

BY ALICE WILLIAMSON.



SHALL never forget the first time I saw Sara Orme. It was at Foxborough Hydropathic, where I had been for several summers in succession; and where, though I was not precisely in my first youth, I was by way of being a belle.

I had heard old Lady Balfour say that her friend, Mrs. Gresham, was coming to the Hydro, and that she would arrive on a certain day, accompanied by a Miss Orme, whom Lady Balfour had never met. But I should not have given the matter a thought if, on the afternoon of their advent, I had not heard the people on the tennis-ground asking one another:—

“Have you seen Miss Orme? Have you seen the beauty?”

Then I pricked up my ears. I hate sensations, and especially dislike the fuss some of my fellow-beings make over a new face.

“No,” I said, in answer to the question going the rounds. “Is there a beauty? Who is she? What is she?”

I was curious to know all particulars, and just what I might have to fear; but I was not pleased that Sir Evelyn Balfour should be within hearing distance and listening with some interest. Sir Evelyn stood at the head

of the Hydro eligibles, and this was the second year he had accompanied his mother to Foxborough, where she had been ordered for her health.

“Beauty? I should think there *was* a beauty!” ejaculated Harry Marley, or “Marry Harley,” as he was usually called, because of his penchant for proposing to every pretty girl he met. Not that he ever proposed to me—but that is a detail. “You never saw such a beauty off a Salon or Academy canvas! I caught a glimpse of her as she came in, and watched her writing her own name and an old lady’s in the register. Of course, she turned out to be the Miss Orme who was to come with a Mrs. Gresham.”

Two or three others besides “Marry Harley” had seen the vision also, it appeared, and there was a general interchange of impressions.

“Gorgeous auburn hair——”

“No, decidedly Titian gold—not dark enough for auburn.”

“Brown eyes——”

“Oh! I beg your pardon, they were distinctly violet.”

“Skin like an alabaster lamp, with a rosy light shining through. Exquisite figure, too.”



"How old?"

"Oh, twenty-one or two."

Such nonsense I never heard, and it was impossible to listen with patience. It never would have been tolerated, except at a Hydropathic. Everybody was particularly keen about tea, hoping for a glimpse of the new arrivals. But it was not vouchsafed, and therefore people were unusually prompt in responding to the dinner-gong.

As luck would have it, the only two vacant seats were at the long table, directly on my left, and, when the strangers came in, I had the full benefit of Miss Orme's profile. I never was so disappointed in my life. I did not consider that she had any pretensions to beauty. She was simply a little, thin, insignificant figure in white, with a deadly pale face, red hair, very wavy, and in great quantities, good enough features, a large mouth, with bright lips, very likely painted. Her eyes were greyish green, and the brows and lashes were so much darker than the hair, that I am positive they must have been dyed. She had an air of girlishness, but I should have pronounced her nearer twenty-six than twenty-one or two. The moment I looked at her I felt convinced that she was a woman with a history, and made up my mind that I would never rest till I had found it out.

It seemed that several people beside Lady Balfour had met Mrs. Gresham, who was said to be a *persona grata* in Bristol, or some other provincial town. After dinner, she and Miss Orme became the centre of attraction in the drawing-room, where even Sir Evelyn was drawn into the circle. Presently the foolish old lady made some doting remark about her favourite's voice, and Miss Orme was implored to sing.

"Not to-night, please," I heard her say. "To-morrow, when I am rested, if you care to ask me."

She had an air of thinking much of herself and her accomplishments, and a sudden upward glance from under her lashes, which was very effective with men.

