girl's lips parted, and a look of pain started into her face.

"I mean" he explained quickly, "I am so very dirty, dear. You'd soil your pretty frock."

"Silly!"

"Silly!" she returned smiling, "and it isn't a pretty frock. I can't wear pretty frocks any longer," she added mournfully.

He dropped his eyes before the flush that sprang into her cheeks, and left the room hurriedly.

His shame followed him about all day, dogging him like a shadow. It lurked in corners and leaped out upon him. Sometimes it crept away and hovered in the remoter distance; he had almost forgotten its attendance; and then in the thick of his laughing conversation it fell upon him black once more. It skulked ever within call, dwindled at times, grey and insignificant. When he stopped to exchange a sentence in the street, it slid away; he moved on solitary, and it ran out before him, dark and portentous. Remorse bit deep into him, remorse and a certain fear of discovery. The hours with his wife were filled with uneasy thoughts, and he would fain have variegated the cheerless monotony of his conscience by adding a guest to his dinner-table. But from this course he was deterred by delicacy; for, at his suggestion, Letty looked at him, winced a little, smiled ever so faintly, and, with an ineffable expression of tender embarrassment, drew her dressing-gown closer round her body. He could not press the indignity upon her young and sensitive mind.

But the fall of night, which he had so dreaded, brought him a change of mood. The table was stocked with the fine fruits of a rare intelligence; the plate shone with the white linen; and all the comforts waited upon his appetite. It was no gross content that overtook him, but the satisfaction of a body gently appeased. His sin had faded wonderfully into the distance, had grown colder, and no longer burned intolerably upon his conscience. He found himself at times regarding it with reluctant equanimity. He stared at it with the eyes of a judicial stranger.

Men

Men were so wide apart from women; they were ruled by another code of morals. If this were a pity, it fell at least of their nature and their history. Was not this the prime lesson science had taught the world? But still the shame flickered up before him; he could watch its appearances more calmly, could reason and debate of it, but it was still impertinently persistent. And yet he was more certain of himself. To-morrow the discomfort would return, no doubt, but with enfeebled spirit; he would suffer a very proper remorse for some time—perhaps a week—and then the affair would dismiss itself, and his memory would own the dirty blot no longer. As the meal went forward his temper rose. He smiled upon his wife with less diffidence; he conversed with less effort. But strangely, as he mended, and the first horror of his guilt receded, he had a leaning to confession. Before, he had felt that pardon was impossible, but now that he was come within range of forgiving himself, he began to desire forgiveness from Letty also. The inclination was vague and formless, yet it moved him towards the subject in an aimless way. He found himself wondering, with a throb in his blood, how she would receive his admissions, and awoke with the tail of her last sentence in his ears.

“I’m so glad the servants have gone. I much prefer being alone with you, George.”

“Yes,” he murmured absently, “they’re a nuisance, aren’t they?”

She pushed the claret to him, and he filled his glass abstractedly. Should he tell her now, he was thinking, and let penitence and pardon crown a terrible day? At her next words he looked up, wondering.

“Had Mr. Fowler any news of Edward?” she asked idly.

The direction of her thoughts was his; he played with the thought

thought of confession ; his mind itched to be freed of its burden.

“ Oh no, we were too busy,” he laughed uneasily. “ The fact is, you see, Letty dear—I have a confession to make——”

She regarded him inquiringly, even anxiously. He had taken the leap without his own knowledge ; the words refused to frame upon his tongue. Of a sudden the impulse fled, screaming for its life, and he was brought up, breathless and scared, upon the brink of a giddy precipice.

“ What confession, darling ? ” she asked in a voice which showed some fear.

The current of his ideas stopped in full flow ; where a hundred explanations should have rushed about his brain, he could find not one poor lie for use.

“ What do you mean, dearest ? ” said his wife, her face straightened with anxiety.

Farrell paled and flushed warm. “ Oh nothing, my darling child,” he said with a hurried laugh ; “ we played baccarat.”

“ George ! ” she cried reproachfully. “ How could you, when you had promised ? ”

“ I don't know,” he stumbled on feverishly. “ I was weak, I suppose, and they wanted it, and—God knows I've never done it before, since I promised, Letty,” he broke off sharply.

The girl said nothing at the moment, but sat staring at the table-cloth, and then reached out a hand and touched his tremulous fingers.

“ There, there, dear boy,” she murmured soothingly, “ I won't be cross ; only please, please, don't break your word again.”

