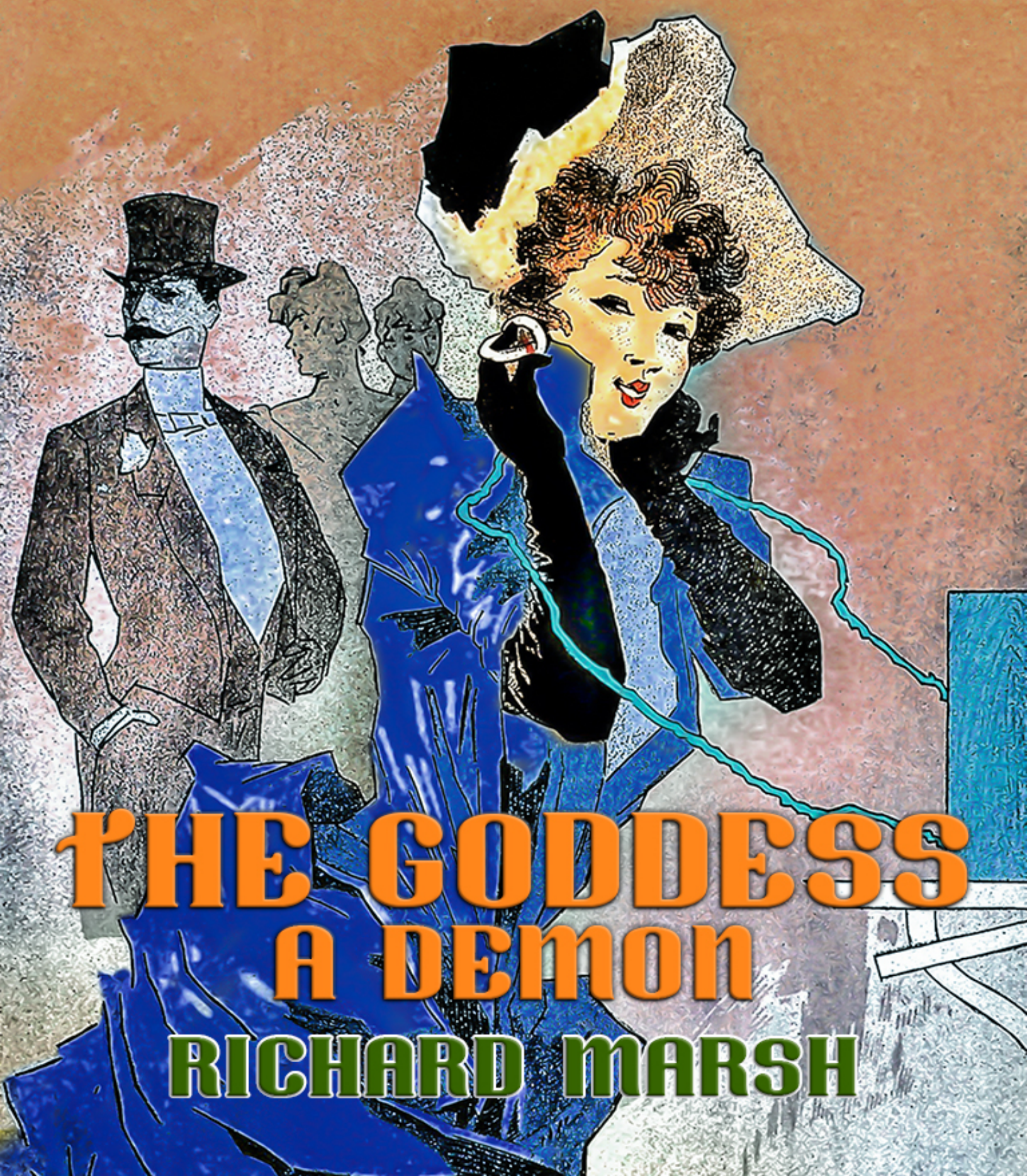


CLASSICS TO GO



THE GODDESS
A DEMON

RICHARD MARSH

The Goddess

A Demon

Richard Marsh

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CHAPTER I.