Next night she did sing. She affected German songs, and her voice was a powerful contralto, but, in my opinion, it could not touch my own. However, it was much admired, and what with her voice and her queer eyes and hair, she sprang, in a moment, to the topmost pinnacle of success. Nothing was complete after that night without Miss Orme. She could not play tennis, and she must be taught. She could ride, and riding parties must be got up. She

must learn golf, she must be shown the best places for sketching, she must teach people that wonderful skirt dance Mrs. Gresham said she had invented. She liked walking, and she liked picnics. Therefore, the male idiots at the Hydro vied with each other in planning excursions to dilapidated ruins, and tiresome walking parties. When Sir Evelyn Balfour began to be the principal instigator of gaieties in Miss Orme's honour, life for me at the Hydro ceased to seem worth living. I hated the girl, and she was certainly not fond of me, but it was not my *métier* to treat her discourteously, and we usually conversed fitfully at the table.

"Your accent is not like that of any county with which I'm familiar," I said one day, a week after the Gresham-Orme advent. "May I inquire what part of England is your home?"

She laughed. "I'm an American; didn't you know?"

"I had not guessed it. You don't speak like an American," I said.

"Possibly not like those you've met. We Southerners are not great travellers. I am a Virginian. My home used to be in Richmond."

"Richmond, Virginia!" I repeated. "A distant connection of mine went there to live many years ago."

I looked at her as I said this, and though her face was partially turned away, I saw a flush mount to her forehead. I felt sure she regretted telling me where she lived. I said no more, but I did not mean to let the matter drop there. I had not heard from my cousin's husband for a long while, but I knew that he was still in America, and I decided, as time was a great object with me, to be extravagant, and cable for particulars regarding Miss Orme's Richmond career.

My message was short, but I thought it might bring what I wanted, unless the name of Orme were an assumed one. It would be nine or ten days at least before I could have a letter in return, and it proved especially difficult to possess my soul in patience, as, during the interim, Sir Evelyn Balfour and Miss Orme were getting themselves gossiped about. My powerlessness to act made me desperate, and I took to questioning Mrs. Gresham. I learned little of any real value, but enough to understand that she had only known Miss Orme for a year or two, that she had taken a fancy to her from the first, and had, soon after, asked the girl to make her home with her. I guessed that the favourite was penniless, and



was merely living in the capacity of paid companion to her patroness.

What I had heard, and what I suspected, I hinted to Lady Balfour, in a chatty, off-hand way, and even dropped a word or two to Sir Evelyn himself, but it was of no avail. Lady Balfour smiled, and Sir Evelyn frowned, and everything went on as before.

Last year, all had been widely different. Sir Evelyn had frankly confessed to being bored at the Hydro, where he would not have stayed for a moment, had it not been for his mother. I had endeavoured to make things pleasant for him, and sometimes I had fancied that I was succeeding passing well. He was a man of thirty-three, within a year or two of my real age, five years beyond my ostensible one. He had a fine old place in Hampshire, not a bad little house in London, and was getting himself talked about in Parliament as a brilliant and rising politician. He was handsome, too, in a dark, aquiline sort of way, and if I had not been a good-looking woman, with a little money of my own, I might have fancied that he talked to me because he had nothing better to do. But I hoped it might be more than this, and therefore his utter forgetfulness of me for Sara Orme was almost unbearable.

"Balfour's caught at last," said Harry Marley, to me, one day.

"Nonsense!" I replied. "We all know you've proposed and been refused, as usual, so you fancy every other man must be interested in the same quarter."

"I tell you they're engaged," he returned. "Never mind how I know it, but I do. It will be all over the Hydro by to-morrow."

I would not believe it, and hoped all things from my expected American letter. That very night it came, and I tore it in a hundred pieces, in my rage of disappointment.

Something, it was clear, Henry Mason did know about Miss Orme, for, as he said, he had "no desire to injure a young woman who had never injured him or his, and therefore he would repeat no stories to her disadvantage."

I was bitterly angry with him for his disloyalty to me. No doubt I could have detectives employed to look up the creature's American record, but by the time I could learn anything, it might be too late. The very next day, as it happened, I was called upon to congratulate Sir Evelyn Balfour and Mrs. Gresham's *protégée* on their engagement. I was obliged to murmur something pleasant, praying meanwhile that the marriage might never take place. Indeed, I meant to move Heaven and earth to prevent it.

