THE CASE OF DR. HARWOOD

By Francis Willing Wharton.

THE room was big and square, with lofty doorways and windows, whose ample corners even the bright light of a red-shaded lamp and the blaze of a wood fire left unlighted. Heavy, dark-red curtains hung at the windows, but were not drawn, and through the unshuttered casements light streamed out on the darkness. It was the custom of the house, and to those who stumbled in haste up the chestnut avenue it was like a beacon as they came to find its master, the well-known doctor of Guildford.

It was for this that the lamp stood on the table near the window, a table covered with heaps of papers which had been pushed aside to admit a tray, on which glittered a decanter and a water jug.

It was a wet, chilly night in early December. Drawn around the fire were three men whose easy attitudes betokened that they had dined.

The host sat between his guests, his big, burly frame, exhibited plainly by the slight chair on which he sat astride, resting his arms on its back.

George Harwood had a marked physiognomy, easy to criticise, about which ordinary words of praise seemed inapplicable, yet full of power. His swarthy color, the curl of his black hair, his blunt, wide features and full lips seemed almost touched with the stigma of mixed blood. But a fineness in the wide nostril, a shapeliness in the general contour of the face and head put speculation again at fault.

His guests were the opposing type of male humanity. One slight, sickly, with a high, intellectual forehead and light-blue eyes filled with an eager spirit; the other, slight-framed also, but with an air of buoyant health on his tanned, ruddy cheek, and young, vigorous grace in his attitude.

There had been a moment's pause in the flood of their talk, and it was Harwood who broke it.

"This is a red-letter night," he said, "to have you both together—the two best friends I have, the only friends I have in the world. We must drink a toast. Boys, what shall it be? To our next meeting?"

Wayne, the younger of his two guests, broke into a light-hearted laugh.

"The witches in 'Macbeth' have been before us," he said. "When shall we three meet again, in thunder, lightning and in rain?"

The blue eyes of Lestrange grew merry.

"We are the next thing to witches," he answered. "We are monstrosities, all three of us—doctors in practice, and bachelors every one. Let us drink to our wives and our weddings."

Wayne shook his head emphatically.

"Not I, for one," he returned. "I refuse the toast. I shall think many times before I saddle myself with a woman."

"You are a boy yet," answered Lestrange, "but Harwood and I are getting on. He's 34, and I beat him by a year or more. I always date from college. It's 10 years since we parted," he went on, scrutinizing Harwood. "We've both changed, of course, but you, George—there is something I miss. You are in the prime of manhood, and you don't look old, but your laugh—and your eyes—what is there in 10 years we have talked of to change your eyes?"

Harwood was silent, but turned his black eyes full on his questioner.

"You see, Wayne"—Lestrange turned to the man whom he addressed—"George and I were boys together, went through college and our medicals together, and a year afterward abroad; then I got my chance in Florence; it suited my health, and he went to Broadwood. For 10 years we haven't been able to reach each other. I've written steadily, but—" he turned to Harwood—"you were a poor correspondent, George."

Harwood leaned toward the fire, and knocked the ash off his cigar.

"I wrote to no one," he said.

"Did you forget?" went on his friend. "Did I grow a rusty memory? I should hate to think that. I bothered my friends with so many stories of you that they thought you too good to be true."

"Too good!" Harwood raised his brows, with a laugh.

"I don't mean too moral," returned Lestrange, smiling, "though you never broke the ten commandments that I know of, George."

"Didn't I?" questioned his host. "Well, I have since—every one."

"Not the sixth"—Lestrange broke into a laugh—"unless it was an accident of the profession."

"Not the sixth, surely," he repeated, "or would I stand here unhung? The decanter is empty—you are a boon companion worth having, Dan. Robert, there, is not good at all on an evening like this. Throw a log on the fire while I go and fill this," said he, leaving the room.

There was a momentary silence. Lestrange settled his slight figure in the big armchair in which he sat, and fixed his ethereal eyes on his companion.

"What a magnetic creature Harwood is," he said. "Don't you feel it? The air is always charged with electricity when he's about. He makes life a thing of passionate sensation—he gives a fillip to the imagination of any woman, I'll be bound, and even stirs a man's more sluggish blood. I always turn myself inside out when I am with him, and," he went on as his host entered, "and in return for all my confidences, what have you told me, George? Surely, you must have more than a growing income to tell of."

Harwood placed the decanter on the table, and, coming to the fire, stood near it.

"Principally other people's fun, Dan," he said. "I've had thrilling things happen, but they were all cases and their contingent troubles."

Lestrange caught him by the arm, with a laugh. "Not a bit of it!" he cried. "I see it writ large on you. You have been in some mischief—who was she?"

Harwood shook his head. "I've liked a good many women a little, but a doctor doesn't fall in love easily. Do you think so, Robert? He turned to the younger man, whose light-hazel eyes studied his two companions.