“ No, I won't, I won't,” muttered the man.

“ I daresay it was hard, but it cost you your train, George, and you were punishe

by losing my society for one whole night. So
there

there—it's all right." She pressed the hand softly, her face glowing under the candle-light with some soft emotion.

Farrell withdrew his arm gently.

"Have some more wine, dear," said his wife.

She raised the bottle, and was replenishing his glass when he pushed it roughly aside.

"No more," he said shortly, "no more."

The wound broke open in his conscience, red and raw. The peace which had gathered upon him lifted; he was shaken into fears and tremors, and that devilish memory, which had retired so far, came back upon him, urgent and instant, proclaiming him a coward and a scoundrel. He sat silent and disturbed, with his eyes upon the crumbs, among which his fingers were playing restlessly. Letty rose, and passed to the window.

"How dark it has fallen!" she said, peeping through the blinds, "and the rain is pelting so hard. I'm glad I'm not out. How cold it is! Do stir the fire, dearest."

Farrell rose, and went to the chimneypiece. He struck the poker through the crust of coal, and the flames leapt forth and roared about the pieces. The heat burned in his face. There came upon him unbidden the recollection of those days, a year ago, when he and Letty had nestled side by side, watching for fortunes in the masses of that golden core. She had seen palaces and stately domes; her richer imagination culled histories from the glowing embers; while he, searching and searching in vain, had been content to receive her fancies and sit by simply with his arm about her. The thought touched him to a smile as he mused in the flood of the warmth.

Letty still stood peering out upon the street, and her voice came to him, muffled, from behind the curtain.

"Oh, those poor creatures! How cold and how wet they must be!

be! Look, George, dear. Why don't they go indoors out of the rain?"

Farrell, the smile still upon his lips, turned his face towards her as he stooped.

"Who, child?"

"Why, those women," said his wife, pitifully, "why don't they go home? They keep coming backwards and forwards. I've seen the same faces pass several times. And they look so bleak and wretched, with those horrid tawdry dresses. No one ought to be out to-night."

The poker fell from Farrell's hand with a clatter upon the fender.

"Damn them!" he cried, in a fierce, harsh voice.

The girl pulled the curtain back, and looked at him.

"Darling," she said, plaintively, "what is it? Why do you say such horrible things?"

Farrell's face was coloured with passion; he stood staring angrily at her.

"George, George," she said, coming to him, "why are you so angry with me? Oughtn't I to be sorry for them? I can't help it; it seems so sad. I know they're not nice people. They're dreadful, dear, of course. I've always heard that," and she laid her face against his breast. "But it can't be good for them to be out this wretched night, even if they are wicked."

She pressed against him as for sympathy, but Farrell made no response. A fearful tension held his arms and body in a kind of paralysis; but presently he patted her head softly, and put her gently from him.

"I'm in a very bad temper to-night, dear" he said, slowly. "I suppose I ought to go to bed and hide myself till I'm better."

She clung to him still. "Don't put me away, George. I don't
mind

mind if you are in a bad temper. I love you, dearest. Kiss me, dear, kiss me ; I get so frightened now."

A spasm contracted his features ; he bent over and kissed her ; then he turned away.

"I will go and read," he said ; "I shall be better then."

She ran after him. "Let me come too, George. I will sit still and won't disturb you. You can't think how I hate being alone now. I can't understand it. Do let me come, for you know I must go to bed early, I was up so late last night."

The pleading words struck him like a blow. "Come, then," he answered, taking her hand.

"And you may swear if you want to very much," she whispered, laughing, as they passed through the door.

The sun rose bright and clear ; the sky, purged of its vapours, shone as fine as on a midsummer day. With this complaisance of the weather Farrell's blacker mood had passed. His weak nature, sensitive as it was to the touch of circumstances, recovered easily from their influences. Sleep had renewed the elastic qualities of his mind, and the smiling heaven set him in great spirits. Letty, too, seemed better, and ate and talked with a more natural gaiety. The nightmare of the previous evening was singularly dim and characterless. He tried to recall the terror of it, and wondered why it had so affected him, with every circumstance of happiness around—his smiling wife, a comfortable house, and the pleasant distractions of fortune. The gulf that opened between Letty and himself was there by the will of nature. He had but flung aside the conventions that concealed it. It was a horrid gap, but he had not contrived it. The sexes kept different laws, and he himself, in all likelihood, came nearer to what she would require of him than any other man. He assured himself with conviction that he would forget altogether in a few days.

