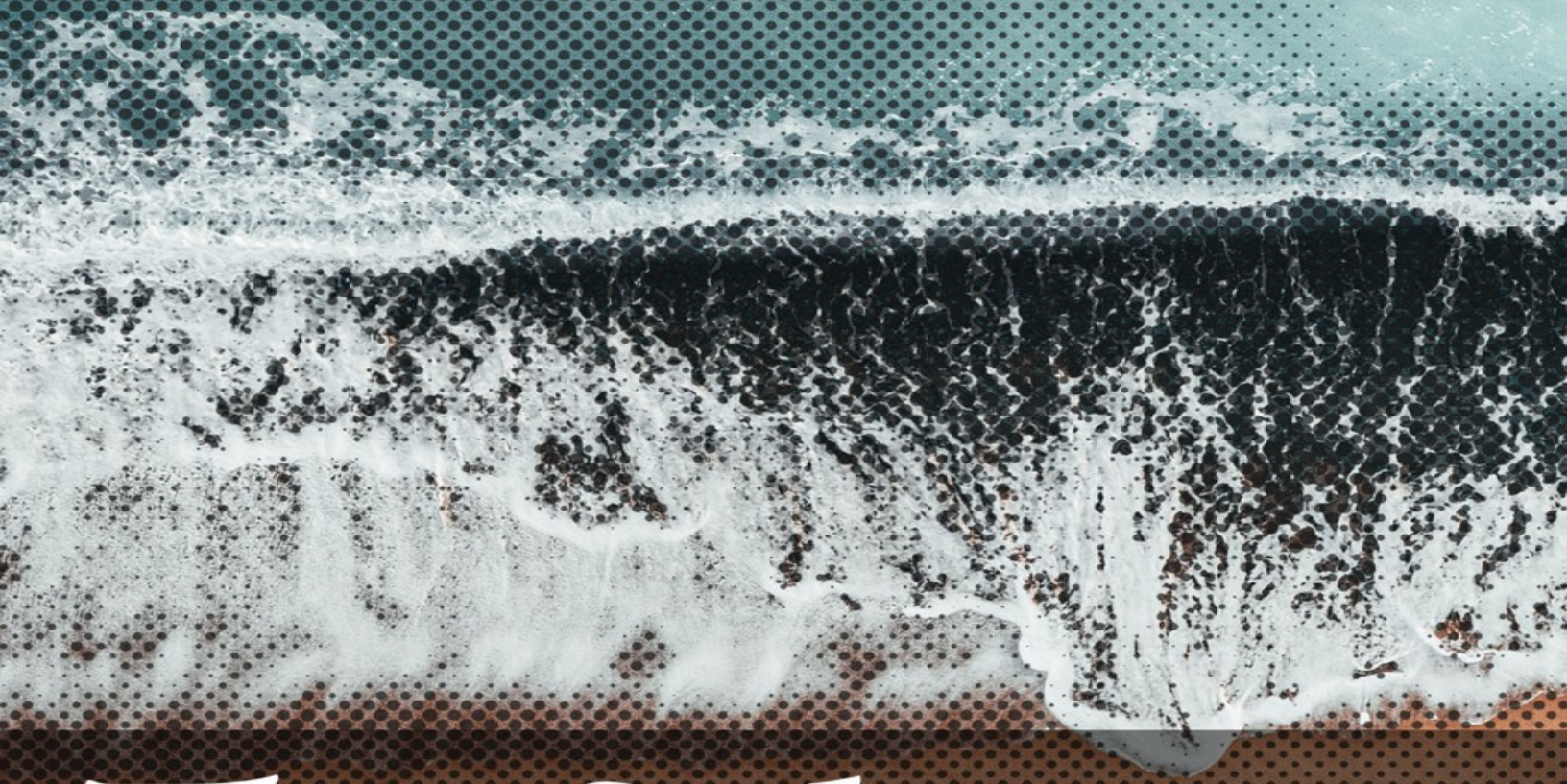


Fred M. White



*The Salt
Of The Earth*

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I - PANDORA WAITS

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Outside a blackbird was piping madly in the blackthorn, and towards the West a sheaf of flaming violet arrows streamed to the zenith. The hedgerows were touched here and there with tender green. The bonny breath of the South was soft and tender as the fingers of Aphrodite. It was the first real day of Spring, and most people lingered out of doors till the bare branches of the trees melted in the gloaming, and it was possible to see and hear no more, save for the promise of the little black herald singing madly from the blackthorn.

