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The Angel of Terror

EDGAR
WALLACE

Table of Contents

[The Angel of Terror](#)

[Edgar Wallace](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Chapter 25](#)

[Chapter 26](#)

[Chapter 27](#)

[Chapter 28](#)

[Chapter 29](#)

[Chapter 30](#)

[Chapter 31](#)
[Chapter 32](#)
[Chapter 33](#)
[Chapter 34](#)
[Chapter 35](#)
[Chapter 36](#)
[Chapter 37](#)
[Chapter 38](#)
[Chapter 39](#)
[Chapter 40](#)
[Chapter 41](#)

The Angel of Terror

Edgar Wallace

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Chapter 1

The hush of the court, which had been broken when the foreman of the jury returned their verdict, was intensified as the Judge, with a quick glance over his pince-nez at the tall prisoner, marshalled his papers with the precision and method which old men display in tense moments such as these. He gathered them together, white paper and blue and buff and stacked them in a neat heap on a tiny ledge to the left of his desk. Then he took his pen and wrote a few words on a printed paper before him.

Another breathless pause and he groped beneath the desk and brought out a small square of black silk and carefully laid it over his white wig. Then he spoke:

"James Meredith, you have been convicted after a long and patient trial of the awful crime of wilful murder. With the verdict of the jury I am in complete agreement. There is little doubt, after hearing the evidence of the unfortunate lady to whom you were engaged, and whose evidence you attempted in the most brutal manner to refute, that, instigated by your jealousy, you shot Ferdinand Bulford. The evidence of Miss Briggerland that you had threatened this poor young man, and that you left her presence in a temper, is unshaken. By a terrible coincidence, Mr. Bulford was in the street outside your fiancée's door when you left, and maddened by your insane jealousy, you shot him dead.

"To suggest, as you have through your counsel, that you called at Miss Briggerland's that night to break off your engagement and that the interview was a mild one and unattended by recriminations is to suggest that this lady

has deliberately committed perjury in order to swear away your life, and when to that disgraceful charge you produce a motive, namely that by your death or imprisonment Miss Briggerland, who is your cousin, would benefit to a considerable extent, you merely add to your infamy. Nobody who saw the young girl in the box, a pathetic, and if I may say, a beautiful figure, could accept for one moment your fantastic explanation.

"Who killed Ferdinand Bulford? A man without an enemy in the world. That tragedy cannot be explained away. It now only remains for me to pass the sentence which the law imposes. The jury's recommendation to mercy will be forwarded to the proper quarter... ."

He then proceeded to pass sentence of death, and the tall man in the dock listened without a muscle of his face moving.

So ended the great Berkeley Street Murder Trial, and when a few days later it was announced that the sentence of death had been commuted to one of penal servitude for life, there were newspapers and people who hinted at mistaken leniency and suggested that James Meredith would have been hanged if he were a poor man instead of being, as he was, the master of vast wealth.

"That's that," said Jack Glover between his teeth, as he came out of court with the eminent King's Counsel who had defended his friend and client, "the little lady wins."

His companion looked sideways at him and smiled.

"Honestly, Glover, do you believe that poor girl could do so dastardly a thing as lie about the man she loves?"

"She loves!" repeated Jack Glover witheringly.

"I think you are prejudiced," said the counsel, shaking his head. "Personally, I believe that Meredith is a lunatic; I am satisfied that all he told us about the interview he had with the girl was born of a diseased imagination. I was terribly impressed when I saw Jean Briggerland in the box. She—by Jove, there is the lady!"

They had reached the entrance of the Court. A big car was standing by the kerb and one of the attendants was holding open the door for a girl dressed in black. They had a glimpse of a pale, sad face of extraordinary beauty, and then she disappeared behind the drawn blinds.

The counsel drew a long sigh.

"Mad!" he said huskily. "He must be mad! If ever I saw a pure soul in a woman's face, it is in hers!"

"You've been in the sun, Sir John—you're getting sentimental," said Jack Glover brutally, and the eminent lawyer choked indignantly.

Jack Glover had a trick of saying rude things to his friends, even when those friends were twenty years his senior, and by every rule of professional etiquette entitled to respectful treatment.

"Really!" said the outraged Sir John. "There are times, Glover, when you are insufferable!"

But by this time Jack Glover was swinging along the Old Bailey, his hands in his pockets, his silk hat on the back of his head.