The

The day was pleasantly filled, but not too full for the elaboration of these arguments. They soothed him ; he grew philosophic ; he discussed the conditions of love with himself ; he even broached the problem in an abstract way over his coffee at the club. For the first time he thought that he had clearly determined the nature of his affection for Letty. It was integral and single, it was built upon a pack of sentiments, it was very tender, and it would wear extremely well ; but it was not that first high passion which he had once supposed. The unfamiliarity of that earlier exaltation had deceived him into a false definition of Love. There was none such in circulation among human bodies. There were degrees upon degrees of affection, and Letty and he stood very high in rank ; but to conceive of their love as something emanating from a superior sphere outside relation to the world and other human beings was the absurd and delightful flight of heedless passion.

He had laid his ghost, and came home to his dinner in an excellent humour. The girl looked forlorn and weary, but brightened a good deal on his return. With her for audience he chattered in quite a sparkling temper. Letty said little, but regarded him often with great shy eyes. He looked up sometimes to find them upon him with a wistful, even a pleading, gaze. She watched every movement he took jealously. But she was obviously content, and even gay in a sad little fashion. He did not understand, but his spirits were too newly blythe to dwell upon a puzzle. He noticed with scarce a wonder little starts of pettishness which he had never seen before. They flashed and were gone, and the large eyes still followed him with tenderness. She rested her arm across the table in the middle of a story he was telling, and rearranged his silver.

“You must not cross your knives,” she said playfully. “That’s a bad omen.” He laughed and continued his narrative.

Left

Left to himself, Farrell lit a cigarette and filled his glass with wine. The current of his spirits had passed, but he felt extremely comfortable, and very shortly his mind stole after his wife, who was playing softly in the further room. He could see the yellow fabric of the distant curtains gleaming softly in the lamp-light. He had a desire for a certain air, but could not bring himself to interrupt. An atmosphere of content enwrapped him, and he leaned back lazily in his chair. Reflections came to him easily. Surely there was no greater comfort than this serene domestic happiness with its pleasant round of change. He had set Letty's love and his in a place too low for justice. It held a sweeter fragrance, it was touched with higher light, than the commoner affections of common people. A genial warmth flooded his soul, and his heart nestled into the comfort of desire. He was hot with wine, and his whole being thrilled with the content of his own reflections. He asked no better than this quiet ecstasy, repeated though a suave untroubled life. The personal charm of that fine body, the intimate distinctions of its subtle grace, the flow of that soft voice, the sweet attention of that devoted human soul—these were his lot by fortune. They conducted him upon a future which was strangely attractive. He had loved her for some months more than a year, and earlier that day he had summoned his bridal thoughts down to a pedestrian level; but now in this hour of sudden illumination, flushed with the kindly influence of his wine, his afternoon fancy seemed to him ungenerously clipt and tame. Letty stood for what was noble in his narrow life; she invited him upon a high ideal way. If he were framed of grosser clay, it was she who would refine the fabric. The thought struck him sharply. He had learned to dispose his error in its proper place, among the sins, and he was not going to assign penalties unduly; but the bare fact came home to him that he was
unworthy

unworthy of this woman's love, that no man deserved it. He had evilly entreated her, but he would rise to a new level in her company and with her aid. She should renew in him the faded qualities of innocence and pure-heartedness which as a child he had once possessed. He would ask her mercy, and use her help. Her pardon should purge him of his dishonour ; she should take him to her heart, and perfect faith should rest between them.

The vision he had conceived drew his attention strongly ; he seemed to himself, and in a measure was, ennobled by this aspiration. Out of the fulness of his penitence he now desired the confession he had feared but a little time before. And, as he reflected, the notes of the piano changed, and Letty shot into a gay *chansonnette*, trilling softly over the sharp little runs. The careless leisure of the air took off his thoughts with it. It would be a bad world in which they might not be happy. The story would hurt her, he was sure ; indeed, he could conjure before him the start of pain in her eyes. But after the shock she would resume her trust, and forget, as he was forgetting. He was entirely certain of her love, and, that secure, nothing could divide them. Perhaps she were better left to herself till she recovered from the blow ; he would go away for a day or two. It might even take her worse than he expected, and he would have dull faces and tearful reproaches for a week or more. If this fell out, it was his punishment, and he would bear it in humility.

As his thoughts ran he had not noticed that the music ceased, and Letty's voice broke on his reverie.

"Mayn't I sit with you, dear," she pleaded. "It's so solitary in the big room !"