"He sees too much of human nature," he agreed. "He admires women, but they don't attract him; that is, if he is more mental than animal—there is the other type."

"To which, thank God, I don't belong!" exclaimed Harwood, grimly, "though most people think I am something of a brute at first sight."

Lestrange shook his head. "Confess something, or I shall believe it's very black indeed," he persisted.

Harwood shrugged his shoulders.

"What shall I say? There are two charming sisters, living not far away, who think an unmarried doctor fair game. They can't see how Wayne and I can escape their different kinds of loveliness, but they don't know us. We are wary, Robert and I. I have been at it so long that I should be adroit by this time."

Wayne got up and stretched his slender frame.

"Well, he said, "I must go 'round to the Wrights, but I'll be back." He turned to Lestrange. "I will leave you to unlock his lips and discover what you can." He ended with a nod to both men and went out. A moment later they heard him whistling as he ran down the steps in the rain.

Harwood stood looking out into darkness, then with a gesture toward the night outside, drew near his friend.

"What do you make of my assistant, Dan?" he asked.

Lestrange knitted his brows.

"His face is curiously familiar," he answered. "Where did you fall in with him?"

Harwood slipped down into the chair near the fire.

"He turned up a year ago at the hotel here and was called upon suddenly, and when I got there later we fraternized. I found he was looking for work. He stayed with me for a while, and I persuaded him to settle here. He got rooms, and in a way has been my assistant ever since. He is an excellent surgeon, quick at diagnosis and perfect with children—steady, gentle and firm. He studied in Edinburgh and London, and has lived in Paris. I have become attached to him. He sends my moodiness flying, he interests me. I can't make him out. He says frankly there is something he doesn't want to talk about, so we both fight shy of our pasts. There is an indefinable charm about him which delights me."

As Harwood ceased speaking there fell a silence on the two men and the crackling of the fire was heard plainly in the quiet of the room. The pause was a long one, and their thoughts had time to travel to a distance when he spoke again.

"Dan," he began, slowly staring into the blaze, "you asked me for some of my stories, and I'm going to tell you one, though I—I am in a sense breaking confidence in doing so. You—" he stopped and looked in the other man's face, then turned to the fire again. "You were always—safe."

Lestrange jammed his hands into his pockets, and he also watched the logs burn.

"I am," he answered, "safe as the grave."

Harwood gave him one steady look and turned to the contemplation of the fire.

"I was in—never mind where—on a consultation—never mind when—and the other doctor, a younger man, told me this story and asked my advice. I said—but you can tell me what your opinion would have been when I have done. In the town where he lived was a woman, wife of the other doctor of the place, a man between 45 and 50. She was young, say 30 or thereabouts. The town was big enough to employ both men, and their relations were friendly, very friendly. Of course, I know the people. I had been to their house, a big comfortable place. The other doctor, not my friend—we will call him—" he hesitated.

"Call him Julius," said Lestrange; "I see that Caesar's wife is not above suspicion."

Harwood's color had deepened in the hot firelight.

"Very well," he answered. "We will call him Julius. Doctor Julius spent his money on horses and such things. He was little with his wife, yet she was pretty."

"Describe her," said Lestrange. "I like to know the outward and visible signs."

Harwood leaned back and folded his arms on his chest.

"She was not tall," he answered, slowly, "rather slight, but rounded, too. Fair-haired, fair eyes, fair altogether. She was a pure, good creature, with no thought of evil; but her temper was quick, flashed into fire, and died and left her penitent, tender—" he stopped.

Lestrange bent forward and rested his hand on Harwood's knee. "Don't, don't go on," he said, "with this flimsy disguise. Of course I know that you are the man—why not be frank with me?"

Harwood's eyes met his with a strange flash.

"Frank with you—frank with you," he repeated. "Well, then, I will be, but remember you have brought this on yourself.

"What I have told you I have told no man. It isn't pleasant to hear, nor yet to tell, but lately—lately" he passed his hand over his eyes—"I have been possessed by fancies. Perhaps you can exorcise the spirits. I am afraid of turning too often to this ever-ready friend," he touched the glass near him—"and if I do, matters will go worse with me, not better. But to go on, to be frank with you—that's it, isn't it, Dan?" He stopped and fixed his eyes on his friend's face.

Lestrange nodded.

"Well, then," began Harwood again. "I was telling you about Mary, 'how open, passionate she was, in every feeling, and how I loved her; for slowly it came to that. I went often to the house, saw her about, and I—I loved her."

Lestrange eyed him with a very gentle gaze. "Foolish George," he said.

Harwood met the softness of his eyes with a faint smile.

"Foolish George," he repeated, and went on. "I can see the living room in her house now. It was full of her presence, of her charm. I found out that she was unhappy, and in a little while she—she told me why."

"Doctor Julius, of course," interjected Lestrange.