Two or three days after this announcement, which was made about the middle

of August, a thing happened which roused my suspicions and renewed my hopes. A new guest arrived at the Hydro pathic. He was young, rather good-looking; his name—Stanley A. Jarvis—was to be seen in the register; and he made his first public appearance at luncheon. His place was nearly opposite mine, and when he came in I felt, rather than saw, Miss Orme give a start, which ended in a species of shudder. I glanced at her, hastily. Her

face was scarlet, from brow to chin. The flush died slowly, and left her even paler than her wont. Mr. Jarvis was smiling across at her and bowing.

"How do you do, Miss Orme?" he said, with a slight American accent.

She inclined her head in response. The surprise was plainly not a pleasant one to her, but for some reason she did not mean to deny the acquaintance.

"I heard you were here," the new-comer went on. "In fact, the news of your presence



"I TORE IT IN A HUNDRED PIECES."



was one of the principal inducements which brought me to Foxborough."

I watched him as closely as I dared. He smiled a great deal, showing a long row of white teeth, and kept his keen, grey eyes upon her face. Miss Orme soon recovered her composure, however, answering all the remarks which Mr. Jarvis addressed to her during luncheon. Afterwards, in the garden, I heard him asking for an introduction to Mrs. Gresham. Later, Sir Evelyn Balfour joined the group, and she quickly made some excuse to walk away with her *fiancé*, leaving Mr. Jarvis to talk to Mrs. Gresham.

I concluded that the American was a man for me to cultivate, and found it very easy to make his acquaintance. Ostensibly, he was exceedingly frank, but it was all upon the surface. He was ready to talk agreeably on any subject save that of his acquaintance with Miss Orme.

I wondered, during the next few days, whether anyone beyond myself noticed the little drama unfolding before our eyes. Just what was the plot upon which the play was founded, I could not satisfy myself. Could it be the old, vulgar story of a deserted

Mr. Jarvis having casually announced his intention to remain for some time longer, it appeared that the Gresham party had reconsidered their determination, and would not leave until they could travel southward with the Balfours.

"She won't leave those two men together here, unless she is on hand to keep them apart," was the decision I arrived at. I often saw Mr. Jarvis hasten to join Miss Orme, if she by any chance were alone for a moment, and once, when this occurred in the garden, I contrived to steal, unobserved, into a narrow path among the trees, leading behind the summer-house where they sat.

"You'd better think it over," Mr. Jarvis was saying, not in the conventional "acquaintance" tone a man uses to a lady.

"I tell you it is absolutely impossible," the girl replied.

"You can ask her."

"It would be no use."

"Then you can fall back upon the other. You've got till the day after to-morrow to think of it, you know."

"Hush!" she exclaimed, "here comes Sir Evelyn."



"HUSH! HERE COMES SIR EVELYN."

husband, come to claim his own? Or, if there had been no love story, what was the secret of the influence wielded over Sara Orme by this stranger? She disliked him intensely. Her eyes, her voice, when she looked at or spoke to him, told me that. It was difficult for her to be civil to him, and yet she was invariably civil.

Lady Balfour and Sir Evelyn were to stay on at the Hydro through the first week in September, but it had been decided that Mrs. Gresham and her companion were to leave at the end of August. Now, however,

What could they have been saying which her *fiancé* must not hear? What might she have till the day after to-morrow to think over?

I felt sure it was something serious, and



on cogitating the matter, I remembered that, on the next day but one, we were all going to the Wellmere sports, an event of great importance, each summer, in the county where we were staying. Many conveyances had been chartered to take the various parties, and so popular was the festivity, that even the servants would slip away if possible.

Lady Balfour had promised to chaperon a couple of pretty cousins, who were coming from a distance in honour of the excursion. To my surprise, therefore, Miss Orme, at the last moment, pleaded a violent headache, and professed herself unable to join the pleasure party. At this Mrs. Gresham was for staying away also, but Miss Orme would not permit the sacrifice. She intended shutting herself in her own room for the day, and nobody could be of the slightest service to her. It would only make her unhappy if anyone stopped at home. Of course, Sir Evelyn was obliged to go and help his mother entertain the cousins, but he looked exceedingly blue at the prospect. He was not a man who found it easy to control his feelings, and I rejoiced in his discomfiture.