A VISION OF THE NIGHT

I WAS sure that I had seen Edwin Lawrence juggle with the pack. As I lay there wide awake in bed it all came back to me. I wondered how I could have been such an unspeakable idiot. We had dined together at the Trocadero; then we had gone on to the Empire. The big music hall was packed with people, the heat was insufferable.

"Let's get out of this," suggested Lawrence, almost as soon as we were in. "This crush, in this atmosphere, is not to be borne." I agreed with him. We left. "Come into my place for an hour," he said.

We both lived in Imperial Mansions, on the same floor. His number was 64, mine was 79. You went out of his door, along the passage, round the corner to the right—the second door on the right was mine. I went in with him.

"What do you say to a little gamble?" he asked. "It will be better than nothing."

I agreed. We had a little gamble—at first for trivial stakes. I am an abstemious man. I had already drunk more than I was accustomed to. At his invitation I drank still more. We increased the stakes. I really do not know from whom the suggestion came, I know that I did not object. I had lost all my ready money. I kept on losing. He was dotting down, on a piece of paper, the extent of my indebtedness. Presently, when he announced the sum total, I was amazed to learn that it was very much more than I imagined—actually nearly a thousand pounds. On the instant I was wide awake.

"Nine hundred and forty pounds, Lawrence! It can't be as much as that!"

"My dear chap, here are the figures; look for yourself."

He handed me the piece of paper. His manner of arranging the several amounts I found more than a little vague, but as I had been so foolish as not to have kept count of them myself, I was hardly in a position to dispute their accuracy; and, added together, they certainly did come to the sum he stated. Still I felt persuaded that there was a mistake somewhere, though in what it consisted I was unable at the moment to perceive.

“Look here,” he said. “Be a sportsman for once in your life! I’ll give you a chance—I’ll cut you double or quits.”

I did not want to. I would have very much rather not. Gambling on such a scale was altogether out of my way. But he urged me, and I yielded; I don’t know why. I must have been very much more under the influence of drink than I imagined. We cut. I cut first—the knave of diamonds. As it was to be highest, not a bad card. I watched him as he cut, and saw that he dropped at least one card from the lot which he picked up; and that after he had had an opportunity of getting a shrewd guess at its value. The card which he faced was the queen of diamonds, exclaiming as he did so:

“That does you!”

“But that was not the card which you originally cut—you dropped one.”

“I dropped one! What do you mean? I have not the slightest notion of having done anything of the kind, and, anyhow, it must have been by the sheerest accident. What are you looking at me like that for? Don’t lose your temper because you happen to have lost.”

The insinuation was as gratuitous as it was uncalled for. There was not the slightest danger of my losing my temper; but that I was right in what I had said I felt assured. But then the card might have been dropped by accident, and he might not have noticed what had happened. And, anyhow, in face of the fact that I had been with the man on terms of intimacy, and had never before had cause to suspect him of

anything in the least dishonourable, having regard to his explicit denial, it was a delicate position to persist in. I got up from my chair, conceding the point.

“That makes eighteen hundred and eighty pounds you owe me. My sympathy, Ferguson; better luck next time.”

I mentally resolved that I would not play cards again with Edwin Lawrence—at any rate, when we two were alone.

I was in a curious state of mind when I returned to my own chambers. The events of the evening buzzed in my head. It was not the money merely. Though I am very far from being a millionaire, and two thousand pounds, less one hundred and twenty, is not a sum to be lightly thrown away. The inquiry kept knocking at my brain—was the man whom already I was beginning to regard as a friend such a very poor creature after all? Was it possible that he had wilfully manipulated those figures to his own advantage, and, with intention, dropped that card? The more closely I followed the events of the evening, the less I liked the conclusion to which they led me.

When I went to bed my thoughts went with me. I could not shake them off. I tossed and tumbled in pursuit of sleep. And when, at last, slumber did come, my sleeping experiences were even more disturbing than my waking ones had been.