"Of course," answered Harwood. "She had married him out of a sort of gratitude and a hope of protection and kindness. It took her just 24 hours to repent. It was not only that his love was of the meanest, poorest kind, that he rapidly cooled toward her, that he was unfaithful to her, but that, in living with him, she felt that she was gradually learning life as he saw it, losing her purity, her trust. When I met her, she had been married two years, and her heart was broken—and—" He hesitated, and Lestrange finished his sentence.

"And you undertook to mend it."

"No," Hardwood answered, slowly. "To give her another in exchange—my own, which I took from my breast and laid in her hands."

There was a moment's pause. Then Lestrange spoke.

"Rather a costly way of doing things," he said.

Hardwood's eyes met his.

"There are times when you do not count the cost," he returned. The other man shrugged his shoulders, and Harwood went on: "So she told me all. She gave me an insight into the simplicity, the innocence of a woman's mind. To know a woman like that creates an ideal, she sets your love apart from your lower self—and so, though we loved each other, we never broke faith with her husband. She transfigured my idea of life; in return, I gave her myself, and Doctor Julius came to know it."

Lestrange made a gesture of protestation.

"But how and why?" he cried. "You were twice a fool. If a man sets to work to spoil his happiness, need he write it on his face?"

Harwood shook his head. "It was not my doing. It was Mary's. She had eyes out of which each emotion looked plain; she had a voice that expressed each change of feeling, and Julius was no fool. And then happened that strange thing that occurs not infrequently in this strange world—having no love of her left, no trace of tenderness, he yet became servant to another passion, jealousy. It strengthened every evil instinct, and it even created new vileness in him. He began to lay traps for her, to get her to commit herself. He was cool, clever, in league with the devil; and one night, after he had wounded and mocked her, drawn her on and chafed her spirit till it bled, she did what he had tried to make her do, avowed her love for me. Then he turned on her and insulted her. I cannot give the scene between them, but the upshot of it was that, while he poured on her his contempt and abuse, he told her, in revenge for her daring to love another man, he should no longer seek amusements away from home, that he should have fit associates in the people he would bring to the house, men like her lover, women as wanton as herself."

Lestrange got up and shook himself. "The beast! What did she do?"

"She came and told me all," went on Harwood. "I begged her to go away with me, but she said Julius would follow us and ruin me as well as her. He wanted nothing better. She was almost frenzied with hate and fear of him. I comforted her as best I could, and told her I would meet him on his way home that afternoon and force from him some compromise—I would protect her, and the thing she dreaded would never come to pass—so she went home, and I went out to my work. It was August. It had been a damp, hot month, with a luxuriant, rank beauty of growth in the trees and leaves and flowers surpassed anything I have ever known. The days were long, heavy, hot; the afternoons were flooded with ripe sunshine; the sunsets were gorgeous, fiery and oppressive. I remember the feeling of the air one evening when I was sitting in the fields. I watched the sun sink down among some wooded hills before me—sink slowly, redly down; and as the light waned, the shadows turned purple, the grass grew damp, and I shivered with a sense of animal closeness to nature, animal farness from God."

He clenched and unclenched his hands restlessly as he talked. "It was on such an evening that I waited for Julius in the woods near his house. I knew he was to visit a woman who lay dying, and would take that way home. The sunlight filtered through the trees, its slanting beams reddened and brown earth. Some leaves had fallen. They crackled, and I looked up to see the doctor coming toward me.

"'Well met!' he cried. 'I come from Widow Claxton's deathbed. You can give me news of the Weldon boy. Is he alive? He has been a long time dying.'

"'He is not dead yet,' I said, 'but I wanted to see you on other business.'

"We both stood still.

"'What is this other business?'

"'Your wife.'"

The change in Harwood's face, in Harwood's voice, ran the blood cold through Lestrange's veins. He seemed to stand upon the spot with the two men.

"The doctor grew white with hate," went on the young man. "He used a word I will not repeat in connection with her name, and added—'What have you to say of her?'

"'Then I said my say—how I would go, how she would agree to anything, but her self-respect she must have. That was not much to ask. I waited for his answer. He looked at me. He was a gaunt, tall man, active, and spare of frame. His face, always grayish in color, was framed in a dark beard. His eyes were small, dark, deepset and had a shifting and yet ferocious expression that made you watch him as he watched you. But his mouth, the thin lips pressed into a sneer, held more of his character than all else beside, a coarse, a clever, a malignant mouth. He twisted with a slow smile as he faced me.

"'Your request is unique,' he said. 'I am to leave my wife free to become your mistress.'"

Lestrange made a suppressed movement.

"I would have killed him," he said.

Harwood looked at him. "Not then," he said. "I controlled myself. 'You do not understand,' I said. 'I am to go—to leave the place. She wishes to be a good woman. Let her fulfill her wish.' Julius laughed.