"Why, of course, sweetheart," said Farrell gently ; "come in, and close the door ; we'll be snug for a little while in here."

Letty stood by his chair and stroked his head.

"You

"You never came to say good-night to me last night," she said reproachfully.

Farrell put up his hand and took hers.

"Dearest, you must forgive me. I—I was very tired, and had a headache."

"Ah, that was the penalty for staying up so late," she replied playfully.

Farrell smiled and patted her hand.

"But you will come to-night, won't you?" she urged.

"Dear heart, of course I will," he said, smiling indulgently.

"I'll come and have a long talk with you."

His wife sighed, in part, as it seemed, with satisfaction, and leaned her chin upon his hair.

"Life is very curious, isn't it, George?" she said meditatively, her eyes gazing in abstraction at the wall. "There are so many things we don't know. I never dreamed——"

Farrell patted her hand again, affectionately, reassuringly.

"I couldn't have guessed," she went on, dreamily. "It is all so strange and painful, and yet not quite painful. I wonder if you understand, George."

"I think I do, dear," said he softly.

"Ah, but how can you quite? Girls are so ignorant. Do you think they ought to be told? I shouldn't have liked to be told, though. I should have been so afraid, but now somehow I'm not afraid—not quite."

A note of pain trembled through her voice; she drew a sharp breath and shivered.

"George, you don't think I shall die, do you, George? Oh, George, if I should die!"

She fell on her knees at his feet, looking into his face with searching eyes that pleaded for comfort. He drew her head

head towards him, a gulp in his throat, and caressed her hair.

“There, child, there !” he said soothingly, “you are frightening yourself. Of course not, silly one, of course not.”

She crouched against his knees, and he stroked her hair tenderly. Pity pulled at his heart, and at the touch of her he was warmed with affection. He had no means of consolation save this smoothing motion of the palm, but he yearned for some deeper expression of his love and sympathy. In the silence his thoughts turned to their former occupation, and he felt nearer than ever to his wife. He would tell her when she had recovered.

She raised her head at length and looked at him.

“Oh, you will think I’m not brave” she said tremulously, “but I am brave—indeed, George. It is only sometimes that I get this fit of depression, and it overbears me. But it isn’t me ;— it is something quite foreign within me : I was never a coward, dear.”

“No, darling,” he answered, “of course you are not a coward. You’re brave, very brave ; you’re my dear brave wife.” She smiled at him faintly. “And you know, Letty,” he went on, still with his hand upon her head. “I think we’ve been very happy together, and shall be very happy together, always. There is so much that binds us to one another. You love me, dear, don’t you ? and you could never doubt that I love you, could you ?”

Letty shook her head. He cast down his eyes, patting the tresses softly.

“And I think you know that well enough and are certain enough of that not to misjudge me,” he resumed quietly. “If I have made a mistake, Letty, it is not you who will be hardest on me, I am sure. It is I myself. If I have fallen into a
seeming

seeming disloyalty, it is not I, as you will believe and understand, but something, as you said just now, quite foreign within me. For I could only be true and loyal and——”

He hesitated, raising his shameful eyes to her.

“What—what is it, George?” she asked anxiously, “what have you done?” His hand rose and fell mechanically upon her head. He parted his lips with an effort, and continued. The task was harder than he had thought.

“It is right” he said slowly, “that we should have no secrets from one another; it is necessary, dear, that we should bear all things in common. To be man and wife, and to love each other, calls for this openness between us.” He stumbled on the threshold of his confession; the pain of this slow progression suddenly unnerved him; all at once he took it with a rush. “Darling,” he cried quickly and on a sharper note, “I want to confess something to you, and I want your forgiveness. That night I was away I did not spend with Fowler. I spent it——”

“You spent it gambling?” she asked, in a low voice.

“No,” he said with a groan, “I spent it in another house—I spent it—I spent it in shame.”

He breathed the better for the words, even though a terrible silence reigned in the room. At least the worst part of his penalty was undergone, for the explanation was over.

But when she spoke he realised, with a sense of dread, that he had not passed the ordeal.

“I don’t understand, George,” she said in a voice thick with trouble. “What is it? Where did you stay?”

The strain was too great for his weak nerves. “For God’s sake, Letty,” he broke out, “try to understand me and forgive me. I dined too well; I was almost drunk. I left the club with Fowler very late. Oh, it’s hideous to have to tell you. I met

some

some one I had never seen since—Oh, long before I loved you. I could not pass her. I—O God! can't you understand? Don't make me explain so horribly."