He found the grey-haired senior member of the firm of Rennett, Glover and Simpson (there had been no Simpson in the firm for ten years) on the point of going home.

Mr. Rennett sat down at the sight of his junior.

"I heard the news by 'phone," he said. "Ellbery says there is no ground for appeal, but I think the recommendation to mercy will save his life—besides it is a *crime passionelle*, and they don't hang for homicidal jealousy. I suppose it was the girl's evidence that turned the trick?"

Jack nodded.

"And she looked like an angel just out of the refrigerator," he said despairingly. "Ellbery did his poor best to shake her, but the old fool is half in love with her—I left him raving about her pure soul and her other celestial etceteras."

Mr. Rennett stroked his iron grey beard.

"She's won," he said, but the other turned on him with a snarl.

"Not yet!" he said almost harshly. "She hasn't won till Jimmy Meredith is dead or——"

"Or——?" repeated his partner significantly. "That 'or' won't come off, Jack. He'll get a life sentence as sure as 'eggs is eggs.' I'd go a long way to help Jimmy; I'd risk my practice and my name."

Jack Glover looked at his partner in astonishment.

"You old sportsman!" he said admiringly. "I didn't know you were so fond of Jimmy?"

Mr. Rennett got up and began pulling on his gloves. He seemed a little uncomfortable at the sensation he had created.

"His father was my first client," he said apologetically. "One of the best fellows that ever lived. He married late in life, that was why he was such a crank over the question of marriage. You might say that old Meredith founded our firm. Your father and Simpson and I were nearly at our last gasp when Meredith gave us his business. That was our turning point. Your father—God rest him—was never tired of talking about it. I wonder he never told you."

"I think he did," said Jack thoughtfully. "And you really would go a long way—Rennett—I mean, to help Jim Meredith?"

"All the way," said old Rennett shortly.

Jack Glover began whistling a long lugubrious tune.

"I'm seeing the old boy to-morrow," he said. "By the way, Rennett, did you see that a fellow had been released from prison to a nursing home for a minor operation the other day? There was a question asked in Parliament about it. Is it usual?"

"It can be arranged," said Rennett. "Why?"

"Do you think in a few months' time we could get Jim Meredith into a nursing home for—say an appendix operation?"

"Has he appendicitis?" asked the other in surprise.

"He can fake it," said Jack calmly. "It's the easiest thing in the world to fake."

Rennett looked at the other under his heavy eyebrows.

"You're thinking of the 'or'?" he challenged, and Jack nodded.

"It can be done—if he's alive," said Rennett after a pause.

"He'll be alive," prophesied his partner, "now the only thing is—where shall I find the girl?"

Chapter 2

Lydia Beale gathered up the scraps of paper that littered her table, rolled them into a ball and tossed them into the fire.

There was a knock at the door, and she half turned in her chair to meet with a smile her stout landlady who came in carrying a tray on which stood a large cup of tea and two thick and wholesome slices of bread and jam.

"Finished, Miss Beale?" asked the landlady anxiously.

"For the day, yes," said the girl with a nod, and stood up stretching herself stiffly.

She was slender, a head taller than the dumpy Mrs. Morgan. The dark violet eyes and the delicate spiritual face she owed to her Celtic ancestors, the grace of her movements, no less than the perfect hands that rested on the drawing board, spoke eloquently of breed.

"I'd like to see it, miss, if I may," said Mrs. Morgan, wiping her hands on her apron in anticipation.

Lydia pulled open a drawer of the table and took out a large sheet of Windsor board. She had completed her pencil sketch and Mrs. Morgan gasped appreciatively. It was a picture of a masked man holding a villainous crowd at bay at the point of a pistol.

"That's wonderful, miss," she said in awe. "I suppose those sort of things happen too?"

The girl laughed as she put the drawing away.

"They happen in stories which I illustrate, Mrs. Morgan," she said dryly. "The real brigands of life come in the shape of lawyers' clerks with writs and summonses. It's a relief from those mad fashion plates I draw, anyway. Do you know,

Mrs. Morgan, that the sight of a dressmaker's shop window makes me positively ill!"

Mrs. Morgan shook her head sympathetically and Lydia changed the subject.

"Has anybody been this afternoon?" she asked.

"Only the young man from Spadd & Newton," replied the stout woman with a sigh. "I told 'im you was out, but I'm a bad liar."