"'You have been so discreet, you two,' he said. 'Had you been ordinary sinners, I would have laid you by the heels long ago, and dragged my name from her in the divorce court; but since you are too careful for that. I shall have the satisfaction, at any rate, of leveling the pride of a woman who is too pure to care for her own husband. In the days to come she shall know what company a woman like herself should keep. You may join us, you may—' I will not repeat the words, Lestrange, but it was then I struck him." The young man leaned forward, his fingers locked, gazing past his companion into the air beyond. "I can see him as I can see you," he went on, "so clear, so plain. He ended his vile sentence, and as the last words fell upon the air, he threw back his head and laughed, and I sprang at him. I caught him by the throat, and shook him. I can feel it gasping in my hands. We struggled, he wound his legs about mine and brought us both to the ground. He was so filled with hate of me, and love of his own life, that he gained the strength of three such men as he might have, and it needed all my power to keep him under. We fought in silence, rolling back and forth, until I suddenly felt the sharp point of a knife graze my ribs, seeking my heart; and, before he could get his arm free to strike, I caught his head in my hands and beat it on the roots of the trees; and then I became aware that he made no resistance, and, rolling him off, I lay still to get a horrible dimness out of my eyes. Then I got to my feet and looked around—where was he? Where was the man who was the source of such bitter hate and fear, who held such terrible power in his hands—then I saw, lying on the ground, a strange body, and I tried to think. It had grown twilight. The sun was dropping out of sight, the shadows thickened, and I looked down at my blood-stained hands, and I tried to plan a way. I had not meant to kill him, but I would not hang for this. I knelt down beside him and raised his head. There was a deep hole in the back of it, and much blood on the ground. I listened to his heart. It was silent. He could not go home to Mary and insult her. That much was accomplished. He must not be found very soon—best not at all. He was known to be a man of eccentric and bad habits of life. He might have gone off somewhere for a day or two. But what to do with this? It was darkening fast, but there was daylight still—the river! That was the way. I picked him up and carried him. I think I was half mad then, for I strode along without precaution. I came to the stream. It was deep, and the mud thick at the bottom. I took stones and put them in his pockets, stuffed them between his waistcoat; and the I took off my clothes, and, getting into the water, swam to the middle of the stream and let him down. He sank—sank—some bubbles rose, but his body lay quiet at the bottom of the river. I swam back and looked my clothes over. My cuffs were red. I washed them white again. The sleeve of my coat was stained. I washed it, too, but it would not come quite clean again. Then I went back to the place. I dug up the bloody dirt and buried it. I filled the hole and stamped it down. I rubbed away the marks of our heels where I could see them, in the gathering gloom, and scattered leaves over it all; and during this, met no one. Then I went home—and that's the story, Dan."

He ceased speaking, and there was a moment's silence in the room. Lestrange leaned forward, his hands clasped so tightly the fingers made red stains upon the backs.

"Is that all?" he said.

Harwood relaxed his tense attitude, and met his eyes with his somber gaze.

"There was talk, wonder, a sort of investigation of his usual haunts, and that was all."

The clear blue of Lestrange's eyes flashed. "But Mary?" he interrogated.

Harwood turned to the fire, and rested his chin upon his hands.

"I went the next day," he spoke slowly, heavily, as though the words were dragged from him—"and asked how she was, but did not ask to see her, and so on the day after, and I did not try to see her till the talk had died away—it was several weeks, perhaps. Then one day I stood in the strange, familiar, unfamiliar house, and waited in the room I knew so well—stood by the window and looked out through the vines, and, hearing a sound, turned to see her coming toward me. She stopped, there was a question in her eyes and a hope—the hope died; something in my face had answered the question. She stood quite still, and she did not hold out her hand—her gentle, white hand. It was always fair, but coming from the sleeve of the black dress she wore, it looked like a flower. I longed to take it in mine, and then I felt—for I tell you I have fancies, Dan—felt his throat quivering under my fingers, and I looked at her, and I was glad, glad the thing was done, and I have never gone back on that, never, even when—" He stopped and passed his hand over his brow, as though to wipe away something.

"Go on," whispered Lestrange.

"I asked conventional questions," proceeded Harwood—"her plans and so forth. She trembled, and the truth came suddenly on me. She was afraid of me—of him—of the past and of the future. Her love had died in her fear. I could not endure it! All my life and all my strength seemed to go from me! Was this love? Was this faith? Was this constancy? Something of this I said, not as it surged within me; for she chilled me, and held me captive in the limits of her nature. She answered me at last—a few words in which her terror held the chief part. She was sorry for me, but love me, stand by me, help me to live my life—she put out her hands and shuddered, and so we parted—parted, and she left me robbed, Dan, of everything I valued, peace and faith and love." He got up as he spoke, and, standing before the fire, folded his arms upon his chest. Lestrange groaned.