My repose is generally untroubled. I seldom am visited by dreams. But that night I had a most extraordinary dream; so extraordinary that I am haunted by it to this day, even in my waking hours. In appearance of reality it was little less than supernatural. Indeed, I do not mind admitting that I have been, and still am, at a loss to determine whether I was not—at least in part—an actual, sentient spectator, and not merely the subject of a vision of the night.

Of course, I am unable to say how long I had been to sleep, but it seemed to me that I had only just closed my eyes, when something, I knew not what, caused me to sit up in bed; and not only to sit up, but to get out of bed. I have

no recollection of putting anything on in the shape of clothes; I am certain that I did not switch on the electric light, I had a clear consciousness of the prevailing darkness. And, in the darkness, I had an uncontrollable impulse to go to Lawrence. I left the room, to the best of my belief, clad only in my pyjamas. In the passage was a light—it is kept burning all night,—and I distinctly remember noticing that it was burning as I passed along. Reaching Lawrence's door, I tapped at the panel. There was no answer. I hesitated before knocking again; and, as I did so, immediately became aware of a strange noise which proceeded from within.

A stranger noise I never heard. I experience a difficulty in describing it. It was as if some wild beast was inside the room, and was beside itself with fury. Yelling, snarling, screeching—a horrid, gasping noise—these sounds seemed to follow hard upon each other. And, mingled with them, were faint cries as of some one in extremity of both pain and terror. At that sound I ceased to hesitate. I turned the handle. I stepped inside. The sight I saw I am not likely to forget.

Lawrence was struggling frantically with some strange creature whose character I was not able to distinguish. From this creature proceeded those hideous sounds. It was a mass of whirling movement. I had never seen a being so instinct with frenzied action. Every part seemed to be in motion at once; and with its whole force it was assailing Lawrence. He seemed to be offering a feeble resistance, as, hauled this way and that, he staggered to and fro.

But, against such an attack, his efforts were vain. Presently he fell headlong to the floor. The creature, stooping, rained on to his motionless body a hail of blows, making all the time that horrid, gasping noise, and then was still.

I had been conscious all the time that there was something about the creature which was terribly human. It

appeared to be covered with a flowing robe of some shining, silken stuff, whose voluminous skirts whirled hither and thither as it writhed and twisted. Now that it became motionless there broke on my ears the sound of a woman's laughter.

I am not a nervous subject. Nor am I, I believe, a physical coward. But I am compelled to own that, instead of attempting to interfere, or offering the assistance which I had only too good reason to suppose was urgently needed, at the sound of the laughter, like some frightened cur, I turned and fled. And not the least strange part of the whole business was that, as it seemed, immediately after, I woke up. Woke to find that, however it might appear to the contrary, I certainly had been asleep, for I was sitting up in bed covered with sweat and trembling in every limb.

I looked about me. The blind was up before the long French window. I remember drawing it up, as was my usual habit, before I got into bed. The moon was shining through. All at once a sound caught my anxious ear. I started forward to learn from whence it came. From the window! I stared with all my eyes. I was wide awake now, of that there could be no sort of doubt whatever. In the moonlight I could see that some one was standing on the other side of the pane—a faint, mysterious figure. The latch was raised; it was a little rusty, I could hear it creaking. The window was pushed open, as by an unaccustomed hand, with something of a jerk. Out of the moonbeams, like some spectral visitant, a woman stepped into the room.

CHAPTER II.

THE WOMAN WHO CAME THROUGH THE WINDOW

I HELD my breath, staring in amazement. The figure was real, that was obvious. And yet, how could a woman have gained my window from without? Where had she come from at that hour of the night? What did she want, now that she was here?

A vague wonder passed through my mind as to whether her object might not be felony. She had left the window open—I could feel the cool night-air—and stood inside it, as if listening. Was she endeavouring to discover if her entrance had been discovered? She had but to use her eyes, and look straight in front of her, to see me sitting up in bed, staring. I was as visible as she was. So far as I could judge she remained motionless, looking neither to right nor left. Presently she sighed, as some tired child might do, a long-drawn sigh, as if the action brought relief to her breast. Then I was persuaded that she was at any rate no thief—there was something in the sound of that sustained respiration which was incompatible with the notion of a feminine burglar.

