



CHAPTER III.

Mrs. Whitaker.

He lived through a long, bad quarter hour, his own tensed nerves twanging in sympathy with the girl's sobbing—like telegraph wires singing in a gale—his mind busy with many thoughts, strangely new and compelling, wearing a fresh complexion that lacked altogether the coloring of self-interest.

He mixed a weak draught of brandy and water and returned to the bedside. She made an effort to rise. The effect was quickly apparent in the color that came into her cheeks, faint but warm. After a moment she asked:

"Please—who are you?"

"My name is Whitaker," he said—"Hugh Morten Whitaker. I didn't want to be known, so registered as Hugh Morten. They mistook me for your husband."

The girl swung to her feet.

"I want to tell you something." She faced him bravely, though he refused the challenge of her tormented eyes. "Won't you listen?"

He crossed to a window, where he stood staring out. "I'd rather not," he said softly, "but if you prefer—"

"I do prefer," said the voice behind him. "I'm Mary Ladislus."

"I . . . I ran away from home last week—five days ago—to get married to our chauffeur, Charles Morton . . ."

She stammered.

"Please don't go on, if it hurts," he begged without looking around.

"I've got to—I've got to get it over with. . . . We were at Southampton, at my father's summer home—I mean, that's where I ran away from. He—Charles—drove me over to Greenport and I took the ferry there and came here to wait for him. He went to New York in the car, promising to join me here as soon as possible. . . ."

"And he didn't come," Whitaker wound up for her, when she faltered. "How much money of yours did he take with him?"

There was a brief pause of astonishment. "What do you know about that?" she demanded.

"I know a good deal about that type of man," he said grimly.

"I didn't have any money to speak of, but I had some jewelry—my mother's—and he was to take that and pawn it for money to get married with."

"I see."

The girl in her turn went to one of the windows, standing with her back to the room. Whitaker drew a chair for her and took a seat a little distance away, with a keen glance appraising the change in her condition. She seemed measurably more composed and mistress of her emotions, though he had to judge mostly by her voice and manner, so dark was the room.

"Don't!" she cried sharply. "Please don't look at me so—"

"I beg your pardon. I didn't mean to—"

"It's only—only that you make me think of what you must be thinking about me—"

"You've had a narrow but a wonderfully lucky escape."

"Oh! . . . But I'm not glad . . . I was desperate—"

"I mean," he interrupted coolly, "from Mr. Morton. The silver lining is, you're not married to a black-guard."

"Oh, yes, yes!" she agreed passionately.

"And you have youth, health, years of life before you?"

He sighed inaudibly. . . .

"You wouldn't say that, if you understood."

"Have you thought of going home? Have you written to your father—explained?"

"I sent him a special delivery three days ago, and—yesterday a telegram. I knew it wouldn't do any good, but I . . . I told him everything. He didn't answer. He won't, ever."

She bent forward, elbows on knees, head and shoulders cringing.

"It hurts so!" she wailed. . . .

"What people will think . . . the shame, the bitter, bitter shame of this! I've earned my punishment."

"Oh, I say—"

"But I have, because—because I didn't love him. I didn't love him at all, and I knew it, even though I meant to marry him. . . ."

"But, why—in Heaven's name?"

"Because I was so lonely and . . . misunderstood and unhappy at home. No mother, never daring to see my sister (she ran away, too) . . . my friendships at school discouraged nothing in life but my father to bully me and make cruel fun of me because I'm not pretty. . . . That's why I ran away with a man I didn't love—because I wanted freedom and a little happiness."

"Good Lord!" he murmured beneath his breath, awed by the pitiful, childish

simplicity of her confession and the deep damnation that had waited upon her.

"So it's over!" she cried—"over, and I've learned my lesson, and I'm disgraced forever, and friendless and—"

"Stop right there!" he checked her roughly. "You're not friendless yet, and that nullifies all the rest. Be glad you've had your romance and learned your lesson—"

"Please don't think I'm not grateful for your kindness," she interrupted. "But the disgrace—that can't be blotting out!"

"Oh, yes, it can," he insisted bluntly. "There's a way I know—"

A glimmering of that way had only that instant let a little light in upon the darkness of his solicitous distress for her. He rose and began to walk and think, hands clasped behind him, trying to make what he had in mind seem right and reasonable.

"You mean beg my father to take me back. I'll die first!"

