

have made this appointment if it were not imperative that we should meet."

"Well?" she sighed. "What do you want of me now?"

"I want to talk to you seriously."

"With the usual request to follow," she observed wearily. "You want money, eh?"

"Money? Oh, no," he said with bitter sarcasm. "I can do without it. I can live on air, you know."

"That's better than prison fare, I should have thought," she answered grimly.

"Ah, now, my dear, you're sarcastic," he said, with a touch of irony. "That doesn't become you."

"Well, tell me quickly what you want and let me get back, or they will miss me."

"You mean that your young lover will want to know with whom you've been flirting, eh? Well, you can mislead him again as you've done many times before. What a fine thing it is to be an accomplished liar. I always envy people who can lie well, for they get through life so easily." He spoke in a familiar tone, as though he held her beneath an influence that was irresistible.

"I am no liar," she protested quickly. "The lies I have been compelled to tell have been at your own instigation."

"And to save yourself," he added, with a dry, harsh laugh. "But I didn't bring you here for an exchange of compliments."

CHAPTER XII.
THE MORNING AFTER.

"Then why have you compelled me to meet you again?" she demanded fiercely, in a tone which showed her abhorrence of him. "The last time we met you told me that you were going abroad. Why haven't you gone?"

"I've been and come back again."

"Where?"

"That's my business," he answered quite calmly. "Your welcome home is not a very warm one, to say the least."

"I have no welcome for my enemies."

"Oh, I'm an enemy, eh? Well," he added, "I have always considered myself your friend."

"Friend!" she echoed. "You show your friendliness in rather a curious manner. You conceive these dastardly plots and then compel me to do your bidding, to act as your decoy."

"Come, come," he laughed, his temper quite unruffled by her accusation. "You know that in all my actions I am guided by your interests—as well as my own."

"I was certainly not aware of it," she responded. "It cannot be to my interest that you compel me to meet you here like this at risk of discovery. Would it not have been better if our meeting had taken place in London, as before?"

"Necessity has driven me to make this appointment," he responded. "To write to you is dangerous, yet I wanted to give you warning so that you can place yourself in a position of security."

"A warning—of what?" she asked, breathlessly.

"La Gioia is here."

"La Gioia!" she gasped. "Here? Impossible!"

La Gioia! It was the name I had found written upon the piece of paper beneath her pillow.

"Unfortunately, it is the truth," he responded in an earnest voice. "The contretemps is serious."

"Serious!" she cried in alarm. "Yes, it is serious, and through you I am thus placed in peril."

"How do you intend to act?"

"I have no idea," she responded in a hoarse tone. "I am tired of it all and driven to despair. I am sick to death of this eternal scheming, this perpetual fear that the terrible truth should become known. God knows how I have suffered during the past year. Ah, how a woman can suffer and still live! I tell you," she cried with sudden desperation, "this dread that haunts me continually will drive me to take my life."

"Rubbish!" he laughed. "Keep up your pluck. With a little ingenuity a woman can deceive the very devil himself."

"I tell you," she said, "I am tired of life, of you, of everything. I have nothing to live for, nothing to gain by living."

Her voice was the broken voice of a woman driven to desperation by the fear that her secret should become known.

"Well," he laughed brutally, "you've certainly nothing to gain by dying, my dear."

"You taunt me," she cried in anger. "You who hold me irrevocably in this bond of guilt, you who compel me to act as your accomplice in these vile schemes! I hate you!"

"Without a doubt," he responded, with a short laugh. "And yet I have done nothing to arouse this feeling of antagonism."

"Nothing? Do you then think so lightly of all the past?"

"My dear girl," he said, "one should never think of what has gone by. It's a bad habit. Look to your own safety—and to the future."

"La Gioia is here," she repeated in a low voice, as though unable fully to realise all that the terrible announcement meant. "Well, how do you intend to act?"

"My actions will be guided by circumstances," he replied. "And you?"

She was silent. The stillness of the night was broken only by the dismal cry of a night bird down near the lake.

"I think it is best that I should die and end it all," she replied in a hard, strained voice.

"Don't talk such nonsense," he said impatiently. "You are young, graceful, smart, with one of the prettiest faces in London. And you would commit suicide. The thing is utterly absurd."

"What have I to gain by living?" she inquired again, that question being apparently uppermost in her mind.

"You love young Chetwode. You may yet marry him."

"No," she answered with a sigh, "I fear that can never be. Happiness can never be mine—never."

"Does he love you?" inquired the major, with a note of sympathy in his voice.

"Love me? Why, of course he does."

"You have never doubted him?"

"Never."

"And he has asked you to marry him?"

"Yes, a dozen times."

"When was the last occasion?"

"To-night—an hour ago."

"And, of course, you refused?"

"Of course."

"Why?"

"Because of the barrier which prevents my marriage with him."

"And you will allow that to stand in the way of your safety?"

"My safety?" she echoed. "I don't understand."

"Cannot you see that if you married Cyril Chetwode at once La Gioia would be powerless?"

"Ah!" she exclaimed, suddenly impressed by the suggestion. "I had never thought of that."

"Well," he went on, "if you take my advice you'll lose no time in becoming Chetwode's wife. Then you can defy your enemies and snap your fingers at La Gioia."

A deep silence fell. The woman who was my wife was reflecting.

"You say that by marriage I could defy my enemies, but that is incorrect. I could not cut myself free of all of them."

"Why? Whom would you fear?"