The tale ran from him in short and broken sentences. His fingers twisted nervously about a wisp of her hair; his gaze had nowhere rest. She looked full into his face with frightened eyes.

"Do you mean—those women—we saw?" she asked at last, in a voice pitched so low that he hardly heard.

"Yes," he whispered; and then again there was silence. The agony of the suspense was intolerable. "You will never forgive me," he muttered.

He felt her trembling hands grow cold under his touch; and as she still kept silence, he dropped his slow, reluctant glance to meet hers. At the sight of the terrified eyes he put his hands towards her quickly.

"Letty, Letty," he cried, "for God's sake, don't look like that. Speak to me; say you forgive me. Dearest, darling, forgive me."

She rose as if unconscious of her action, and, walking slowly to the fireplace, stood looking at the red flames.

"Letty," he called, "don't spurn me like this. Darling, darling!"

His attitude, as he waited for her response, there in the centre of the room, was one of singular despair. His mouth was wried with an expression of suffering; he endured all the pangs of a sensitive nature which has been always wont to shelter itself from pain. But still she made no answer. And then she seemed suddenly taken with a great convulsion; her body trembled and shivered; she wheeled half-way round with a cry; her eyes shone with pain.

"George, George!" she screamed on a horrid note of agony,
and

and swaying for a second to and fro, fell hard across the fender and against the live bars of the grate.

Farrell sprang across the intervening space and swung her head away from the angry flames. She lay limp and still upon the hearth-rug, a smear of black streaking her white arm from the elbow, the smell of her frizzled gown fusing with the odour of burned hair. Her face was set white, the mouth peaked with a spasm of pain; the eyelids had not fully fallen, and a dreadful glimmer of light flickered from a slit in the unconscious eyes. He stood, struck weak and silent for a moment, and then flung himself upon the floor, and hung over the body.

"Letty, Letty!" he cried. "Letty, Letty! Oh, my God! have I killed you?" The flesh twitched upon the drawn face, and a moan issued from her lips. Farrell leapt to the bell-rope and pulled fast; and away in some distant depth the peals jangled in alarm. A servant threw open the door and rushed into the room.

"A doctor, a doctor!" cried Farrell, vehemently. "Get a doctor at once. Your mistress is ill. Do you hear, Jackson. God, man, don't stare at me. Go, go!"

As the door closed Farrell's glance stole back to the floor. His breath came fast as he contemplated the body. It lay there as though flung by the hand of death, and wore a pitiful aspect. It forbade him; it seemed to lower at him; he could not associate it with life, still less with Letty. It owned some separate and horrible existence of itself. The flames mounting in the fire threw out great flashes upon the recumbent figure, and the pale flesh took on a moving colour. Hours seem to pass as he stood beside her, and not until the quivering eyelids denoted a return of life did he gain courage to touch her. With that she became somehow familiar again; she was no more the blank eidolon of a woman. He put his arms beneath her and slowly

lifted the reviving body to the sofa. The blood renewed its course in the arteries, and she opened her eyes dully and closed them again.

The entrance of the doctor dispelled for a while the gloomy thoughts that environed him. The man was a stranger, but was welcomed as an intimate.

"She has had a shock," said Farrell. "You will understand. It was my doing," he added.

The sharp change from the dreadful reveries of his solitude turned Farrell to a different creature. He was animated with action; he bustled about on errands; he ran for brandy, and his legs bore him everywhere, hardly with his knowledge. And as the examination proceeded he grew strangely cheerful, watching the face of the physician and drawing inferences to his fancy. He laughed lightly at the doubt if she could be lifted to her room.

"Yes, of course," said he.

"The stairs are steep, sir," said Letty's maid.

He smiled, and drew back the cuffs from his strong wrists. Stooping, he picked up his wife lightly, and strode upstairs.

As the doctor was leaving, Farrell waylaid him in the hall, and took him to the door. The visitor drew on his gloves and spoke of the weather; the sky threatened rain again and the night was growing black. Farrell agreed with him hurriedly, adding a few remarks of no interest, as though to preserve that air of unconcern which the doctor seemed to take for granted; and then, with his hand on the door, abruptly touched his subject.

"Is there any danger?" he asked.

The doctor paused and buttoned his glove.

"She is very sensitive," said the doctor.

"It was my doing," said Farrell after a moment, dropping his eyes to the floor.

"It

"It is a dangerous time," said the doctor. "Very little may do damage. We can't be too careful in these affairs."