"Just then I got this chance at Guildford here," Harwood went on, "and I came, resolute to put together the broken bits of me and be of use to other men, and I worked on through the bitterness that seemed to build itself like a wall about my heart, between me and the light; but, as the time went on, I lost courage, Dan. I have grown morbid and half cracked. I sit by the fire here alone, and go over my life; I come to that evening; I feel its air, warm and damp upon my cheek; I see the same sunlight; I meet him; we have our talk; the fight begins, ends, I carry him to the river, and when it is all done and the leaves scattered over the ground, the vision fades—but I am alone. Do you know what it is to be alone with things like that? Sometimes it is Mary; we talk together; I feel her near me; her liveliness, her shallowness; we part in bitterness again, and I am alone—alone."

He rested his arms upon the mantelshelf and buried his face in his hands. Lestrange groaned.

"And it is getting worse," Harwood turned and stated to him with troubled eyes. "Today I went to the waiting room of the hospital to tell a man about his wife. I was sorry it was a bad case. I came toward him. His back was toward me. I laid my hand upon his shoulder. He turned—the horror of it! It was Julius! I sprang back. My eyes were dim. I felt a touch upon my arm, and met the gentle, concerned gaze of the wondering man before me. A girl died in the hospital the other day. She had grown to look so like Mary that I could not rid myself of the thought that it was she; and so it goes, Dan. You asked me why I don't laugh as I used to do, why I have different eyes and now you know." He made a gesture that had a sore of despair in it. Lestrange bent toward him, and laid his hand on his arm.

"But George," he said, "what is going to be the upshot of it all? What are you going to do?"

Harwood shrugged his shoulders. "Do!" he repeated. "Nothing. What can I do? I give myself a year, then enough morphia to lay me under the ground. I prefer that to a cell somewhere. But come, Dan, I must not ruin our whole evening—"

Lestrange interrupted him.

"Don't be a fool," he said, roughly. "Do you think I can break off like that? Tell me what I can do to help you?"

Harwood fixed his eyes on him. "Help me?" he returned, with a bitter smile. "Well, I think if you found a woman, noble and courageous, who would say to me: 'I know your story, and, in spite of it, can love you, if she were also beautiful and charming, why, then I think I might be able to try life at her side—short of that—". He shook his head.

"You ask much," answered Lestrange, slowly. "But give me time. Promise, George, that you will—will not—"

Harwood turned to him, fiercely. "I promise nothing," he said. "There comes to me at times such a longing for the end of it—" He stopped, abruptly. "Here is Wayne," he added, in another tone of voice, and the two men turned to greet the young man who stood in the dorway with a dripping umbrella. Behind him a servant entered to give a message to Harwood.

"I must be off," said the latter, his face very grave. "You'll forgive me, Dan, but I shall have to answer this call. I will be back as soon as I can. You must be tired, after your journey. Have a nightcap with Robert and tumble in." He rested his hand lightly on Lestrange's shoulder as he passed him. "I will see you in the morning," he added as he went out.

Wayne drew near the fire, and, slipping down into the chair opposite Lestrange, looked at him.

"It's beastly wet," he remarked.

"You don't look as though a little water would hurt you," rejoined his companion, smiling, his blue eyes busy with a keen scrutiny of his face. "By the way, Harwood said you studied in Paris. I wonder whether I could have seen you there?"

The younger man brought his light-hazel eyes to bear on his questioner. They were big, wide-open eyes, alert, a little defiant in expression.

"I don't remember your name," he answered, "and it ain't a common one."

"I suppose I must be mistaken," Lestrange got up and lit a cigar. "I must be of course. George tells me you are in a sort of alliance."

Wayne laughed, a light-hearted laugh that showed his white teeth and gave his mouth a charming expression. When he was silent, the tightly pressed lips suggested a sort of antagonism to life.

"That's one way to put it," he said. "I am really a sort of doctor's apprentice."

"Not a bit of it," Lestrange answered. "Harwood speaks very highly of you. Are you aware," he added, in a friendly voice, "that your coat is wet and your boots soaking."

For answer Wayne got up, and slipping off his coat, hung it over the back of a chair, and set it near the fire. "Thank you," he said. "I forgot about the rain. I've got a pair of shoes in Harwood's room. I'll go up and get them." He left the room, whistling under his breath a soft little whistle that accompanied him everywhere.

Lestrange took a hard pull at his cigar and set it firmly between his teeth.

"Now," he said aloud, "if I can concentrate my mind I can remember where I have seen that face."

There was silence in the room. Suddenly he struck the arm of his chair.

"I've got it!" he cried. "Paris, a fete, races, the Grand Prix—Nina Havelock! That's it." He gazed around the room in triumph. Then his face fell. "Fool!" he said. "That was a woman! This is a man! Oh, Lord!" He got up and walked about the room. "What good will a woman do me?" he muttered. "The likeness is extraordinary. He might be her brother, but she had none." He stopped by the fire again. "How Warner stared at her that day, with his miserable, hungry eyes, and gave his life afterward in that absurd duel to prove his love. She became a hospital nurse afterward—and studied medicine—studied medicine, by heaven!" He sank down in his chair and grew silent, and when Wayne entered he merely greeted him with a little nod. The latter lit a cigarette, and sitting down, wrapped the scarlet silk dressing-gown he wore about him, and passed his hand over his coat.

