

"How unfortunate," said Joan, sitting down as far away from him as the width of the niche would allow.

"Quite the contrary. Any pain would be welcome, if it kept you by my side."

"Compliments are wasted on me, Mr. Emerson," she replied.

"That was not a compliment, truly, but the plain truth."

"You are so much given to small fictions," Joan said with a quiet smile, "that I never know when you are speaking truth. I am compelled to take refuge in believing nothing you say."

Emerson looked vexed and mortified.

"That is rather harsh. I don't think I quite deserve it."

Joan rose.

"I will go to the top," she said, "and you can join us on the way down."

"Don't go yet," he entreated, following her to the rude staircase. "Do listen to me for five minutes, won't you?"

"I have heard enough fiction for one day. I have a great dislike to being taken in, Mr. Emerson."

"What do you mean? Oh! my ankle? Well, I'll own that was a little bit of invention of mine to keep you near—"

She was already up some steps, so he had to give up the idea of saying more. He stood for a minute, frowning and silent, then quickly bounded up in pursuit.

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Some few days after this Joan Kennet was walking homeward in the cool evening, after an afternoon spent with a friend. The lower edge of the sun was just touching the purple horizon, and the portions of the landscape that lay highest were suffused with a ruddy orange light.

The lane was a lonely one, but Joan was not nervous. She lingered to let her eyes dwell on the soft alternation of gold and purple tints, nor did she hurry when she heard behind her the heavy tread of a man.

A shambling, shuffling tread it was, its sound accompanied by a hoarse cough. It came nearer and nearer, and then she was aware of a thick and husky voice addressing her in a feeble, whining monotone—

"Poor man—can't get any work—got any coppers to spare, kind lady? Wife and eight little children—"

etc., etc.

Joan's hand at once sought her pocket. But before she could produce anything therefrom her watch chain was clutched; it snapped at her hasty movement to escape, but the man, a tramp by his appearance, made another snatch.

Joan was hardly conscious of what she did. She only remembered afterward that a hand was for a moment on her wrist; that she exerted all her strength in a fierce thrust; saw her adversary lose his footing and stumble back into a ditch by the roadside; and that she fled with all the speed of which she was capable.

Her assailant was gathering himself up from among the nettles, when he found himself grasped by the throat, and Fred Lenthall, breathless with running, panted—

"You cowardly ruffian—how dare you?"

A brief scuffle ensued. Then the tramp was thrown heavily to the ground.

"You brute, Fred! You've half killed me!" came faintly from him.

Lenthall started and stared.

"Emerson!" he exclaimed, incredulously.

There was no reply. Stooping lower, for the twilight was increasing, he could see now that they were indeed the features of his friend. His eyes were closed, and he appeared perfectly unconscious.

"I don't pity you," muttered Lenthall, as he chafed the other's hands and loosened his neckcloth. Some minutes elapsed without this treatment producing the slightest result.

Half frightened, Lenthall looked round for water. There was none to be seen, but he remembered that lower down the hill on the crest of which he stood, a little stream trickled from the bank.

No movement from Kane. He stooped again to make sure, then picking up the shabby, slouched hat that had hidden the tramp's white brow, he carried it off as a vessel to convey water, and ran down the slope.

At the same instant Kane sprang up and shook his fist after the retreating figure.

"Got my hat, have you, Master Fred!" said he, "well, there's no one coming."

He hastily divested himself of a heavy, dark beard, flung it into the ditch and started off in the direction Joan Kennet had taken.

She was far ahead. He did not overtake her until she was in sight of her own gate.

"Miss Kennet!"

Joan turned around with a pleased smile, on hearing after her adventure, the voice of a friend. At the first glance his uncovered head and tattered coat told her the truth. Her face changed, and she walked on without a word.

"Miss Kennet," he said again, "I hope you were not really alarmed."

No reply.

"You are offended, I see," said Emerson, keeping by her side. "Well, I humbly apologize. It was what you said the other day that put the idea into my head."

Still no response.

"I wish I hadn't done it," he said gloomily, "I am always putting my foot in it with you. Do speak, unless you want me to blow my brains out. No, pray don't go in yet—not till you have forgiven me."

He laid his hand on the gate and held it shut, waiting for a reply. But Joan merely looked him coldly over, with an inward inclination to laugh at his odd appearance.

"How could I tell you would take it so seriously?" and Kane opened the gate, finding she was yet dumb.