I felt sure that he would have good occasion for it later, for my prophetic soul whispered that Mr. Jarvis would also find a pretext for remaining behind, and had he done so, I would cheerfully have sacrificed the day's gaiety to the greater satisfaction of watching further developments. I prepared to slip unobserved from the ranks, but was amazed to see Mr. Jarvis driving away with a party of wealthy Australians, to whom he had been noticeably attentive for the past few days.

I could not even yet believe in the genuineness of Miss Orme's headache, though she certainly had looked very white and hollow-eyed the night before. But I could not see, under the circumstances, that it would advance my interests to remain at the Hydro, and I went away, albeit somewhat hesitatingly, with the rest.

It was nearly ten o'clock when we got home, and the first words I heard, on re-entering the Hydro, were from one among a group of excited, trembling servants.

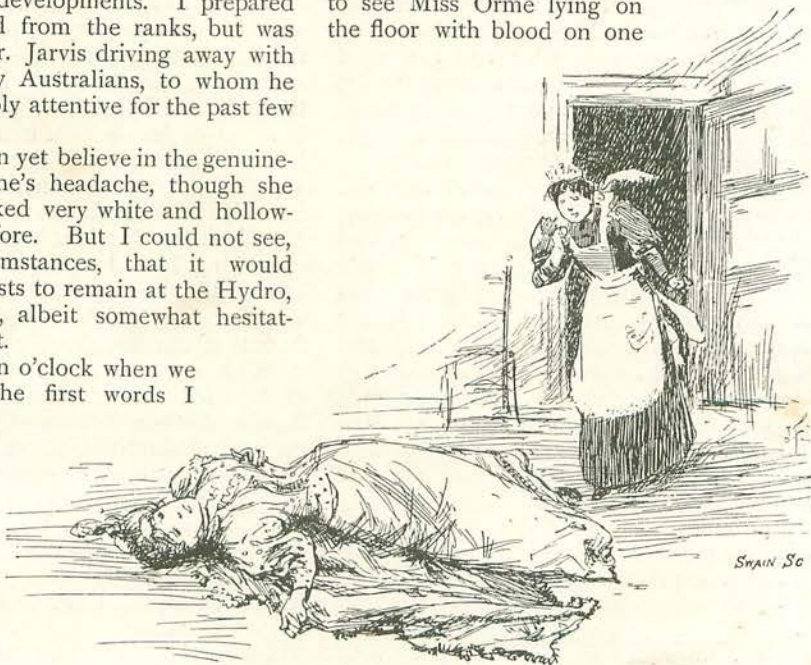
"Oh! ma'am, such a terrible thing's happened while you've been gone! There's

been a dreadful robbery, and poor Miss Orme's nearly murdered."

All was confusion in a moment. Everybody was hoping, no doubt, that he or she had not been robbed, and in the anxiety and impatience to get at details, Miss Orme and her injuries might well-nigh have been forgotten, had it not been for the Balfours and Mrs. Gresham.

The robbery, it appeared, had occurred during the afternoon, nobody knew exactly when. Miss Orme had been the only guest left at the Hydro, with the exception of a couple of invalids on the floor above. Mrs. Gresham's maid, Bridges, had been instructed to await Miss Orme's orders, but had been told, soon after our party left for Wellmere, that she would not be required, and might go out for the rest of the day. Several other servants had given themselves the same permission, and the house was practically deserted save for a few people employed about the kitchen.