The girl groaned.

"I wonder if I shall ever get to the end of those debts," she said in despair. "I've enough writs in the drawer to paper the house, Mrs. Morgan."

Three years ago Lydia Beale's father had died and she had lost the best friend and companion that any girl ever had. She knew he was in debt, but had no idea how extensively he was involved. A creditor had seen her the day after the funeral and had made some uncouth reference to the convenience of a death which had automatically cancelled George Beale's obligations. It needed only that to spur the girl to an action which was as foolish as it was generous. She had written to all the people to whom her father owed money and had assumed full responsibility for debts amounting to hundreds of pounds.

It was the Celt in her that drove her to shoulder the burden which she was ill-equipped to carry, but she had never regretted her impetuous act.

There were a few creditors who, realising what had happened, did not bother her, and there were others... .

She earned a fairly good salary on the staff of the *Daily Megaphone*, which made a feature of fashion, but she would have had to have been the recipient of a cabinet minister's emoluments to have met the demands which flowed in upon her a month after she had accepted her father's obligations.

"Are you going out to-night, miss?" asked the woman.

Lydia roused herself from her unpleasant thoughts.

"Yes. I'm making some drawings of the dresses in Curfew's new play. I'll be home somewhere around twelve."

Mrs. Morgan was half-way across the room when she turned back.

"One of these days you'll get out of all your troubles, miss, you see if you don't! I'll bet you'll marry a rich young gentleman."

Lydia, sitting on the edge of the table, laughed.

"You'd lose your money, Mrs. Morgan," she said, "rich young gentlemen only marry poor working girls in the kind of stories I illustrate. If I marry it will probably be a very poor young gentleman who will become an incurable invalid and want nursing. And I shall hate him so much that I can't be happy with him, and pity him so much that I can't run away from him."

Mrs. Morgan sniffed her disagreement.

"There are things that happen——" she began.

"Not to me—not miracles, anyway," said Lydia, still smiling, "and I don't know that I want to get married. I've got to pay all these bills first, and by the time they are settled I'll be a grey-haired old lady in a mob cap."

Lydia had finished her tea and was standing somewhat scantily attired in the middle of her bedroom, preparing for her theatre engagement, when Mrs. Morgan returned.

"I forgot to tell you, miss," she said, "there was a gentleman and a lady called."

"A gentleman and a lady? Who were they?"

"I don't know, Miss Beale. I was lying down at the time, and the girl answered the door. I gave her strict orders to say that you were out."

"Did they leave any name?"

"No, miss. They just asked if Miss Beale lived here, and could they see her."

"H'm!" said Lydia with a frown. "I wonder what we owe them!"

She dismissed the matter from her mind, and thought no more of it until she stopped on her way to the theatre to learn from the office by telephone the number of drawings required.

The chief sub-editor answered her.

"And, by the way," he added, "there was an inquiry for you at the office to-day—I found a note of it on my desk when I came in to-night. Some old friends of yours who want to see you. Brand told them you were going to do a show at the Erving Theatre to-night, so you'll probably see them."

"Who are they?" she asked, puzzled.

She had few friends, old or new.

"I haven't the foggiest idea," was the reply.

At the theatre she saw nobody she knew, though she looked round interestedly, nor was she approached in any of the *entr'actes*.

In the row ahead of her, and a little to her right, were two people who regarded her curiously as she entered. The man was about fifty, very dark and bald—the skin of his head was almost copper-coloured, though he was obviously a European, for the eyes which beamed benevolently upon her through powerful spectacles were blue, but so light a blue that by contrast with the mahogany skin of his clean-shaven face, they seemed almost white.

The girl who sat with him was fair, and to Lydia's artistic eye, singularly lovely. Her hair was a mop of fine gold. The colour was natural, Lydia was too sophisticated to make any mistake about that. Her features were regular and flawless. The young artist thought she had never seen so perfect a "cupid" mouth in her life. There was something so freshly, fragrantly innocent about the girl that Lydia's heart went out to her, and she could hardly keep her eyes on the stage. The unknown seemed to take almost as much interest in her, for twice Lydia surprised her backward scrutiny. She found herself wondering who she was. The girl was beautifully dressed, and about her neck was a platinum

chain that must have hung to her waist—a chain which was broken every few inches by a big emerald.