She came a little forward into the room, doubtfully, as if uncertain of her surroundings. She stumbled against a chair, the contact seeming to startle her. I saw her put her hand up to her head, with the gesture of one who was trying to collect her thoughts.

“I can’t think where I am.”

The words broke the silence in the oddest manner. The voice was sweet, soft, clear—unmistakably a lady’s. It thrilled me strangely. Nothing which had gone before had disconcerted me so much—it was an utterance of such extreme simplicity. Was it possible that the lady was a somnambulist, who, held in the thralldom of that curious

disease, had woke to find herself in a stranger's bedroom? If that was the case, what was I to do? How could I explain the situation, without unduly startling her?

The question was answered for me. I must unconsciously have fidgeted. All at once her face was turned towards me. She exclaimed:

"Who's that?"

I arrived at an instant resolution—replying with the most matter-of-fact air of which I was capable.

"Do not be alarmed—it is I, John Ferguson. If you will allow me, I will turn on the light, so that we may see each other better."

I switched on the electric light. What it revealed again amazed me into speechlessness. At the foot of my bed stood the most beautiful woman I had ever seen; I thought so in that first astounded moment—I think so still. She was tall and she was slight. She looked at me out of the biggest and the sweetest pair of eyes I ever saw. But there was something in them which I did not understand. It was not only bewilderment, it was as if she was looking at the world out of a dream. She regarded me, as I sat, with my tousled head of hair, not, as I had feared, with signs of agitation and alarm, but rather with a curious sort of wonderment.

"I don't know who you are. Where am I? Have I ever seen you before?"

It was spoken as a child might speak, with a little tremulous intonation, as if she were on the verge of tears.

"I don't think you have. But don't be alarmed—you are quite safe. I think you have been walking in your sleep."

"Walking in my sleep?"

"I fancy you must have been."

"But—do I walk in my sleep?"

In spite of myself, I smiled at the simplicity of the inquiry.

"That is a matter on which you should know more than I do."

“But—where can I have walked from?”

“That also is a question to which you should be able to supply an answer. Do you live in the Mansions?”

“The Mansions?”

“These are the Imperial Mansions. Is your home here?”

“My home?” She shook her head solemnly. “I don’t know where my home is.”

“Not know? But you must know where your home is. Who are you? What is your name?”

“I don’t know who I am or what is my name.”

Was she an imbecile? She did not look it. I never saw intellect more clearly marked upon a woman’s face. But the more attentively I regarded her the more distinctly I began to realise that there was something peculiar in her expression. She seemed mazed, as if she had recently been roused from sleep and had not yet had time to acquire consciousness of her surroundings. My original surmise was correct; she had been walking in her sleep, and had not yet recovered sufficient consciousness to enable her to recognise the actualities of existence, and comprehend what it was she had been doing.

While I told myself this I had never removed my glance from off her. And now my gaze fastened on something which had for me a dreadful fascination.

She was covered from head to foot in a voluminous garment, which set off her face and figure to perfection. I took it to be some sort of opera-cloak, though, more than anything else, it resembled a domino buttoned down the front. It was made of some bright plum-coloured material, which I afterwards learned was alpaca. A hood, which was attached to the garment, was half off, half on, her dainty head. The whole affair, cloak and hood, was lined with green silk. The front of the cloak was decorated with voluminous green ribbons; one of these caught my eye. It was a broad sash-ribbon, some six or eight inches wide, reaching from her neck almost to her toes.

For quite half its length the vivid green was obscured by what seemed to be a stain of another colour. The stain was apparently of such recent occurrence that the ribbon was still sopping wet. But it was not the broad ribbon only which was stained; I perceived that, here and there, the bright hues of the knots of narrower ribbon were also dimmed. More, there were splashes on the cloak itself. She had her hand up to her head. I glanced at it. How could the fact have previously escaped my notice? There were stains upon her uplifted hand, and upon the other hand which dangled loosely at her side. They were half covered with something red—and wet.