The cook had sent one of her subordinates to knock at the invalid's door about four o'clock, to ask if she would have tea, and, receiving no answer, had concluded she was sleeping, and had gone away. Perhaps an hour and a half later the servant had been carrying down a tray from the floor above, and noticing that Miss Orme's door was ajar, had rapped again, peeping inside, as there was no response. She had then been horrified to see Miss Orme lying on the floor with blood on one



"HORRIFIED TO SEE MISS ORME LYING ON THE FLOOR."



of her hands, and on her white *robe-de-chambre*. She had thereupon screamed several times for help, but receiving none, had felt too frightened to stay where she was, and had run downstairs to the kitchen. Reinforced by the cook and a gardener's assistant, she had returned, when Miss Orme had been laid on the bed, and restored to consciousness by means of cold water and eau-de-Cologne.

On recovering, the young lady had asked if the thief had been caught, and it was not until this startling suggestion caused them to look round that the servants noticed the confusion in the room. All the drawers had been pulled out of the chest, and their contents scattered on the floor. The gowns had been taken from the wardrobe, and their pockets turned wrong side out. Several keys lay on the floor, Miss Orme's boxes were open, the dressing-table had been denuded of jewellery. Mrs. Gresham's room adjoining was in the same condition. Others, farther down the hall (belonging to the Australian people), and the Balfour's suite, had also been ransacked.

Nothing on any other floor, so far as the servants and a policeman from the adjacent village could ascertain, had been meddled with. Miss Orme had been going from one fainting fit into another, and thus far was quite unable to explain what had taken place. A doctor had been sent for, but one was away, and another engaged with a critical case, and the chemist alone had been obtainable. The servants' impressions of what had happened were very vague. One or two thought they had seen a stranger about the grounds, but on cross-examination decided it might have been the "gardener's young man."

Most of the guests at the Hydro were old habitués, and had been in the habit of leaving valuable possessions in their rooms, instead of giving them to the proprietor for safe keeping. The Australians soon ascertained that they had lost a case of almost priceless emeralds, a number of diamond rings and other ornaments, and a considerable sum of money, all of which had been kept in a writing-desk, broken open by the thief. Mrs. Gresham had been robbed of nearly £200 in gold and notes, a good deal of jewellery, and some magnificent old lace. Lady Balfour had also lost money and jewels, mostly diamonds in old-fashioned settings, and Miss Orme's beautiful solitaire betrothal ring had evidently been roughly wrenched from her finger. What else she might have lost would remain a mystery until she herself could speak.

Nobody thought of going to bed until long after midnight, and before that hour the leading doctor of the village had called upon Miss Orme, pronouncing that beyond a slight cut on her right wrist, and considerable nervous excitement, there was nothing much the matter with the interesting invalid. She was conscious when we separated for the night, but the doctor had left orders that she was not to be questioned until next day.

By the following noon, her statement had been given. It was Sir Evelyn who repeated it to me, and a very dramatic story it was which he had to tell. I could see that his admiration for his *fiancée* was increased a hundred-fold, and that, in his eyes, the world had never yet produced such a heroine.

"She waked from a long sleep," he said, "and was just looking at her watch, which was under her pillow, when a head, in a soft hat, appeared at her window, which opens, you remember, on to the roof of the front porch. She gave a little cry, but before she could repeat it the man had leaped into the window, and caught her round the throat. 'Make one sound, and you're a dead woman!' he hissed, putting the cold barrel of a pistol against her cheek.

"Then, she tells me, she thought of the money which Mrs. Gresham had just sent for (for a particular purpose), and all the valuable jewellery in the next room. For her own things she did not care, except for my ring—and she was just trying to slip it off, under the bed-clothes, when the brute suspected something, snatched her hand, and pulled the ring from her finger, nearly spraining it in her struggles to resist him. He took her by the arm, dragging her about the room with him, as he searched it, and then on into Mrs. Gresham's, next door.

"She knew that Mrs. Gresham kept nearly everything locked up in a big silver jewel box on the dressing-table, and it occurred to her that she might save it by throwing it out of the window, among the flower-beds, where the thief would not dare go and look for it. She had got it in her free hand, when he saw what she meant to do, and slashed her across the wrist, giving her the cut which bled so freely. She still struggled with him, and had nearly accomplished her purpose, when he pushed her with such force that she fell through the open door, and on to the floor of her own room, where she lay stunned. That is all she can tell of the affair."