It required something of an effort of concentration to bring her mind back to the stage and her work. With a book on her knee she sketched the somewhat bizarre costumes which had aroused a mild public interest in the play, and for the moment forgot her entrancing companion.

She came through the vestibule at the end of the performance, and drew her worn cloak more closely about her slender shoulders, for the night was raw, and a sou'westerly wind blew the big wet snowflakes under the protecting glass awning into the lobby itself. The favoured playgoers minced daintily through the slush to their waiting cars, then taxis came into the procession of waiting vehicles, there was a banging of cab doors, a babble of orders to the scurrying attendants, until something like order was evolved from the chaos.

"Cab, miss?"

Lydia shook her head. An omnibus would take her to Fleet Street, but two had passed, packed with passengers, and she was beginning to despair, when a particularly handsome taxi pulled up at the kerb.

The driver leant over the shining apron which partially protected him from the weather, and shouted:

"Is Miss Beale there?"

The girl started in surprise, taking a step toward the cab.

"I am Miss Beale," she said.

"Your editor has sent me for you," said the man briskly.

The editor of the *Megaphone* had been guilty of many eccentric acts. He had expressed views on her drawing which she shivered to recall. He had aroused her in the middle of the night to sketch dresses at a fancy dress ball, but never before had he done anything so human as to send a taxi for her. Nevertheless, she would not look at the gift cab too closely, and she stepped into the warm interior.

The windows were veiled with the snow and the sleet which had been falling all the time she had been in the theatre. She saw blurred lights flash past, and realised that the taxi was going at a good pace. She rubbed the windows and tried to look out after a while. Then she endeavoured to lower one, but without success. Suddenly she jumped up and tapped furiously at the window to attract the driver's attention. There was no mistaking the fact that they were crossing a bridge and it was not necessary to cross a bridge to reach Fleet Street.

If the driver heard he took no notice. The speed of the car increased. She tapped at the window again furiously. She was not afraid, but she was angry. Presently fear came. It was when she tried to open the door, and found that it was fastened from the outside, that she struck a match to discover that the windows had been screwed tight—the edge of the hole where the screw had gone in was rawly new, and the screw's head was bright and shining.

She had no umbrella—she never carried one to the theatre—and nothing more substantial in the shape of a weapon than a fountain pen. She could smash the windows with her foot. She sat back in the seat, and discovered that it was not so easy an operation as she had thought. She hesitated even to make the attempt; and then the panic sense left her, and she was her own calm self again. She was not being abducted. These things did not happen in the twentieth century, except in sensational books. She frowned. She had said almost the same thing to somebody that day—to Mrs. Morgan, who had hinted at a romantic marriage. Of course, nothing was wrong. The driver had called her by name. Probably the editor wanted to see her at his home, he lived somewhere in South London, she remembered. That would explain everything. And yet her instinct told her that something unusual was happening, that some unpleasant experience was imminent.

She tried to put the thought out of her mind, but it was too vivid, too insistent.

Again she tried the door, and then, conscious of a faint reflected glow on the cloth-lined roof of the cab, she looked backward through the peep-hole. She saw two great motor-car lamps within a few yards of the cab. A car was following, she glimpsed the outline of it as they ran past a street standard.

They were in one of the roads of the outer suburbs. Looking through the window over the driver's shoulder she saw trees on one side of the road, and a long grey fence. It was while she was so looking that the car behind shot suddenly past and ahead, and she saw its tail lights moving away with a pang of hopelessness. Then, before she realised what had happened, the big car ahead slowed and swung sideways, blocking the road, and the cab came to a jerky stop that flung her against the window. She saw two figures in the dim light of the taxi's head lamps, heard somebody speak, and the door was jerked open.

"Will you step out, Miss Beale," said a pleasant voice, and though her legs seemed queerly weak, she obliged. The second man was standing by the side of the driver. He wore a long raincoat, the collar of which was turned up to the tip of his nose.

"You may go back to your friends and tell them that Miss Beale is in good hands," he was saying. "You may also burn a candle or two before your favourite saint, in thanksgiving that you are alive."

"I don't know what you're talking about," said the driver sulkily. "I'm taking this young lady to her office."

"Since when has the *Daily Megaphone* been published in the ghastly suburbs?" asked the other politely.

He saw the girl, and raised his hat.

"Come along, Miss Beale," he said. "I promise you a more comfortable ride—even if I cannot guarantee that the end will be less startling."