"There mustn't be any more talk, or even any thought, of anything like that. I understand too well to ask the impossible of you. But there is one way out—a perfectly right way—if you're willing and brave enough to take a chance—a long chance."

Somehow she seemed to gain hope of his tone. She sat up, following him with eyes that sought incredulously to believe.

"Have I any choice?" she asked.

"I'm desperate enough. . . ."

"God knows," he said, "you'll have to be!"

"Try me."

He paused, standing over her.

"Desperate enough to marry a man who's bound to die within six months and leave you free? I'm that man; the doctors give me six months more of life. Will you take my name to free yourself? Heaven my witness, you're welcome to it."

"Oh," she breathed, aghast, "what are you saying?"

"I'm proposing marriage," he said, with his quaint, one-sided smile.

"Please listen: I came to this place to make a quick end to my troubles—but I've changed my mind about that, now. What's happened in this room has made me see that nobody has any right to—hasten things. But I mean to leave the country—immediately—and let death find me where it will. I shall leave behind me a name and a little money, neither of any conceivable use to me. Will you take them, employ them to make your life what it was meant to be? It's a little thing, but it will make me feel a lot more fit to go out of this world—to know I've left at least one decent act to mark my memory. There's only this far-fetched chance—I may live. It's a million-to-one shot, but you've got to bear it in mind. But really you can't lose—"

"Oh, stop, stop!" she implored him, half hysterical. "To think of marrying to benefit by the death of a man like you—!"

"You've no right to look at it that way." He had a wry, secret smile for his specious sophistry. "You're being asked to confer, not to accept, a favor. It's just an act of kindness to a hopeless man. I'd go mad if I didn't know you were safe from a recurrence of the folly of this afternoon."

"Don't!" she cried—"don't tempt me. You're no right. . . . You don't know how frantic I am. . . ."

"I do," he countered frankly. "I'm depending on just that to swing you to my point of view. You've got to come to it. I mean you shall marry me."

She stared up at him, spellbound, insensibly yielding to the domination of his will. It was inevitable. He was scarcely less desperate than she—and no less overwrought and unstrung; and he was the stronger; in the natural course of things his will could not but prevail.

The last trace of evening light had faded out of the world before they were agreed. Darkness wrapped them in its folds; they were but as voices warring in a black and boundless void.

Whitaker struck a match and applied it to the solitary gas-jet. A thin, blue, sputtering tongue of flame revealed them to one another. The girl still crouched in her armchair, weary and spent, her powers of contention all vitiated by the losing struggle. Whitaker was trembling with nervous fatigue.

"Well?" he demanded.

"Oh, have your own way," she said drearly. "If it must be. . . ."

"It's for the best," he insisted obstinately. "You'll never regret it."

"One of us will—either you or I," she said quietly. "It's too one-sided. You want to give all and ask nothing in return. It's a fool's bargain."

He hesitated, stammering with surprise. She had a habit of saying the unexpected. "A fool's bargain"—the wisdom of the sage from the lips of a

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child. . . .

"Then it's settled," he said, business-like, offering his hand. "Fool's bargain or not—it's a bargain."

She rose unassisted, then trusted her slender fingers to his palm. She said nothing. The steady gaze of her extraordinary eyes abashed him.

They left the hotel together. Whitaker got his change of a hundred dollars at the desk—"Mrs. Morton's" bill, of course, included with his—and bribed the bell-boy to take the suitcase to the railway station and leave it there, together with his own hand-bag. Since he had unaccountably conceived a determination to continue living for a time, he meant to seek out more pleasant accommodations for the night.

The rain had ceased, leaving a ragged sky of clouds and stars in patches. The air was warm and heavy with wetness. Sidewalks glistened like black watered silk; street lights mirrored themselves in fugitive puddles in the roadways; limbs of trees overhanging the sidewalks shivered now and again in a half-hearted breeze, pelting the wayfarers with miniature showers of lukewarm, scented drops.

Whitaker, taking his heart and his fate in his hands, accosted a venerable gentleman whom they encountered as he was on the point of turning off the sidewalk to private grounds.

"I beg your pardon," he began.

The man paused and turned upon them a saintly countenance framed in hair like snow.

"There is something I can do for you," he inquired with punctilious courtesy.

"If you will be kind enough to direct me to a minister . . ."

"I am one."

"I thought so," said Whitaker. "We wish to get married."

The gentleman looked from his face to the girl's, then moved aside from the gate. "This is my home," he explained. "Will you be good enough to come in?"