He finished with his gloves, and put out his hand.

"Have I," stammered Farrell, "have I done irreparable harm?"

"She is very delicate," said the doctor.

"What will it mean?" asked the husband, lowering his voice.

The doctor smiled and touched him with his fingers. "If you were to cut your finger, my friend, a doctor would never prophesy. Events are out of all proportions to causes." He put his own hand upon the latch. "I will call to-morrow early," he said, "and will send a nurse at once."

Farrell took his arm in a hard grip.

"Is she dying?" he asked hoarsely.

The doctor moved impatiently. "My dear sir, certainly not," he answered hastily. He threw open the door and emerged into the night. "I would not distress myself with unnecessary fancies, Mr. Farrell," said he, as he dropped down the steps.

Farrell walked down the hall to the foot of the stairs. He laid a hand upon the balustrade uncertainly. The house was engrossed in silence; then from the floor above came a sharp cry, as of a creature in pain, and a door shut softly. Trembling, he rushed into the dining-room, and hid his face in his hands. Yet that weak device was no refuge from his hideous thoughts. His brain was crowded with fears and terrors; in the solitude of that chamber he was haunted by frightful ghosts. The things stood upon the white cloth, like spectres; the lamp burned low, and splashes of flame rose and fell in the ashes. He rose and poured some brandy into a glass. The muscles jumped in his hands, and the liquor spilled over the edges and stained his shirt, but the draught strung up his nerves, and brighter thoughts flowed in his mind.

mind. He pulled out a chair before the fire and sat down, meditating more quietly.

An hour later he was disturbed from his reflections by the passage of feet along the hall. His ears took in the sound with a fret of new anxiety ; it portended fresh horrors to him. But in a little he realised from the voices without that the nurse had arrived, and a feeling of relief pervaded him. The footsteps passed upstairs. He sat passive within the arms of his chair and listened. A fresh hope of succour lay in those feet. The doctor and the nurse and the maid were doing what was vital ; in their attentions was the promise of rescue. It was as if he himself took no part in the tragedy ; he sat as a spectator in the stalls, and viewed the action only with the concern of an interested visitor. He filled another tumbler with spirit.

The alcohol fired his blood, and raised him superior to the petty worry of his nerves. He drank and stared in the embers and considered. Letty was ill in a manner not uncommon ; even though it threatened the sacrifice of one life the malady was not inevitably mortal. He had been bidden to discharge his fears, and brandy had discharged them for him. He turned to fill his glass again ; the fumes were in his head, but at that moment the recollection of his last excess flashed suddenly upon him, and, with an inarticulate scream of rage, he dashed the bottle to the floor, and ground the glass under his feet. Rising irresolutely he made his way upstairs, and paused before Letty's door. At his knock the nurse came out and greeted him—a strange tall woman with hard eyes.

“ My wife,” he asked—“ is Mrs. Farrell better ? ”

She pushed him gently away. “ I think so,” she said ; “ we shall see. The worst is over, perhaps. You understand. Hush, she is sleeping now at last.” He lingered still, and she made a gesture

to

to dismiss him, her voice softening. "Doctor Green will tell you best to-morrow."

Farrell entered his room and took off his coat. His ears, grown delicate to the merest suspicion, seemed to catch a sound upon the stillness, and opening the door he looked out. All was quiet; the great lamp upon the landing swung noiselessly, shedding its dim beams upon the pannelled walls. He shut to the door, and once more was in the wilderness of his own thoughts.

The doctor came twice that next day. In the morning a white and anxious face met him on the stairs and scanned him eagerly.

"She is going on, going on" said he deliberately.

"Then the danger is past?" cried Farrell, his heart beating with new vigour.

"No doctor can say that," said the doctor slowly. "She is as well as I expected to find her. It was very difficult."

"But will she——" began Farrell, stammering.

"Well?" exclaimed the doctor sharply.

"Will she live?"

The doctor's eye avoided his. "Those things are never certain," he said. "You must hope. I know more than you, and I hope."

"Yes, yes," cried Farrell impatiently. "But, my God, doctor," he burst forth, "will she die?"

The doctor glanced at him and then away. "It is possible," he said gravely.

Farrell leaned back against the handrail and mechanically watched him pass the length of the hall and let himself out. Some one touched his arm, and he looked up.

"Come, sir, come," said the nurse. "You musn't give way. Nothing has happened. She is very weak, but I've seen weaker folk pull through."