Chapter 3

The man who had opened the door was a short, stoutly built person of middle age. He took the girl's arm gently, and without questioning she accompanied him to the car ahead, the man in the raincoat following. No word was spoken, and Lydia was too bewildered to ask questions until the car was on its way. Then the younger man chuckled.

"Clever, Rennett!" he said. "I tell you, those people are super-humanly brilliant!"

"I'm not a great admirer of villainy," said the other gruffly, and the younger man, who was sitting opposite the girl, laughed.

"You must take a detached interest, my dear chap. Personally, I admire them. I admit they gave me a fright when I realised that Miss Beale had not called the cab, but that it had been carefully planted for her, but still I can admire them."

"What does it mean?" asked the puzzled girl. "I'm so confused—where are we going now? To the office?"

"I fear you will not get to the office to-night," said the young man calmly, "and it is impossible to explain to you just why you were abducted."

"Abducted?" said the girl incredulously. "Do you mean to say that man——"

"He was carrying you into the country," said the other calmly. "He would probably have travelled all night and have left you stranded in some un-get-at-able place. I don't think he meant any harm—they never take unnecessary risks, and all they wanted was to spirit you away for the night.

How they came to know that we had chosen you baffles me," he said. "Can you advance any theory, Rennett?"

"Chosen me?" repeated the startled girl. "Really, I feel I'm entitled to some explanation, and if you don't mind, I would like you to take me back to my office. I have a job to keep," she added grimly.

"Six pounds ten a week, and a few guineas extra for your illustrations," said the man in the raincoat. "Believe me, Miss Beale, you'll never pay off your debts on that salary, not if you live to be a hundred."

She could only gasp.

"You seem to know a great deal about my private affairs," she said, when she had recovered her breath.

"A great deal more than you can imagine."

She guessed he was smiling in the darkness, and his voice was so gentle and apologetic that she could not take offence.

"In the past twelve months you have had thirty-nine judgments recorded against you, and in the previous year, twenty-seven. You are living on exactly thirty shillings a week, and all the rest is going to your father's creditors."

"You're very impertinent!" she said hotly and, as she felt, foolishly.

"I'm very pertinent, really. By the way, my name is Glover—John Glover, of the firm of Rennett, Glover and Simpson. The gentleman at your side is Mr. Charles Rennett, my senior partner. We are a firm of solicitors, but how long we shall remain a firm," he added pointedly, "depends rather upon you."

"Upon me?" said the girl in genuine astonishment. "Well, I can't say that I have so much love for lawyers——"

"That I can well understand," murmured Mr. Glover.

"But I certainly do not wish to dissolve your partnership," she went on.

"It is rather more serious than that," said Mr. Rennett, who was sitting by her side. "The fact is, Miss Beale, we are

acting in a perfectly illegal manner, and we are going to reveal to you the particulars of an act we contemplate, which, if you pass on the information to the police, will result in our professional ruin. So you see this adventure is infinitely more important to us than at present it is to you. And here we are!" he said, interrupting the girl's question.

The car turned into a narrow drive, and proceeded some distance through an avenue of trees before it pulled up at the pillared porch of a big house.

Rennett helped her to alight and ushered her through the door, which opened almost as they stopped, into a large panelled hall.

"This is the way, let me show you," said the younger man.

He opened a door and she found herself in a big drawing-room, exquisitely furnished and lit by two silver electroliers suspended from the carved roof.

To her relief an elderly woman rose to greet her.

"This is my wife, Miss Beale," said Rennett. "I need hardly explain that this is also my home."

"So you found the young lady," said the elderly lady, smiling her welcome, "and what does Miss Beale think of your proposition?"

The young man Glover came in at that moment, and divested of his long raincoat and hat, he proved to be of a type that the Universities turn out by the hundred. He was good-looking too, Lydia noticed with feminine in consequence, and there was something in his eyes that inspired trust. He nodded with a smile to Mrs. Rennett, then turned to the girl.

"Now Miss Beale, I don't know whether I ought to explain or whether my learned and distinguished friend prefers to save me the trouble."

"Not me," said the elder man hastily. "My dear," he turned to his wife, "I think we'll leave Jack Glover to talk to this young lady."

"Doesn't she know?" asked Mrs. Rennett in surprise, and Lydia laughed, although she was feeling far from amused.

The possible loss of her employment, the disquieting adventure of the evening, and now this further mystery all combined to set her nerves on edge.