"It will be dry shortly," he remarked, and then he also leaned back in silence.

They smoked steadily in the warmth of the room, and at last Lestrange spoke.

"Wayne," he began slowly, "I am worried about Harwood."

His companion watched his cigarette smoke curl upward.

"Can you account for his troubled state?" asked Lestrange. "Is he in love with any one?"

"I think not," returned Wayne, considering the end of his cigarette. "Certainly I have seen no signs of it."

"He reminds me," the other went on, "of a friend of mine who died in Paris years ago—shot in a duel about a girl. Warner—Charles Warner. Did you ever meet him."

"Warner," Wayne repeated. "No, I never did."

"He was a fine fellow," Lestrange continued, "and more in love than I ever saw human creature. Did you ever meet the girl, a Miss Havelock? She was widely known at the time for her beauty and her spirited riding."

The younger man had restored his arm on the low, padded back of his chair, his cheek sunk in his hand. He seemed to consider Lestrange's question, and after a moment, answered it with a negative ungarnished by further words.

Lestrange stared into the fire as he went on. "That's all, beside the point is what to do for Harwood and I have the answer if I could put it into action. Get him a wife!" He stopped and fixed those gentle, intense eyes of his on the young man before him, whose look never wavered from the fire. Through the youth of the face for the first time he saw signs of a life lived hard, the bright color that had held its healthy hue there in the evening had faded, the hazed eyes were brilliant with fatigue, the corners of the mouth, robbed of their smile, had taken a less aggressive set. Lestrange leaned eagerly toward him. "I say," he repeated, "find him a wife! What do you answer to that?"

The young man, thus challenged, turned on him with something almost savage in his manner.

"We differ," he said. "I think less of women, it seems, than you do. I see no one within 20 miles fit to mate with Harwood for an hour, and as to tying him to one of them for life—" He shrugged his shoulders with a sort of disdain that kept Lestrange's gaze fastened on him.

"You are thinking of some commonplace creature," he returned, quickly, "but suppose there should come in his way a rare person, compounded of strange opposite, a woman, yet with the courage and brains of a man, would you refuse to advise him a try at domesticity after his years of loneliness?"

"I know of no such person," Wayne said, shortly. "Do you?"

The two faced each other. Lestrange had a spot of red on each cheek.

"I think I do," he returned, dropping his words out slowly, "if she will come out in her true colors."

The face he watched hardened. "Oh, if there is anything false about the colors she is sailing under, it's all up with her as far as Harwood is concerned, so if I were you, I'd let things stand as they are, and be glad, at least, that he isn't married to a fool. That's what the best men generally come to."

Lestrange shook his head, and, throwing the end of his cigar into the fire, took a turn about the room.

"You don't understand how pressing the situation is," he said. "He needs a woman. No man can fill the place that's empty here."

Wayne turned to the fire and shaded his face with his hand.

"Harwood's story," went on the other, hurriedly, "is not one to be faced by any ordinary woman, I admit that. His life is not to be lived except with the help of some strong nature who shall come to him at the crisis in his life. You do not know him as I do—"

Wayne interrupted him with a gesture.

"I know him 10 times better," he returned fiercely, his voice hoarse and low. "I know that softness, weakness almost, is what attracts him in women, and not to save his soul could he conquer his temperament. Your creature of nerve and resource that you described just now"—he crimsoned to his brow, but proceeded sternly—"would wring from him respect and comradeship, perhaps, no more; his passion he would expend on some—" he stumbled over an adjective—"on some child, such as he told us of an hour ago. No, I tell you, let him alone; and if such a woman comes into his life as he could love—then—then encourage him to attain her."

Lestrange stopped before the fire and jammed his nervous hands into his pockets.

"All very well, my dear fellow," he answered, impatiently, "but that takes time, and time is what we have not to spare. Harwood needs help now—now. I believe it stands in his reach. I believe I have fallen on a fact that will color his whole life anew. Will you tell him of it, or shall I?"

The other man had risen also, and leaned against the mantel.

"You will without scruple violate another person's wishes as to the conduct of his own life, a life on which you have no claim?" His voice shook, but his eyes blazed into those of his companion.

Lestrange uttered a low groan.

"Ah," he said, "I understand. There is something of which you are ashamed—there is—"

"Nothing, before God," the answer flashed back at him.

"Then, as bad or worse, you do not love him. I could not have believed it possible to live with him as you have done, to come in contact with every phase of his noble nature, and not love him. Forgive me, I withdraw." He turned wearily and sank into his chair again. There was a long heavy silence. It grew on them and rested like a weight. Suddenly a sound of wheels broke it, a door opened, a voice outside gave an order.

The younger man raised his head and listened; his compaion's eyes had sprung to his face, and, resting there, filled swiftly with light. Rising, he held out both hands and laughed.