All at once there came back to me the extraordinary vision I had had of the strange happening in Lawrence's room. I recalled the frenzied figure, clad in the woman's robe, with the whirling skirts. Woman's robe? Why, here it was in front of me, upon this woman, the very robe which I had seen. And here, too, now sufficiently quiescent, were the whirling skirts. I put my hand up to my eyes to shut out the horrid thought which seemed to rush at me; and I cried —

“Tell me who you are, and from where you come!”

There was silence. I repeated my inquiry. She answered with another.

“Why do you speak so strangely? And why do you put your hand before your eyes?”

The mere sound of her speaking soothed me. To my mind, one of the greatest charms of a woman should be her voice. Never did I hear a more comfortable voice than hers. It was impossible to imagine that a voice in which, to my ears, rang so unmistakably the accents of truth, could belong to one who was false. Removing my hands, I looked at her again.

She had smeared her countenance with her fingers; all down one side of her face was a crimson stain.

“Look,” I cried, “at what you've done!”

"What have I done?"

"What's on your hands?"

"My hands? What is on my hands?"

She held out her hands in front of her, staring at them with the most innocent air in the world.

"It's blood."

"Blood? Where has it come from?"

She asked the question as a child might do. In spite of her blood-stained face, the ring of truth which was in her voice, the unspoken appeal which was in her eyes, went to my heart.

"Try to think where you've come from, and what you have been doing?"

"Think? I can't think."

"But you must! Don't you see you're all covered with blood?"

"All covered with blood? Why, so I am! Oh!"

She gave a little cry which was more than half a sob. She swayed to and fro. Before I could reach her she had fallen to the ground. I found her lying as if she were dead. She had swooned.

This was a pretty plight which I was in. I have had but little experience of feminine society. My life, for the most part, has been lived in places where women are not. I knew as little of them as of the cuneiform character—perhaps less. I, of course, had heard of women fainting, but never before had I seen one in such a pitiful predicament. What was I to do? I thought of Mrs. Peddar. She was the housekeeper at the Mansions—an excellent woman. Everything under her rule went by clockwork: she had been of more assistance to me in various matters than I had supposed that a person in her position could have been. But I scarcely felt that this was a case in which her interference might be altogether desirable.

As I looked at the lovely creature lying there so still, I felt this more and more. Her utter helplessness filled me

with a curious sense of pity. A resolve was growing up within me to constitute myself her champion, if she would only avail herself of my services, in whatever circumstances of doubt and danger she might find herself. If she had something to conceal, by no action of mine should it be blazed to the world. Without her express sanction, neither Mrs. Peddar nor any one else, should be informed of her presence there. Yet how was I to restore her to consciousness?

While I hesitated I perceived that something was lying beside her on the floor. Where it had come from I could not tell; it was hardly the kind of thing to have fallen from a woman's pocket. I picked it up. It was a photograph of Edwin Lawrence; I could not help but recognise the likeness directly I raised it. Back and front it was smeared with blood. Actuated by an impulse for which I did not attempt to account, rising, I thrust it between the leaves of a book which was on the mantelshelf. She moved. Turning, I found that she had raised herself a little, and was looking at me with her eyes wide open.

"What is the matter with me? Have I been asleep?"

Her frank, fearless gaze, with, in it, that strange look of bewilderment, filled me with a sudden sense of confusion. I stammered a reply.

"You have not been very well. But you are better now. Let me help you to get up."

I held out my hand. Putting hers into it, she rose to her feet with a little spring. When she took her hand away, on mine there was a ruddy smirch. The condition of her plum-coloured garment, and of the bright green ribbons, seemed to have become more conspicuous even than before.

"Hadn't you better take off your cloak?"

She looked at me as if amazed.

"Take off my cloak? Why should I?"

"You will be more comfortable without it."