Conducting them to his private study, he subjected them to a kindly catechism. The girl said little, Whitaker taking upon himself the brunt of the examination. Absolutely straightforward and intensely sincere, he came through the ordeal well, without being obliged to disclose what he preferred to keep secret. The minister, satisfied, at length called in the town clerk by telephone; who issued the license, pocketed his fee, and in company with the minister's wife, acted as witness. . . .

Whitaker found himself on his feet beside Mary Ladislus. They were being married. He seemed to hear the droning of the loom of the Fates. . . .

And they were man and wife. The door had closed, the gate-latch clicked behind them. They were walking quietly side by side through the scented night, they whom God had joined together. Neither found anything to say. At the station, Whitaker bought his wife a ticket to New York and secured for her solitary use a drawing-room in the sleeper. Whitaker possessed himself of his wife's hand-bag long enough to furnish it with a sum of money and an old envelope bearing the name and address of his law partner. He explained that Drummond would issue her an adequate monthly allowance and advise her when she should have become her own mistress once more; in a word, a widow.

She thanked him briefly, quietly, with a constraint he understood too well to resent.

Both, perhaps, were sensible of some relief when at length the train thundered in from the East, breathing smoke and flame. Whitaker helped his wife aboard and interviewed the porter in her behalf. Then they had a moment or two alone in the drawing-room, in what was meant to be their first and last parting.

She caught him suddenly by the shoulders with both her hands. Her eyes sought his with a wistful courage he could not but admire.

"You know I'm grateful . . ."

"Don't think of it that way—though I'm glad you are."

"You're a good man," she said brokenly.

He knew himself too well to be able to reply.

"You mustn't worry about me, now. You've made things easy for me. I can take care of myself, and . . . I shan't forget whose name I bear."

He muttered something to the effect that he was sure of that.

She released his shoulders and stood back, searching his face with tormented eyes. Abruptly she offered him her hand.

"Good-by," she said, her lips quivering—"Good-by, good friend!"

He caught the hand, wrung it clumsily and painfully and . . . realized that the train was in motion. He had barely time to get away . . .

He found himself on the station platform, stupidly watching the rear lights dwindle down the tracks and wondering whether or not hallucinations were a phase of his malady. A sick man often dreams strange dreams. . . .

A voice behind him, cool with a trace of irony, observed:

"I'd give a good deal to know just what particular brand of foolishness you've been indulging in, this time."

He whirled around to face Peter Stark—Peter quietly amused and very much the master of the situation.

"You needn't think," said he, "that you have any chance on earth of escaping my fond attentions, Hugh. I've fixed it up with Nelly to wait until I bring you home, a well man, before we get married; and if you refuse to be my best man—well, there won't be any party. You can make up your mind to that."

CHAPTER IV.

Willful Missing.

It was one o'clock in the morning before Whitaker allowed himself to be persuaded; fatigue re-energized every stubborn argument of Peter Stark's to overcome his resistance. "Oh, have your own way," he said at length, unconsciously iterating the words that had won him a bride. "If it must be . . ."

Beyond drawing heavily on his bank and sending Drummond a brief note, Whitaker failed to renew communication with his home. He sank into a state of semi-apathetic contentment. The Adventuress was five months out of port before he began to be conscious that he was truly accursed. There came a gradual thickening of the shadows that threatened to eclipse his existence. And then, one day as they dined with the lonely trader of an isolated station in the D'Entrecasteaux Islands, he fell from his chair as if

poleaxed. He regained consciousness only to shiver with the chill of the wind that fanned by the wings of death. It was impossible to move him. The agonies of the damned were his when, with exquisite gentleness, they lifted him to a bed. . . .

Stark sallied in the Adventuress before sundown of the same day, purposing to fetch a surgeon from Port Moresby. Whitaker said a last farewell to his friend, knowing in his soul that they would never meet again. Then he composed himself to die quietly. But the following morning brought a hapchance trading schooner to the island, and with it, in the estate of supercargo, a capricious Scotch gentleman who had been a famous specialist of London before drink laid him by the heels. He performed a heroic operation upon Whitaker within an hour, announced by nightfall that the patient would recover, and the next day sailed with his ship to end his days in some abandoned Australian boozing-ken—as Whitaker learned in Sydney several months later.

In the same place, and at the same time, he received his first authentic news of the fate of the Adventuress. The yacht had struck on an uncharted reef, in heavy weather, and had foundered almost immediately. Of her entire company, a solitary sailor managed to cling to a life-raft until picked up, a week after the wreck, by a tramp steamship on whose decks he gasped out his news and his life in the same breaths.