"You did not answer me," he cried, "but your face does. Do not try to deny it. I warn you that I shall tell him everything I believe before I go tomorrow." His delicate, refined face shone as though a lamp showed through its tranparency, and he added a gesture of deference, of homage. "Forgive me," he whispered "for treating you like a man."

Their eyes met, and Harwood, flinging open the door, and coming to the fire, glanced at their reddened faces.

"Have you two chaps been fighting?" he asked, with a weary smile. "Jove! I'm getting soft in my old age. It was dull work driving against the rain and wind, and the little girl hadn't gained, either. That takes the heart out of you—to see them getting steadily worse."

Lestrange came up beside him as he lay back in the big armchair, his head on its back, his eyes half closed.

"Good night, old chap," he said, laying his hand fondly on the broad shoulder near him. "Good night. Come to bed soon, and don't you two talk cases." He walked to the door. "Good night," he added to the tall, slender figure wrapped in its heavy red silk gown that faced him with eyes blazing. "I am a man of my word, Wayne, don't forget that." And he left the room.

Harwood clasped his hands behind his curly head and, his lids drooping over his dark eyes, looked down into the fire.

"What does the beggar mean?" he asked, idly. He got no answer. His companion, after one hasty turn about the room, had gone to a seat behind the big writing table, and, leaning both elbows on it, had covered his face with his hands. Harwood twisted about in his chair as the silence lengthened, and, rising, crossed to the table and sat before it.

"Tired?" he said gently.

The hands were withdrawn from the face opposite him. Wayne leaned back and looked at him.

"Yes—no" he stumbled out the words. "Your patient was no better?"

Harwood shook his head and began sorting the paper before him. The other watched him and slowly hardened into a set image.

"Harwood," the low, soft, hoarse voice began. "I have something to tell you. Promise me that you will sit still and hear me to the end."

Harwood stared at the countenance before him. It was aflame with color, in kindness he dropped his gaze again on his papers.

"Fire away. Of course, I'll hear you to the end."

Wayne's hands clinched. The next words came through set teeth.

"Harwood, I'm going to leave you. I'm going away."

The busy hands at the desk dropped into their owner's lap; he looked up and bent his frown sternly on his companion.

"Going away?"

"Yes. I'm going away. It isn't from choice, but I must go."

Harwood stared, then uttered a laugh.

"How utterly ridiculous the boy is," he returned. "Must! Must!. You simply can't go. I won't let you, that's all."

Wayne's arms folded tightly.

"You will when I tell you all," was the answer. "Go over there in your chair by the fire, and listen."

Harwood got up and took a long turn up and down the room.

"Go ahead," he returned. "So it's coming, it is? The secret that has stood between us. Well, I'm prepared, and it would not be possible to upset our friendship. Do you want a drink?"

A short laugh that was almost a sob went with the denial he received and then, as he sat before the fire, that half-defiant, half-pleading voice began again.

"Harwood, I have deceived you—" It hesitated.

"So I supposed," said Harwood, smiling into the fire. "But you haven't deceived me as to your being the most delightful companion I've ever had, and the best assistant in the operating room." He laughed.

"Don't don't," Wayne began again. "Listen, I—I am not a man!" Harwood smiled again. "No, I know that. You are a boy if there ever was one."

Wayne's nails cut the flesh. "No, I am not a boy, either, I am—" The other man rose and sank into the seat opposite the speaker.

"A roaring lion, I suppose," he ended for him, half lightly, half grimly.

Their eyes met.

"I am a woman," said Wayne.

The black eyes of the man who faced him shone like weapons.

"Come, come," he said sternly, "sensible, be—"

"I mean it! I mean it!" was the answer. Don't, don't persist. How can I, man? Believe me, George, I mean it."

Suddenly the brown head, with its short, curly locks, fell on the arm resting on the table, and she shook from head to foot.

Harwood also leaned on the table near that graceful head as it rested on the scarlet silk sleeves, and stared down at it.

"Are you mad?" he said.

She raised her head and looked at him.

"Look at me. Look!" she said.

Their eyes met and hers dropped beneath his stare, and the color flamed into her cheek.

He put out his hand, and, taking hers, turned it palm down on the table; then, pushing back his chair, he uttered a low sound. "By the Lord, it's true!" There was silence. Harwood turned from her and struck his knee with his clenched hand.

"How blind I've been. How dull, how besotted in my own misery. I've always suspected what selfishness there lay in me, and since I've thought of putting this wretched body of mine under the ground, I've thought of little else. So—so—you're a woman, a woman. That accounts for it! The sort of content I've had with you, one doesn't get with a man." He got up and walked up and down the room, then stopped and looked at her. "But the work—how did you learn it? And your ways? Your talk? Your—" He sank into the chair by the table. "Tell me," he said, "the whole story, every word, from beginning to end. I, who have been so blind, so deaf. I am all eyes, all ears."

She leaned back, her hands in her lap, and began, with no sign of emotion except that her nether lip quivered with the first words.