"Do you think so? Then of course I'll take it off."

She removed her cloak, with my assistance. I flung it over the back of a chair.

"You will find water there with which to wash your hands and face."

Again she eyed me with that suggestion of surprise.

"Why should I wash my hands and face?"

"There is blood upon them."

"Blood?" She held out her hands with her former gesture. "So there is. I had forgotten. I cannot think how it came there." Her cheeks assumed an added tinge of pallor. "Will it come off if I wash them?"

It seemed impossible to doubt that it was seriously asked; yet the apparent puerility of the question stung me to a brusque response.

"We will hope that soap and water will at least, remove the outward and visible stain."

Turning, I went into my dressing-room, she following me with her eyes. There I hastily donned some more conventional attire. Thence, passing into the dining-room, I called to her through the bedroom door.

"When you are ready, may I ask you to come in here. We shall be more at our ease."

She did not keep me waiting, but appeared upon the instant, coming towards me holding out her hands as a child might do.

"I'm clean now. Aren't I clean?"

Her close propinquity filled with me wholly unreasonable agitation. I drew back. The removal of the cloak had disclosed a dark blue silk dress which fitted her, to my thinking, with the most marvellous perfection. There was a touch of white about her neck and wrists. Her beauty struck me more even than at first—it awed me. Yet at the back of my mind was born a dim fancy that somewhere in the flesh I had seen this enchanting vision before. I was at a loss as to the words with which I ought to address her, speaking at last, blunderingly enough.

“Have you any reason why you should wish to conceal your name?” She shook her head. “Then tell me what it is.”

“But I don’t know. Have I a name?”

“I presume that, with the rest of the world, you have. Pray do not suppose, however, that I wish to force myself into your confidence. I would only suggest that I think it might be better, for both our sakes, if you could give me some idea of where you came from before you entered my room.”

“Did I enter your room? Oh yes, I remember; but—I don’t remember anything more.” She put her hand up to her head with the gesture which had previously struck me. “Where did I come from?”

“I don’t know if you are intentionally trifling, but if you are unable to supply the information, I certainly cannot.”

Something in my manner seemed to occasion her distress. She moved towards me anxiously, like a timid child who stands in fear of admonition.

“Why do you look like that? Are you angry?”

I knew not what to think or what to feel; but, at least, I was not angry. If she was playing a part, which I for one was disposed to doubt, she acted with such plausibility that I was conscious of my incapacity to discover in what the trick consisted. I perceived that, after all, this was a case for Mrs. Peddar.

“The housekeeper is a most superior person—a Mrs. Peddar. She will be of more assistance to you than I can be. Will you allow me to tell her that you are here?”

“Why not? Of course you can tell her—if you like.”

This was said with such an air of innocence, and with such an entire absence of suspicion that there could be anything dubious in her position, that I myself was conscious of a sense of shame at the thoughts which filled my mind. I moved towards the door. She stopped me.

“Who are you going to tell?”

“The housekeeper—Mrs. Peddar.”

“Oh.” This was with a little touch of doubt. “She’s a woman. You’re a man. I’m a woman.” She said this with the utmost gravity, as if she were giving utterance to portentous facts which she had just discovered. She seemed to shiver. “Is she—nice? Will she—be kind to me?”

I registered a mental vow that she should be kind to her, or I would know the reason why; I said as much, though with less emphasis of language. Then I left the room.

But, before I actually went in search of Mrs. Peddar I returned into the bedroom, through the door which opened out of the passage. Using that plum-coloured cloak with scant ceremony, I rolled it up into a bundle and thrust it into a wardrobe behind a heap of clothes. Then, opening the window, I stood on the balcony and threw the water in which my visitor had washed her hands and face, as far as I could out into the street. I heard it fall with a splash on to the road below.

CHAPTER III.

THE CONQUEST OF MRS. PEDDAR

MRS. PEDDAR has her rooms at the top of the building—on the seventh floor. The lift runs all night. It had been my intention, rather than summon it and attract the attention of the porter, to have climbed the endless flights of stairs; but, as luck had it, when I reached the staircase the lift was setting some one down. Since it was there I thought I might as well use it, to save time, and also my legs. I stepped inside.