"I wonder," I asked, with some malice, when he had done extolling his heroine, "why



the thief should have chosen first to enter almost the only room which was occupied? He might have saved himself much time and trouble by taking an empty one, I should think."

"Don't you see," explained Sir Evelyn, impatiently, "hers was the only one he could get into from the porch, which is particularly sheltered among trees, and easy to climb?"

I assented, but the more I pondered the affair, the more I began to develop a theory of my own. That afternoon, a couple of detectives from London made their appearance, and I longed to mention the theory to them, but I had sense enough to know that the time was not yet ripe.

In the evening, Miss Orme was led by a sort of triumphal procession into the drawing-room, where she languidly held court. If she had been popular before, she was doubly so now. She was not only Sir Evelyn's heroine, but was lauded in that capacity by everyone else, and it was all so much gall and wormwood to me. I had the curiosity to ask if I might see the much-talked-of marks upon her throat and the cut upon her wrist. She languidly assented, but the traces of conflict were scarcely visible on her marble flesh.

"I shouldn't object to a few little hurts of this sort, for the mere pleasure of being a heroine," I remarked, with a laugh, and I did not miss seeing that the shot told upon the victim.

She flushed, until her eyes were suffused with tears, and Sir Evelyn looked daggers at me. I was politic enough to regret that I had shown my hand; but I had something to do before bed-time, and the general devotion to Miss Orme afforded me my opportunity. I knew that she could not get away, nor would others leave their "point of vantage" at her side, for some time to come. I ran upstairs, and knocked at the door of her bedroom. This was merely precautionary, as I was convinced it was unoccupied, but to my vexation, Mrs. Gresham's maid opened the door. For an instant I was nonplussed, but my presence of mind speedily returned, and I announced that Miss Orme had said I might come up and look through her stock of light literature

"Can I get you a book, ma'am?" asked the woman. I thanked her, but said I should like to choose something, and Bridges retired to Mrs. Gresham's room, nearly closing the door between. Just what I expected to find I scarcely knew, but I felt that it would be something which might aid my keen detective instinct toward substantiating my theory.

I crept softly about, ostentatiously closing a book with a loud "click" once in a while, and at length my researches brought me near the writing-table. Beneath was a scrap basket, containing some torn papers, which evidently had not been moved for a day or two. Hastily I ran my fingers through them until I came to an envelope—our own hotel stationery—without a post-mark, and addressed to Miss Orme in a hand which I felt sure was the same in which Mr. Stanley A. Jarvis's name was written in the register. I slipped it hastily into my pocket, feeling I had accomplished something; though I could find no trace of the letter which must have accompanied it. There was nothing which could assist me on the blotting-pad, though I took a small mirror to examine it, but close at hand lay a little pearl penknife. I carried it nearer the electric light, opened it, and saw that the larger blade was slightly stained with blood.

This most satisfactory piece of evidence I



"I TOOK A SMALL MIRROR TO EXAMINE IT."



also annexed, and then proceeded to examine the locks of Miss Orme's two boxes. They were quite intact, though I remembered that it was said they had been opened by the thief. And Lady Balfour's and the Australian's had undoubtedly been forced. I wondered whether Miss Orme carried her keys about with her, but daring to prolong my researches no further, I took up a novel at random, called cheerfully to Bridges that I had found what I wanted, and went out.

Next morning at breakfast, Mr. Jarvis received a telegram, over which he ruefully exclaimed, announcing that he must leave for London that night. Another thread in the web! I knew that, if my theory were correct, I must do what I had to do within a few hours, or it would be too late.

About twelve o'clock, Fate threw an opportunity in my way. I had been pretending to read, in the summer-house, and was nervously taking myself indoors, when I met Sir Evelyn.

"Is Miss Orme in the garden?" he asked.