"It's a dull story"—she spoke slowly—"with little romance in it, and much struggle of a somewhat bitter kind. It starts from the time when my father died. I need not go back of that, when we lived a life of idle pleasure, knocking about from place to place, he and I together. I faced the world when he died without a penny, and I had to make a living somehow, and I became a nurse in a hospital. I had abounding health, fingers easily taught, and I soon made my way; then it occurred to me to learn medicine. I worked at night to support myself, and I studied hard. It was in Edinburgh, and I got my degree, and after that a place as assistant in a hospital for children."

She stopped wearily, and Harwood watched her with a wonder that grew. How had he been so blind?

"I tried then to establish a practice," she began again, shading her eyes with her hand, "and, not succeeding in Edinburgh, I went to London and worked among the very poor; but, whenever I became associated with a man, he took the helm and displaced me; he looked down on me—I was finding life more than I could bear, and not making a living. I lived in a lodging house, and my next door neighbor was a lad slightly built, and looking a little like me. It was that which put it in my head. I bought a suit of clothes from him, presumably for a poor patient, changed my lodgings, and, dressed as them, one night I went out. Nobody bothered me. I went to a concert. The women looked at me, the men didn't. Then I knew I was all right. It used to be the other way. For a while I studied my expressions, gestures, walk, and then I took the name you know me by, moved again and set to work. It went very well, but the fear of recognition was too great. I decided to go where I knew no one, and had been knocking about the country, trying to get a place to settle down, when I fell in with you. There you have it, and now I must move on."

She wrapped the robe about her, waiting for him to speak.

Harwood drew a deep breath. "You wonderful creature—the courage of it! Were you ever caught?"

"Once or twice. It was close work, but I got away."

He leaned eagerly toward her. "But that day after I first saw you, you were having a kind of a row with a man. If I hadn't come up, he would have struck you."

She shrugged her shoulders. "I trusted to luck. I worked it out this way: Never go back on it—see it through. It was my only chance—be have and act as a man, and I would get through—better do anything than funk."

"Funk," repeated Harwood. "That's it. You don't talk like a woman."

She smiled for the first time. "I patterned my talk first on the casual men I met, then on you."

Harwood gave her one long, slow look; then, rising, moved about the room restlessly.

"How strange it all is! How strange this sudden friendship we have had, the closeness of the intimacy in two days, the easy speech one does not have with men except through years of habit. The sentiment and laughter, the piquance of your talk. I might have guessed no man could supply such a place; and would have, too, if I had not been sunk in my own selfish thoughts. When you contemplate leaving the world by your own hand, it shuts your eyes and ears to all other thoughts. I used to turn to you with the eagerness with which a man, long thirsty, drinks. When the spring is clear and sparkling, he does not question whence the brightness comes. I lived in the present once more, was a man, not a creature of memories; for that, I was grateful to you for that, I loved you—now—now—"

As he finished the flood of his talk poured out so easily to her, he stopped by the table, and she stared up at the virile figure. He caught her eyes, and his own softened, glowing as he looked down. "Now—now—" he hesitated.

Her face changed. "Now I go; the play is over. Put out the candles."

He stood looking down at the light on her hair. "Why do you go?"

She made a gesture of hopeless pain. She had grown pale, and the bright flush died. "It has come to an end," she said. "Your friend Lestrange knew me. He would have told you. I preferred doing it myself."

"Lestrange knew you," repeated Harwood. "When? Where?"

"Never to speak to," she answered. "He was the friend of a man who—" she hesitated.

The man before her slipped into his chair and fastened his dark eyes on her face.

"Who loved you," he finished for her.

She did not meet his gaze. "Yes."

He drew a deep breath. "So," he said, "you are really a woman, and a man may love you. I begin to take it in." He gave one long, long look about the room that made a picture of the heavy curtains, the fire, the warmth, the comfort—all that you would have been so empty, cold without that fellow presence there—and his roving eyes fixed on her, hungrily.

"What is your name?" he asked.

She flushed. "Nina," she replied.

A slow color brightened his dark cheek. "What a feminine little name," he said; "and I have been calling you Robert for a year. Nina—what a different sound it has. Nina—Nina what?"

"Havelock," she answered.

He smiled. "Ah, there is where the dash comes in! It has been proved that Havelock is a name to quell a mutiny. So, Nina Havelock, what are you going to do?"

Her lips set painfully. "Go," she said.

Her companion extended his clenched hand on the table.

"But Harwood," he said, "George Harwood? What are you going to do with him?"

Her lips quivered. "Do with him?"

"Yes; go, and see what becomes of him."

She drew her red robe about her, and moved restlessly. "You will lead the life you led before I came."

Harwood pushed back his chair, and folded his arms on his chest. "How simple it sounds," he said, and going to the fire, he drew his chair to it and held out his hands as though he were cold. "I see your point of view perfectly," he added. "Go, but go quickly."

She rose also and stood somewh

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