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He descended the stairs and entered the drawing-room. The room looked vacant ; the inanimate furniture seemed to keep silence and stare at him ; he felt every object in that place was privy to his horrible story. They regarded him sternly ; he seemed to feel the hush in which they had talked together, ere he entered. He could not bear the condemnation of that silence, and sat down at the piano, softly fingering the notes. But the voices of those chords cried to him of Letty. It was her favourite instrument, the purchase of her own means, and every resonance reminded him of her. It was by her hand that melodies had been framed and fashioned from the strings ; his was an alien touch. They wept for their mistress underneath his fingers ; he struck at random, and melancholy cadences mourned at him. They knew his secret, too. With a horrid, miserable laugh he got up, and putting on his hat, went forth and down to his club.

The change did not distract his thoughts ; the burden lay as heavy upon his mind, but at least the walk was an occupation. He came back with a bundle of letters which his indolent nature had allowed to accumulate with the porter, and, retiring to his smoking-room, made a manful effort to re-engage his attention. With this work and the hour of lunch, the time passed until the doctor's second visit. He heard the arrival, and, putting down his pen, waited in a growing fever for the sound of feet descending on the stairs. The smoking-room lay back from the hall, but Farrell flung open his door and listened. The day was falling in and the shadows were deepening about him, but still the doctor made no sign. At length he left his chair and called Jackson. The doctor had gone. He must have left without noise, for Jackson had not heard him ; it was a maid who had seen him go. The discovery threw Farrell into fresh agitation ; his anger mingled with terror. He had wanted a report of the illness ;
he

he would have the doctor back at once ; he had a thousand questions to put. Rushing up the stairs he rapped at the door of the sick room, softly and feverishly. When the nurse presented herself he burst out impetuously. He must come in ; he would see his wife ; he was persistently held in ignorance of her condition, and he demanded admittance as a right. The nurse stood aside and beckoned him forward without a word. Her face was set harder than ever ; she looked worn and weary.

Farrell entered softly, and with furtive fears.

“You may stay if you will be still,” said the nurse. Farrell looked at her inquiringly, beseechingly. “No,” she added, “you will not disturb her. She has been put to sleep. She suffered a good deal. It is a bad case.”

“Will she live ?” whispered Farrell.

The nurse shook her head. “She will not suffer much more. She will sleep. But the doctor will come in the morning. We have done everything.”

Farrell shuddered, and drew near the bed. The lamp burned low upon the dressing-table, and the chamber was in a soft twilight. He could not see her face, but her dark hair was scattered over the white pillows. A slow slight breathing filled the room. The window rattled with a passing noise. Farrell sat down upon a chair beyond the bed, and the nurse resumed her place by the fire, warming her hands. Outside, the traffic passed with low and distant rumbling.

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At the sound the nurse stole stealthily to the door and opened it.

“It is your dinner,” she whispered, turning to Farrell.

He shook his head. “I will stay here,” said he in a monotone.

“You had better go,” she urged. “You will want it. You can

can do nothing." He shook his head again, impatiently. She yawned, closed the door, and, with a little sigh of weariness, retraced her steps to the hearth. Farrell rose and followed her.

"Come," he said, bending over her, "you are very tired. Go and rest in the next room. There is nothing to be done. I will call you. Let me watch. I wish it." She looked at him in doubt. "Yes, yes," he pleaded. "Don't you see? I must be here, and you want sleep."

She glanced round the room, as if to assure herself that there was nothing to require her.

"Very well," she assented; "but call me soon." And she vanished through the doorway like a wraith.

Farrell took his seat and regarded his wife. The breathing came gently; masses of dark hair swarmed over the head that crouched low upon the pillow; one arm, crossing the face with shadow, lay reaching toward the brow. The room glowed with a luminous gloom rather than with light. The figure rested upon its side, and the soft rise of the hip stood out from the hollows of the coverlet. In the grate the ashes stirred and clinked; the street mumbled without; but within that chamber the stillness hung heavily. Farrell seemed to hear it deepen, and the quiet air spoke louder to him, as though charged with some secret and mysterious mission. He followed the hush with a mind half-vacant and wholly irrelevant. But presently the faintest rustle came with a roar upon his senses, and he sprang to his feet, stricken with sudden terror. The body moved slightly under its wrappings; the arm dropped slowly down the pillow into the darker hollows of the counterpane; the hair fell away; and the face, relapsing, softly edged into the twilight.