Thus was it outside. Inside the silk blinds were closely drawn, and the heavy tapestry curtains pulled across them as if the inmates of the room were envious of the dying day, and were determined to exclude it. The score or more tiny points of electric flames were scrupulously shaded with pale blue, so that even the most dubious complexion might not suffer. At certain places the lights were grouped in lambent masses, for they lighted the trio of Louis Quatorze card-tables, where twelve people were playing bridge. Now and again the tongues of yellow flame picked out some glittering object against the walls or on the floor, hinting at art treasures, most of them with histories of their own.

On the whole the restful room was more calculated for philosophic reflection than for fierce silent gambling, with indrawn breath, and lip caught sharply between white teeth. The room was deadly still, save for the flutter of the cards as they rippled over the tables. There were cards, too, upon

the floor, glistening under the light blue like bizarre patterns to the Oriental carpet. Only two men looked on—one a thin, nervous, ascetic creature, with melancholy grey eyes, and a Vandyck beard. The average man would have had no trouble in guessing that Philip Vanstone was an artist. He had the temperament stamped upon him, both as to his features and his clothes. His companion was built in a larger mould, a clean-shaven man with a hard, straight mouth, and the suggestion of a bull-dog about him. When one glanced at Douglas Denne, one instinctively thought of Rhodes and other pioneers of Empire, who had that marvellous combination of mind, which allies high courage and imagination with the practical attributes that lead to fortune. To a certain extent Denne was a pioneer. He had amassed a huge fortune in foreign lands. He had played his part in painting the map of the world a British red, and, incidentally, he had found time during his Oxford career to win the Newdigate prize and write a volume of poems which had attracted considerable attention. If he had described himself, and why his career had been so phenomenally successful, he would have spoken slightly, and called himself a pawnbroker with an imagination. Usually he thanked Pinero for that phrase. It saved a great deal of trouble when he found himself in the clutches of the interviewers.

And yet, despite his youth, and his health, and his fortune, he was by no means a happy man. To begin with, he was cursed with a certain demon of introspective analysis. He was bound to bring everything under the microscope, including his own soul, and the soul of his

fellow men. He refused to believe in the genuine disinterested action. He put it down to temperament. It gave pleasure to the wide-minded man to do good and kind things; therefore, it could not be accounted as righteousness—it was merely a selfish method of enjoyment. Everything that happened in life, every mood and impulse of his own and of other people came under Denne's mental scalping knife, so that to him the beauty of the pearl was never anything but the poetic secretion of the oyster. Denne would have given much to have been able to change places with Phil Vanstone, the penniless artist.

He wasn't playing himself; in fact, he rarely touched a card. Playing for sovereigns was poor sport to a man who had been moved to stake an Empire upon the throw of a dice. He had come to Adela Burton's cottage at Maidenhead purely to please his companion, but was more or less scornfully amused, because Adela Burton was one of the apostles of the Simple Life. Perhaps that was why she was playing cards with a more or less notorious set of men and women, who had motored down from town that same morning, seeking the pure delights of the pink, March day. Denne watched the cards flashing across the table, heedless of the play of emotions in the rich brown Rembrandt shadows. He was as near to enjoying himself now as ever he had been in his cynical life. Presently, by a curious coincidence, the three rubbers finished simultaneously, and the players sat back in their Chippendale chairs. It was characteristic of Adela Burton's cottage, and, incidentally, of herself, that all the furniture was Chippendale, unless it happened to date back to the period of Louis Quatorze.

"Are you going to play any more?" Denne asked.

The hostess rose from her seat and came round to the speaker's side. She was very simply and plainly dressed in homespun material with a suggestion of heather blue in it, which no doubt, was one of the notes in the melody of the Simple Life. But it had cost sixty guineas in Paris all the same, as any woman who studied the fashion papers would have known at a glance.