“Up or down, sir?”

“I am going up to Mrs. Peddar.”

The porter favoured me with a doubtful glance.

“Mrs. Peddar lives at the top of the building. She’s in bed long ago.”

“So I suppose. I’m afraid, however, that I shall have to wake her up again, as I am in urgent need of her assistance.”

“Anything wrong, sir?”

“No. At least nothing in which you could be of service.”

As we mounted I could see that Turner—the night porter’s name is Turner—was wondering what possible business I could have with Mrs. Peddar that I should rouse her out of her warm bed at that hour of the night. It occurred to me to ask him a question or two.

“Has a lady come up lately?”

“Up where?”

“Up to the first floor—or anywhere?” He shook his head.
“You’re sure?”

“Certain. No lady’s come into this building for a good two hours, at any rate. The last was Mrs. Sabin; she and her husband’s on the fourth floor. They’ve been to the Gaiety

Theatre: I took 'em up in the lift. She was the last lady as came in, and that was just after eleven."

His words set me thinking. If my visitor had not come in through the doorway, how then had she gained access to my balcony, which is on the first floor, and between twenty and thirty feet above the ground. Turner volunteered a statement on his own account.

"And the last man who went out was Mr. Lawrence's brother."

I pricked up my ears at this.

"Mr. Lawrence's brother? Oh."

"Yes—Mr. Philip, I think his name is. He came down not three minutes before I saw you, just as I was going to take up Mr. Maynard—that was Mr. Maynard who got out as you got in. He seemed to be in a big hurry. I said good night as he went past, but he said nothing. He had a big parcel in his arms, almost as much as he could carry."

"You are sure it was Mr. Lawrence's brother?"

"It was him right enough. My cousin's his coachman—I ought to know him."

"You say he came down three minutes ago?"

"Not three minutes ago, I said."

Then, in that case, he must have been with his brother some time after my visitor had come to me. The knowledge occasioned me distinct relief.

Turner continued:

"He went up about an hour ago: perhaps a little more. He'd got no parcel then. I stared when I saw he'd got one when he came back. I shouldn't have thought he was the kind to carry a parcel, and especially such a one. I'd have called him a cab if he'd given me a chance, but I was just starting with Mr. Maynard, and he was off like a shot. Shall I wait for you, sir? The first door round the corner is Mrs. Peddar's."

I told him not to wait, feeling conscious that it might take me some time to explain to Mrs. Peddar what I desired

of her. The lady must have been a light sleeper. Hardly had I saluted the panel of the door with my knuckles than a voice inquired who was there. When I informed her she made a prompt appearance in her dressing-gown.

"You, Mr. Ferguson! What do you want at this hour of the night?"

I immediately became conscious that it might be even more difficult to explain than I had supposed.

"I have a visitor downstairs, Mrs. Peddar."

"A visitor? Well? What has that to do with me? You can't have anything to eat at this time of night."

She said that, I take it, because in the Mansions meals are provided for residents, and she supposed that I had dragged her out of bed at that unholy hour in search of food.

"The visitor is a lady, and I wanted to know if you could give her a bed somewhere to-night."

"A bed? Who is the lady?"

"Well—the fact is, Mrs. Peddar, something very remarkable has taken place. I've come up to tell you all about it, and to ask your advice."

"You had better come in."

I went into her sitting-room, she, with an eye for the proprieties, leaving the door discreetly open. There was that in her bearing which made me wonder if she suspected me of having been guilty of some act of rakish impropriety, unworthy of my age and character. I was conscious that the course in front of me was not all smooth sailing.

"A young lady, Mrs. Peddar, has just entered my room through the window."

"Through the window! Mr. Ferguson! At this hour!"

"I'm afraid the poor thing is not quite right in her mind."

"I should think not. That is the best thing you can hope of her."

"She is quite a lady."