Farrell stood staring, mute and distracted, upon this piteous piece of poor humanity. Its contrast with the woman he had known

known and loved appalled him. His jaw fell open, his nails scored into his palms, his eyes bulged beneath his brows. The face rested, white and withered, among the frillings of her gown ; unaccustomed lines picked out the cheeks ; the mouth was drawn pitifully small and pinched with suffering. Even as he looked she seemed to his scared gaze to shrink and shrivel under pain. This was not the repose of sleep, releasing from the burden of sickness ; surely he could see her face and body pricked over with starts and pangs under his eyes. It seemed to his morbid thoughts that he could read upon her moving features the horrible story of that slow disintegration ; in his very sight the flesh appeared to take on the changing colours of decay. He withdrew aghast from the proximity ; he blanched and was wrung with panic. In what place within that breathing human fabric was death starting upon his dreadful round ? She respired gently, the heart beat softly, the tissues, yet instinct with life, were re-built piece by piece. Wherein lay the secret of that fading life ?

The counterpane stirred faintly, and drew his attention. His wandering glance went down the length of that swathed body. The limbs still beat warm with blood, and yet to-morrow they must stretch out in stiff obedience to strange hands. The fancy was horrible—a cry burst from him and rang in the still and changeless chamber. The sound terrified him anew, breaking thus rudely upon the silence. He feared that she would awake, and he trembled at the prospect of her speechless eyes. And yet he had withal a passionate desire to resolve her from this deathly calm, and to see her once more regarding him with love. She hung still upon the verge of that great darkness, and one short call would bring her sharply back. He had but to bend to her ears and whisper loudly, and that hovering spirit would return. He stood, a coward, by the bed.

And

And now the lips in that shrunken face parted suddenly, the bosom quickened, and the throat rattled with noises. It flashed upon him that this at last was the article of death, and vainly he strove to call for help; his voice stifled in his mouth. She should not so dissolve at least; she should breathe freely; he would give her air—and, springing with an effort to the window, he flung it back. The cool air flowed in, and, turning quickly, he looked down upon the bed.

The eyes had fallen open, and were set upon him, full and wide. Unnerved already as he was, the change paralysed him, and he stood for a moment stark and motionless. The fire flared up and lit the face with colour; the eyes shone brightly, and he seemed to see into their deepest corners. There was that in them from which he recoiled at length slowly and with horror. They fastened upon him mutely, pleading with him for mercy. They were like the eyes of a creature hunted beyond a prospect of defence. Dumbly they dwelt on him, as though in his presence they had surrendered their last hope. They seemed to wait for him, submissive to their fate, yet luminous with that despair. He tried to speak, but the wheels of his being were without his present rule, and he might only stand and shudder and give back glance for glance. He looked away, but his fascinated gaze returned again to those reproaching eyes. They did not waver; it was as if they dared not lose their sight of a pitiless enemy. They recognised him as their butcher. Even through her sleep this poor weary soul had come to understand his proximity, and had woke up, in fright at his unseemly neighbourhood.

The lamp sputtered, a tongue of flame shot up the chimney, and the rank smell of smoke stole through the room. Farrell retreated to the table, and dressed the wick with trembling fingers. The act relieved the strain, but when he turned the eyes were watching
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ing still. They bereaved him of his powers, and under the spell of their strange and horrible attraction he sweated in cold beads. They burned upon him from the distance, two great hollows of light, like shining stars, holding that awful look of wistful fear. There was no room in his mind for any sensation save the one ; he could not think ; he had no reckoning of the time his agony endured. But outside, at last, the bell of a clock-tower boomed far away and some hour was struck. And suddenly it seemed to him that the lustre of those great eyes grew dimmer ; the look of sad expectation died slowly away. They stared with a kinder light. It was his fancy, perhaps, but at least it seemed that no strange creature now regarded him with unfamiliar terror, but his own dear Letty watched him again with soft affectionate eyes. His limbs grew laxer under him, and, with a little sob of relief, he stole forward, an uncertain smile of greeting growing round his mouth.

“Letty” he whispered, “my darling, are you better?”

He drew near the bed, and put out his arm eagerly and gently ; but in an instant a start rose quickly in her face, the eyes kindled with a horrible look of panic, and with a faint repulsive gesture of the hands she shrank deeper into the wrappings. A little sigh followed ; the limbs fell slowly back, and the eyes, with their dreadful terror, stared vacantly into Farrell’s ghastly face.

The coverlet went on rustling as the bed-clothes settled down.