"I will play no more this evening," Adela said gaily. "In fact, I wonder at my temerity in playing at all today. For before I sleep to-night the great secret will be disclosed. Do you know that before long I shall come into my mysterious fortune?"

Denne congratulated his hostess gravely. He was studying and criticising her now in his own merciless fashion, but, outwardly, there was little with which he could find fault. To begin with, there was no other woman of his acquaintance who had gone through two rapid seasons in London without some sign that the bloom was off the peach, and the dew dry on the flower. Adela Burton's complexion was as pure and fresh now as when she first startled society with her original methods and almost archaic extravagance. In some strange way she had retained all the innocent look of youth though there was wisdom and laughter in her unfathomable eyes, which were like green lakes under budding chestnut trees in the calm of a still May evening. Such wonderful eyes they were, with all the knowledge of the ages in them, and yet clear and innocent as those of a little child. For the rest, she was rather small, though she was not without a dominating something, which it was

impossible to express in words, and yet which could be left like darkness. Two years before Adela Burton had hardly been heard of. Now she went everywhere until the time had come when she led fashion instead of following it. This is the rare attribute of the gods, and is given only to great Society ladies and inventive milliners.

Probably Adela Burton had been the first to grasp the picturesqueness and poetical advertisements to be derived from the cult of the Simple Life. Her cottage at Maidenhead consisted merely of a hall, sitting-room, bedroom, and bathroom, together with a tiny kitchen, where she did for herself. The humble necessary charwoman came every morning to scrub and scour, and, besides that, when at Maidenhead Adela Burton lived entirely alone. One had to look to the graphic writers of society papers adequately to describe the personality and menage of a woman like Adela Burton, for they were beyond the scope and intellect of the ordinary novelist. Possibly no living woman had contributed so much to the income of the paragraphists who make their living by describing the toilettes and eke the pots and pans of ladies of fashion.

"I am sure I congratulate you," Denne said, in his same grave way. "Let me see, what is the amount of this fabulous fortune? One authority, I understand, puts it at five millions."

"I haven't the exclusive knowledge of these favored journalists," Adela laughed. "But I shall deem Providence open to criticism if it is less than a million. Famous Samuel Burton could not leave his adopted daughter less than that. Now have you ever read of a more delightful romance

outside the pages of a halfpenny paper? Here am I, taken from a humble sphere at a comparatively early age, and educated to the purple. I am not allowed to know what relation Mr. Burton is to me. All I know is that I get certain remittances from a New York firm of lawyers, who always warn me not to ask unnecessary questions. Ever since I was seventeen I have practically had as much money as I have cared to ask for. Now the trust has expired, and by the mail which comes in to-day I am to learn all about it. Possibly I am to have the happiness of seeing my benefactor, and thanking him in person. I rather gather that he is coming here this evening, and that is why I am not to have the happiness of winning any more of my friends' money. Now, answer me a question, Mr. Denne. Why do I always win at bridge? It makes not the slightest difference to me whether I lose or not—"

"My dear young lady," Denne said in a monotonous voice, with all the expression squeezed out of it, "you have answered your own question. And after that gentle hint you gave me just now, it is time Vanstone and myself were moving. May I be permitted again to offer you my sincere congratulations in advance?"

Denne and his companion stepped out through the crystal glass porch, heavy with the scent of tropical flowers, and gay with pink and yellow orchids, into the sweetness of the air. The former drew a long, deep breath of relief. For the moment the poetic side of his nature was uppermost.

"What a night!" he murmured. "How wholesome and pleasant after the heated atmosphere we have just left! I declare that blackbird yonder is scolding us. Well, he

certainly has the best of the argument. My dear fellow, 'Idalian Aphrodite Beautiful' certainly has the popular approval. She would take the prize hands down in a beauty show, though, after all, Aurora has the dainty and more spiritual beauty of the two. Vanstone, tell me candidly, why did you bring me here?"

Denne literally thrust the question at his companion. There was a sudden and searching change in his manner.

