

"Is Roy Mason your lawful name?" I asked.

"It is."

"And Henry Morris is, so far as you know, the name of the man buried out there?"

"It is."

"Then, Mason, if I understand your request, you wish to exchange identities with the dead man—you wish to make it appear to the world that Roy Mason lies buried out there. Is that it?"

"Yes, Blake," he answered, unhesitatingly, "that is what I wish. It is simply a harmless exchange of names; but if it need justification, I have reasons to justify it."

"And those reasons, Mason? Pardon me for wishing to know them before becoming even a passive participant in such a deception."

He bowed his head in silence for an instant, then said, slowly—

"I am a married man, Blake. Have you ever suspected it?"

I think I gave a start of surprise at the words. I never had thought of him as a benedict, and told him so now, in answer to his question.

"No," he answered, bitterly, "I am not of the stuff of which husbands are made, and no wonder you never thought of me in that light. Nevertheless, there is a little woman in the far East who bears my name, and whose heart is broken in consequence. Don't look at me like that, Blake, or I can't go on."

His voice broke, and I turned away to avoid seeing the mental anguish in his eyes.

"I knew when I set about winning her," he continued, "that I was not fit for her. I knew that if she could see into my past, she would shrink from me with loathing; for, as you once so aptly put it, Blake, I had kissed the dew from a hundred lips before I ever touched hers. I had, in short, lived a fast life, in the fullest sense of the words, and had imbibed views and ideas of life not calculated to make me the fit custodian of any pure woman's happiness. Yet I loved her, and would not give her up; but I had hard work to win her. One great obstacle stood in my way, and that was her knowledge of my previous drinking habits. That is something, you know, Blake, that we can not hide. All the other crookedness we can cover up with the darkness that lies between two days, but whisky proclaims itself every time. For more than a year she stood firm against all my pleading, and checked me midway in all my vows. But she loved me, and at last, one evening—can I ever forget it?—she put her tender arms about my neck—the first caress she ever gave me—and said: 'Roy, you have made me promises enough, I think, to pave your way to heaven or hell. If you hold them sacred, heaven's doors will open wide for you and me

here on earth. If you break them—Oh, Roy! hell is the only word to describe what I shall suffer. I am weak enough to love you, dear; but never, for one moment, imagine that I will be weak enough to forgive you if you ever break this solemn pledge, by which you have won me. If ever, after this hour, you lift that fatal stuff to your lips, never come into my presence again. Go away, thousands of miles away from me, for you will be as dead to me as though a mound of earth were heaped above you.' Well, Blake, in the face of all this, I married her; even while, in the depths of my inner consciousness, I felt that, sooner or later, I should break the promise to which she had anchored her all. Not that I admitted as much, even to myself, but I had a sort of vague idea that her notions were far-fetched, and entirely too exalted to outlive the wear and tear of every-day life. I even smiled a little to myself at what I mentally termed her heroics, and fondly pictured her a subdued little matron, a year or so hence, with a miniature edition of myself in her arms, too busy and content to let a broken promise, more or less, disturb her equanimity. God! how little I knew her! We had been married almost a year, when she came to me one morning, as I was getting ready to go up town to my business, and laid her head on my shoulder in a caressing way: 'Roy,' she said, 'we think our happiness perfect now, but there is still another joy in store for us, dear,' and lifting her lips to my ear, she whispered a little secret, with shining eyes. I went away smiling at the thought of the wee being who would, doubtless, soon rival me in the little woman's heart—smiling rather complacently, as one who feels the rivets of his fetters loosening a little, and finds his thoughts straying, in a vague, fragmentary way, toward some of the forbidden haunts of his bachelor days. 'It is a fortunate thing,' I thought, 'the coming of this inoffensive little rival, of whom I can not possibly be jealous, yet who will do me a good turn in distracting some of the little wife's attention from me; in loosening some of the clinging tendrils of her heart and fastening them to himself. She's the sweetest, truest little wife imaginable, and I would not exchange her for all the habitable globe; but pshaw! man is a free-born animal, and even love's restraints grow irksome if too long drawn out.' Thus my thoughts shaped themselves throughout that day, as I sat at my desk, and something that seemed to me the light of a dawning freedom was shining into my eyes, the odor of forbidden fruit floating in the atmosphere about me.

"How many men are there in the world, I wonder, who hai the advent of their first-born with similar sensations? More than would be willing to make penitential confession, I imagine, and far more than trusting womankind ever suspects.