Glover waited until the door closed on his partner and his wife and seemed inclined to wait a little longer, for he stood with his back to the fire, biting his lips and looking down thoughtfully at the carpet.

"I don't just know how to begin, Miss Beale," he said. "And having seen you, my conscience is beginning to work overtime. But I might as well start at the beginning. I suppose you have heard of the Bulford murder?"

The girl stared at him.

"The Bulford murder?" she said incredulously, and he nodded.

"Why, of course, everybody has heard of that."

"Then happily it is unnecessary to explain all the circumstances," said Jack Glover, with a little grimace of distaste.

"I only know," interrupted the girl, "that Mr. Bulford was killed by a Mr. Meredith, who was jealous of him, and that Mr. Meredith, when he went into the witness-box, behaved disgracefully to his fiancée."

"Exactly," nodded Glover with a twinkle in his eye. "In other words, he repudiated the suggestion that he was jealous, swore that he had already told Miss Briggerland that he could not marry her, and he did not even know that Bulford was paying attention to the lady."

"He did that to save his life," said Lydia quietly. "Miss Briggerland swore in the witness-box that no such interview had occurred."

Glover nodded.

"What you do not know, Miss Beale," he said gravely, "is that Jean Briggerland was Meredith's cousin, and unless certain things happen, she will inherit the greater part of six

hundred thousand pounds from Meredith's estate. Meredith, I might explain, is one of my best friends, and the fact that he is now serving out a life sentence does not make him any less a friend. I am as sure, as I am sure of your sitting there, that he no more killed Bulford than I did. I believe the whole thing was a plot to secure his death or imprisonment. My partner thinks the same. The truth is that Meredith was engaged to this girl; he discovered certain things about her and her father which are not greatly to their credit. He was never really in love with her, beautiful as she is, and he was trapped into the proposal. When he found out how things were shaping and heard some of the queer stories which were told about Briggerland and his daughter, he broke off the engagement and went that night to tell her so."

The girl had listened in some bewilderment to this recital.

"I don't exactly see what all this is to do with me," she said, and again Jack Glover nodded.

"I can quite understand," he said, "but I will tell you yet another part of the story which is not public property. Meredith's father was an eccentric man who believed in early marriages, and it was a condition of his will that if Meredith was not married by his thirtieth birthday, the money should go to his sister, her heirs and successors. His sister was Mrs. Briggerland, who is now dead. Her heirs are her husband and Jean Briggerland."

There was a silence. The girl stared thoughtfully into the fire.

"How old is Mr. Meredith?"

"He is thirty next Monday," said Glover quietly, "and it is necessary that he should be married before next Monday."

"In prison?" she asked.

He shook his head.

"If such things are allowed that could have been arranged, but for some reason the Home Secretary refuses to exercise his discretion in this matter, and has resolutely refused to allow such a marriage to take place. He objects on the

ground of public policy, and I dare say from his point of view he is right. Meredith has a twenty-years sentence to serve."

"Then how——" began Lydia.

"Let me tell this story more or less understandably," said Glover with that little smile of his. "Believe me, Miss Beale, I'm not so keen upon the scheme as I was. If by chance," he spoke deliberately, "we could get James Meredith into this house to-morrow morning, would you marry him?"

"Me?" she gasped. "Marry a man I've not seen—a murderer?"

"Not a murderer," he said gently.

"But it is preposterous, impossible!" she protested. "Why me?"

He was silent for a moment.

"When this scheme was mooted we looked round for some one to whom such a marriage would be of advantage," he said, speaking slowly. "It was Rennett's idea that we should search the County Court records of London to discover if there was a girl who was in urgent need of money. There is no surer way of unearthing financial skeletons than by searching County Court records. We found four, only one of whom was eligible and that was you. Don't interrupt me for a moment, please," he said, raising his hand warningly as she was about to speak. "We have made thorough inquiries about you, too thorough in fact, because the Briggerlands have smelt a rat, and have been on our trail for a week. We know that you are not engaged to be married, we know that you have a fairly heavy burden of debts, and we know, too, that you are unencumbered by relations or friends. What we offer you, Miss Beale, and believe me I feel rather a cad in being the medium through which the offer is made, is five thousand pounds a year for the rest of your life, a sum of twenty thousand pounds down, and the assurance that you will not be troubled by your husband from the moment you are married."