Whitaker hunted up an account of the disaster in the files of a local newspaper. He read that the owner, Peter Stark, Esq., and his guest, H. M. Whitaker, Esq., both of New York, had gone down with the vessel. There was also a cable dispatch from New York detailing Peter Stark's social and financial prominence—evidence that the news had been cabled home. To all who knew him Whitaker was as dead as Peter Stark.

"There is a world outside the one you know To which for curiousness 'Eil can't compare; It is the place where wilful missings go, As we can testify, for we are there."

Kipling's lines buzzed through his head more than once in the course of the next few years; for he was "there." They were years of such vagabondage as only the South Seas countenance; neither unhappy nor very strenuous, nor yet scarred by the tooth of poverty. Whitaker had between four and five thousand dollars in traveller's checks which he converted into cash while in Sydney. Memory of the wreck of the Adventuress was already fading from the Australian mind; no one dreamed of challenging the signature of a man seven months dead. And as certainly and as quietly as the memory, Whitaker faded away; Hugh Morten took his place, and Sydney knew him no more, nor did any

other parts wherein he had answered to his rightful name.

The money stayed by him handsomely. Thanks to a strong constitution in a tough body (now that its malignant demon was exorcised) he found it easy to pick up a living by one means or another. Indeed, he played many parts in as many fields before joining hands with a young Englishman he had grown to like and entering upon what seemed a forlorn bid for fortune. Thereafter he prospered amazingly.

When at length he did make up his mind to go home, he was L. Melbourne with Lynch, his partner. Whitaker passed old friends in the street. They were George Presbury and his wife—Anne Forsyth that was—self-evident tourists, looking the town over between steamers. Presbury, with no thought in his bumptious head of meeting Hugh Whitaker before the day of judgment, looked at and through him without a hint of recognition; but his wife was another person altogether. Whitaker could not be blind to the surprise and perplexity that shone in her eyes, even though he pretended to be blind to her uncertain nod; long after his back alone was visible to her he could feel her inquiring stare boring into it.

The incident made him think; and he remembered that he was now a man of independent fortune and of idle hands as well. After prolonged consideration he suddenly decided, told Lynch to look out for his interests and expect him back when he should see him, and booked for London by a Royal Mail boat—all in half a day. From London Mr. Hugh Morten crossed immediately to New York on the Olympic, landing in the month of April—nearly six years to a day from the time he had left his native land.

He put up at the Ritz-Carlton, precisely as any foreigner might be expected to do, and remained Hugh Morten while he prowled around the city and found himself. Now and again in the course of his wanderings he encountered well-remembered faces, but always without eliciting the slightest gleam of recognition; circumstances that only went to prove how thoroughly dead and buried he was in the estimation of his day and generation.

Nothing, indeed, seemed as he remembered it. But his ultimate utter awakening to the truth that his home had outgrown him fell upon the fourth afternoon following his return, when a total but most affable gentleman presented himself to Whitaker's consideration with a bogus name and a genuine offer to purchase him a drink, and promptly attempted to enmesh him in a confidence game that had degenerated into a vaudeville joke in the days when both of them had worn knickerbockers. Whitaker privately admitted that he was outclassed, that it was time for him to seek the protection of his friends.

He began with Drummond. The latter, of course, had moved his offices. Whitaker found him independently established in an imposing suite in the



"Whitaker!" He gasped. "My God!"

Woolworth Building—found him an ash-faced man of thirty-five, who etched the side of his roll-top desk as if to save himself from falling.

"Whitaker!" he gasped. "My God!"

"Flattered," said Whitaker, "I'm sure."

He derived considerable mischievous amusement from Drummond's patent stupefaction. It was all so right and proper—as it should have been. He considered his a highly satisfactory resurrection. Seldom does a scene pass off as one plans it; but Drummond played up his part in a most public-spirited fashion—gratifying, to say the least.

It took him some minutes to recover, Whitaker standing by and beaming, as striking as the improvement in Drummond's fortunes. Physically his ex-partner had gone off a bit; the sedentary life led by the average successful man of business in New York had mangled his person unmistakably. Only his face seemed as it had always been—sharply handsome and strong. Whitaker remembered that he had always somewhat meanly envied Drummond his good looks; he himself had been fashioned after the new order of architecture—with a steel frame.

(To Be Continued)

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