"No," I replied. "I don't think she's left her room." (I had been watching her window.) "Shall I call her for you?"

"Thanks, don't trouble," he responded. "She said I should find her in the garden about this time."

He sauntered away, and I went upstairs to knock at Miss Orme's door.

"Come in!" her voice cried, and I entered. Her breakfast, almost untouched, stood on a tray, and she was not yet quite dressed. "Oh!" she exclaimed, vexedly, "I thought it was Bridges who knocked."

It was plain that I was not wanted, but nevertheless I entered, sat down, and began watching her as she dressed, confusing her, purposely, with my steady gaze. Her hands shook as she arranged the great coils of hair at the nape of her white neck, and she dropped her hairpins.

"Sir Evelyn asked me to tell you he is very anxious to speak to you, in the garden," I said, making no move to depart. Instead, I tried to draw her into talking of her late adventure.

She would say little, and half hid herself in the wardrobe, pretending to search for a frock. I saw the blue silk she had worn the night before lying across a chair, and an inspiration came to me. She took it up once, but I hastened to say something about the cut on her wrist and the loss of her engagement ring, and she laid down the dress, as though forgetting what she had intended to do.

We finally left the room together, and I

made as though to go above to my own sanctum, but the instant she was out of sight, I darted down the passage, into her room, and in a second had turned the keys of both the doors. I seized the blue evening gown, and was fumbling for the pocket, when someone knocked.

"Please, Miss Orme," said the voice of Bridges.

I made no sound. The door was tried, and later, the one leading into the next room. I began again. Another knock. "Could I come in and make the bed?" from Anna, the chambermaid.

My hands grew cold as ice. My heart beat wildly. But I found the pocket. And the keys were there! I tried them in the boxes. They fitted. The crisis had come! I opened the small black box. Nothing there but a little under-linen, scented with violets. The next! I lifted a trayful of hats, and drew aside a clean damask towel. *My theory was right!*

There they all lay—the emeralds, the watches, piles of jewellery, brooches, and rings, amid soft heaps of lace, and in a paper box, sovereigns, silver, and bank-notes! My brain fairly seethed. My triumph was in my own hands. Her ruin was accomplished. How should I bring it about in the most public and disgraceful way?

I thought rapidly as I closed the trunks, and put the keys into my own pocket. It was not probable that Miss Orme would return to her room before luncheon, as it was now nearly one o'clock. When all the household was assembled in the dining-room—that would be my time to speak.

I could scarcely wait for the gong to sound, and yet I restrained myself and would not go in until I felt sure that everybody must be seated. Then I paused, at my own place, holding tightly to the back of my chair. I could look down on that red-gold head, which was so admired by all, so beloved by Evelyn Balfour—how I should drag it in the dust!

The topic of conversation was, as usual, the robbery.

"How are the London detectives getting on?" I asked.

"Pretty well," answered Sir Evelyn. "They say they have a clue."

"Only a clue?" I echoed. "What if I told you I had got the thief?"

Everybody laughed.

"I'm not jesting," I said. "It is absolutely true, as you will find, if you care to leave your luncheon, and come with me."



Half afraid of a practical joke, wholly curious and excited, they all came, talking and laughing. We arrived at Miss Orme's bedroom door.

"The thief will be found here," I explained. Then, in a wild rush of passion, fed by my long-stifled craving for revenge, I darted to her box, flung it open, and losing my head a little, tore out the upper tray, and began flinging the stolen articles about the floor, as everyone crowded round me, or grouped at the door, bewildered and protesting.

"Hold her!" I screamed. "*She* is the thief! Don't let her escape! She planned it all—she wounded herself, she did everything to avert suspicion, but I tracked her.

"You fury—you she-devil!" he cried, and I lived to hear the words. "You creep into the room of an unsuspecting girl, and plot to ruin her. But you are a fool for your pains! Don't you see, you are throwing suspicion on yourself?"

For an instant only I faltered.