"Oh, I'll be candid," Vanstone laughed, a trifle awkwardly. "It is no use trying to deceive you, I know. I want you to do your best to save that woman from herself. She is young, beautiful, and capable of the most generous impulses, and yet, with a soul and mind and body like hers, she is frittering away life amongst those chattering magpies."

"Making souffles instead of substantial soup," Denne laughed. "Oh, my dear chap, you are quite wrong. What a travesty it all is. Here is a three-roomed cottage, furnished with the loot of a score of palaces, a sitting room almost Ouidaesque in its luxuriance, a five-hundred pound freehold, with a couple of thousands spent on the electric light, a kitchen to cook porridge and poach eggs designed by an Eschoffler, and costing the income of an ambassador. Fancy the simple life in Paris frocks, and pap served up in Charles II. porringers! The whole thing appeals irresistibly to one's sense of humor. And, don't forget, that this enchantress is going to marry Mark Callader. Any woman who would stoop to marry Callader is absolutely beyond mortal aid. Nothing but conversion to the Salvation Army would meet a case like this."

"That is why I want you to interfere," Vanstone said eagerly. "We all know what Callader is. He has the instincts of a Squire Western, and the mind of a pugilist. I am certain that man would knock a woman about, especially if she were his wife. He would be far happier tied up to a fifth-rate variety artist. You can help me if you like, and I am going to make a personal favor of it. I am not a bit in love with the girl myself. Besides, she wouldn't look at me if I were. But I honestly believe if you took Adela Burton away from her surroundings, she is capable of becoming a good woman. I know you believe in nothing, but at any rate, I'll ask you to give me the credit of good intentions."

"I'll try," Denne said sardonically. "If there is one man I know more than another who is given to self-sacrifice you are that foolish and slightly idiotic person. Still, you might have asked me to help an honest woman."

Vanstone stared at his companion in astonishment.

"I don't know what you mean," he stammered.

"I mean exactly what I say," Denne replied in matter-of-fact tones. "Your paragon amongst women plays bridge with people who can't afford to lose. The whole thing disgusts me. Stare as you please; if you will come to a dinner party I am giving, I shall be able—but there—what does it matter? And yet perhaps—"

II - PANDORA SHOWS HER HAND

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At last all the guests were gone, the frivolous silken rustles had died away, the mass of inane femininity had departed. Nothing remained but a subtle suggestion of effete perfumes, and the acrid insinuation of tobacco smoke. The flowers were struggling now to come into their kingdom. A cluster of narcissus in an old Ming bowl began to assert itself. With an impatient sigh Adela pulled back the curtains, and flung open the long French windows leading to the lawn. She stood drinking in the fragrance of the evening. The breath of the spring night touched her cheek caressingly. The blackbird in retrospective mood was still whistling softly on his porch. It was practically dark, and a sense of desolation swept over Adela as she turned back into the room again.

"What a fool I am!" she soliloquised. "All the more so, because I am not devoid of intellect like most of the people who have just left. I wonder what they would say if they knew, if they realised that I have actually come to the end of my tether, and have not a five-pound note in the world to call my own. I wonder if this is the end of it? Perhaps the funds are exhausted, for it is scarcely likely that those American people would have written intimating that it was useless to apply to them for further money, and that, in future, Mr. Burton would communicate with me himself. Is it possible that some rich crank has been playing a joke upon me? No, that is hardly credible. I don't think that any man, however rich, would keep up a joke, which, from first to last,

has cost him a hundred thousand pounds. I have not long to wait. I shall soon know my fate."

She stopped to gather up the cards which lay on the floor, like the gaudy parti-colored leaves of an autumn forest, and placed them methodically away. She emptied the ash trays, and sprinkled the sitting-room with sanitas so that the flowers in the *Prinus* jars began to pick up their heads, and the whole atmosphere became sweeter. It was so dark that the purple shadows beyond the French windows were almost menacing. With a shiver of apprehension, Adela closed the shutters and pulled down the blind again. It seemed to her fancy that she heard a footstep on the gravel. With a smile at her cowardice she put the fear from her. As she stood waiting vaguely for something to happen, as one does in moments of nervous tension, she imagined she could hear the bathroom window raised gently and closed again. It came upon her with overpowering force that it was half a mile to the nearest house, that she was alone, and that there was booty enough here to keep a score of burglars in affluence for the rest of their natural lives. Instinctively she walked across the room to where the telephone receiver hung. She had her hand upon it when something touched her arm. All her combative instincts were awake. She was ready for real, palpitating danger. It was only the intangible that frightened her. Her eyes gleamed with anger.