"You yourself!" she answered bluntly. "I know you too well, alas!" she went on desperately. "I know that I could never be safe from your ingenious plotting, that just at the moment of my happiness you would cast upon me the black shadow of the past."

"You have no confidence in me," he protested with a dissatisfied air.

"I can have no confidence in one who holds me enslaved as you do."

"And yet I have come here at considerable risk and personal inconvenience to give you warning."

"Because you fear discovery yourself."

"No," he laughed. "I'm quite safe. I merely came here to make two suggestions to you. One I have already made, namely, that you should marry Chetwode without delay. And the other—"

He paused, as though accurately to gauge the extent of his power over her.

"Well? Go on. I am all attention."

"The other is that you should, as before, render me a trifling assistance in a little matter I have in hand which, if successfully carried out, will place both of us for ever beyond the reach of La Gioia's vengeance."

"Another scheme!" she cried wearily. "Well, what is it? Some further dastardly plot or other, no doubt. Explain it."

"No. You are under a misapprehension," he responded quickly. "The affair is no dastardly plot, but merely a little piece of ingenuity by which we may outwit La Gioia."

"Outwit her!" she cried. "The very devil himself could not outwit La Gioia!"

"Ah!" he laughed. "You women are always so ready to jump to ill-formed conclusions. She has one weak point."

"And you have discovered it?"

"Yes. I have discovered it."

"How?"

"That is my affair. It is sufficient to be aware that she, the invincible, is nevertheless vulnerable."

There was another pause, but at last the woman I loved responded in a firm, determined tone.

"Then, if this is true, I leave it to you. You declare that you are my friend; therefore I can at least rely on you for protection, especially as we have so many interests in common."

"But you must assist me," he observed.

"No," she answered, "I refuse to do that. I have painful recollections of what has already happened. The grim ghosts of the past are always with me."

"You are far too impressible," he laughed. "If I had not stood your friend, you would have fallen into the hands of the police long ago."

"And you?" she inquired.

He did not respond. Possibly the subject was rather too unwelcome to admit of discussion. From his fingers I knew this man to be at least a gaol-bird who had performed hard labour, and it was also certain that with the ingeniously prepared cigarette he had attempted to take my life.

"No," she went on in a clear, firm voice, "I refuse to be further associated with any of your schemes. You are capable of carrying out any villainy without my assistance."

"Need we use the term villainy where La Gioia is concerned?" he asked. "You know her well enough to be aware that if she finds you she will be merciless, and will gloat over your downfall."

"I would kill myself before she discovers me," my wife declared.

"But you might not have time," he suggested. "To die willingly demands considerable resolution. Women's nerve usually fail them at the extreme moment."

"Mine will not, you may rest assured of that," she answered.

"You don't seem capable of listening to reason to-night," he protested.

"I am capable of listening to reason, but not to conspiracy," she replied with some hauteur. "I know well what is passing in your mind. It is not the first time that such a thought has passed there. You would plot to take her life—to murder La Gioia!"

He laughed outright, as though there were something humorous in her words.

"No, no, my dear," he answered quickly. "You quite misunderstand my intention."

"I misunderstand your intention on a previous occasion," she said, meaningly.

"But in this affair our interests are entirely mutual," he pointed out. "You must assist me."

"I shall not."

"But you must. It is imperative."

We have everything to gain by securing her silence."

"And everything to lose by meeting her."

"But when we meet her it will be in defiance. I have thought out a plan."

"Then carry it out," she said. "I will have nothing whatever to do with it."

"I may compel you," he said, with slow distinctness.

"You have already compelled me to act as your accomplice, but you have strained my bonds until they can resist no longer. I intend to break them."

"That is, indeed, very interesting!" He laughed, treating her as though she were a spoilt child.

"Yes!" she cried furiously. "I will kill myself."

"And leave me to make a scandalous explanation."

"Then you would besmirch my good name after my death!" she said, turning upon him quickly. "Ah! yes. You show yourself in your true colours. You would even weave about me a web of infamy, so as to prevent me taking my life. I hate and detest you."

"That's not the first time you have informed me of that fact, my dear," he responded, with perfect coolness.

"If it were not for you I should now be a happy, careless girl, without a thought beyond the man I love. Thanks to you I am, however, one of the most wretched of all God's creatures."

"You need not be. You are petted in your own circle of friends, and your reputation remains unsoiled."

"I occupy a false position," she declared. "What would Cyril say if he knew the truth?"

"A woman should never study the man who is to be her husband. It makes him far too conceited; and, moreover, she is sure to regret it in after life."

He was at times shrewdly philosophical, this scoundrel who held my wife beneath his thrall.

"I have you—only you—to thank for my present position. Believed by the world to be an honest, innocent girl, and accepted as such, I nevertheless fear from hour to hour that the truth may be revealed, and that I may find myself in the hands of the police. Death is preferable to this constant, all-consuming dread."

"The unreasonableness and pertinacity of woman is extraordinary," he exclaimed, in a tone of impatience. "What good can possibly result from this duel between us? Why not let us unite in defeating La Gioia?"

"That I refuse to do."

"But our position is serious—most serious," he pointed out. "Suppose that she discovers you?"

"Well, what then?"

"You would be entirely at her mercy," he said in a deep voice. "And you know her well enough to be aware that once determined upon a course she never goes back—you know the feindishness of her vengeance."

"I know," she responded in a voice scarce above a whisper, the voice of a woman driven to desperation.

"She is your enemy," he said. "She



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