"Who was here on the day of the robbery?" I asked. "Look at her! Is that the face of innocence?"

She seemed in a moment to have grown years older.

"Dearest," he pleaded, moving to her side, "defend yourself. You have only friends around you here, those whom this woman has tried to make your enemies."

Prone along the floor she fell, then, her



"HOLD HER! SHE IS THE THIEF!"



Here is the proof, and I have others beside. I know the whole story. It was for the man she loves—Stanley Jarvis, not Sir Evelyn Balfour. Let him come forward and defend her if he will!"

But he did not come. He alone was absent, and afterwards, when search was made, he had carefully disappeared. No one, however, looked for him at that moment. It was my hour of triumph. I laughed hysterically. Had I been proclaimed Queen of the World my happiness could have been no more glorious.

It had all happened in less time than I take in the telling. I had flown at my work like a panther, but as I flung jewels and money upon the floor, Sir Evelyn Balfour sprang to my side, and caught my hands with a grip which nearly broke them.

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face upon his feet. Had I loved her as he did, she would have seemed to me a fair, crushed lily, as she lay there grovelling, in her soft dress, and the yellow meshes of her loosened hair. But I only thought of her as a writhing serpent, and longed to see her ground under the heel of scorn.

"I *can't* defend myself," she moaned. "I'm guilty! Oh, God, I'm guilty!"

Sir Evelyn stood as though frozen into stone.

"I did it because I loved you, and to keep your love, and that no disgrace might fall upon you through me. It was the only way. I tried to think what to do, but I was going mad."

"I don't understand," said Sir Evelyn. I think he had forgotten, then, that they two were not alone.



"He made me do it," she sobbed. "Jarvis! It was what you would call blackmail. He said I must get money for him. He knew my life. I was his aunt's companion, in Richmond, after my father died. They had quarrelled, and she made a will leaving her money to me, instead of to him. She used to take chloral, and one night, soon after, she died of an overdose. He had me accused of her death, but nothing could be proved, and, indeed, I was innocent. The will was disputed, and he got the money, but now that he has spent it all, he found me out, and followed me, saying my story should be published, and people should know me as a woman who had been tried for murder, unless I paid him at least a thousand pounds. I could not bear to think that your wife should be the heroine of a scandal, and yet I could not give you up. There was something else, too.

From my poor mother I inherited a morbid craving to take things which did not belong to me. I had it as a child, but I tried earnestly to overcome it, and that man's aunt helped me, and was kind to me. I thought I was cured. But he reminded me of the past, and a way of getting money, which he said would be easy for me. Perhaps it was easier than it would have been for another woman. I thought I might save myself by taking the things from people who were rich, and would not really care—you and your mother and Mrs. Gresham would not have grudged them to me in my despair. My own jewels had to go too, to prevent suspicion, even my beloved ring. But when it was done, and I had lied, and everyone had said kind words, not knowing, I felt that I could never marry you. I meant to go away with

Mrs. Gresham, and then to hide myself, or die."

Her voice broke. Until then her words had rushed convulsively forth like a mountain torrent, but now they ceased, and she either fainted or seemed to. I shall never forget Sir Evelyn's face as he stooped and lifted her head upon his knee.

"Before you all," he said, in a strange, solemn voice, "I claim this dear, repentant sinner as my love, and my wife, when I can make her so. What there is to forgive I do forgive. Is there anyone here who wishes to complain against her, to the world—any of those whom she has injured, in her trouble?"

"Not one!" many voices answered. Mrs. Gresham came forward and laid her hand on



"HE STOOPED AND LIFTED HER HEAD UPON HIS KNEE."

her companion's hair. Others began to steal silently away. And so I had schemed in vain. This woman, to put whom in prison I would have sacrificed my right hand, was to go free, and be forgiven. Those two would go abroad and be happy, in spite of the newspapers. As for me, my services for the public weal were likely to receive no recognition better than an offer from a well-known detective agency (which did arrive, when the facts became known), and which, as I have no longer an object in life, I may accept.