"What are you doing here?" she demanded.

The intruder made no reply for a moment. He pressed his hands to his sides. The panting of his breath filled up the silence of the room. He might have been some fugitive

seeking sanctuary. But for a moment his limbs failed him, and he staggered to his fall. There was time for Adela to gaze at him from under her long purple lashes. She had it in her to study him calmly and critically.

Evidently this was no creature to be afraid of. In age he was about sixty, with a mass of white hair, and grey moustache that dropped over the corners of his lips. His face was handsome in its way, though seared and lined. He gave an apprehensive glance over his shoulder which told its own tale. For the rest, he might have been a broken down derelict cast off from some cavalry regiment. He certainly had the air of a man who had seen service—a man who would be at home amongst refined surroundings. His eyes were blue, small eyes, that told of cunning and wickedness, eyes that spoilt what otherwise might have been a benevolent face. He was dressed with some attempt at smartness, though his grey frock-coat was faded and discolored, his patent leather boots were down at heel. Adela knew the type. Doubtless this had been a man of clubs in his time, a man to whom the topography of the West End was as an open book.

Beyond question, this man had come to beg and whine, to plead some pitiful tale, more or less true, and in her indolent way Adela was already feeling in her pocket. A deal of promiscuous charity has its origin in indolence rather than generosity. The man seemed to realise what was passing through the girl's mind, for he raised his hand protestingly. It was a long, slim hand, and Adela saw that the nails were pink and filbert-shaped. She saw, too, what puzzled, and, at the same time, alarmed her. The hard, sly

cunning had died from the intruder's blue eyes. His whole face had changed its expression to one of deepest interest, and almost filial affection. Adela would have found it hard to express her feelings at that moment. Disappointment and fear and horror were uppermost.

"What are you doing here?" she repeated.

"They followed me," the man gasped, as a curious dry hard cough seemed to choke him. "They nearly had me outside the station. I was an accursed fool to come back again. I might have known that I was not forgotten. There are a score of men in England to-day who would go a long way to put a spoke in the 'Colonel's' wheel. And now, my dear, how are you? Ha! There is no need to ask that question. If ever I saw anyone with the true air about her, you are she, ruffling it with the very best of them, too. Oh, bless you. I have read all about it in the papers. Laugh, well, I should think so. But, you see—"

A fit of coughing choked the speaker's utterance again. He pressed a dingy handkerchief to his lips, and Adela saw a faint smear of red upon it. She was standing opposite the speaker, breathing quickly and rapidly herself, and unable to overcome a feeling of evil.

"Once more, what do you want?" she demanded. "From what you say, you are flying from justice."

"That is so," the man replied coolly. "I thought you would enjoy the joke, and so you will when you have heard it. How like your mother you are, to be sure!"

Like her mother! The words seemed to be tangled and twisted in Adela's brain, just as a physical pain starts at the touch of a raw and bleeding nerve. Had this degraded

wretch known her mother, the mother she did not remember herself, whom she naturally thought of as someone exalted and beautiful? Yet he spoke of her as though they had been on the most familiar terms.

"Did you know her, then?"

"Know her! I fancy I did. Why, there wasn't a man or boy in New York twenty years ago who was not familiar with the name of Sophie Letolle. But people are soon forgotten in these days. Ah, there was a woman for you? Handsome? Handsome's not the word. Daring and ambitious, too. What a queen she would have made! I ought to have married her myself. I should have been in a very different position now if I had. But she never cared for anybody but poor Jake, who was a feeble sort of creature at the best. Ah, my dear, it is not from your father's side that you inherit your brilliant qualities."

"Jake!" Adela repeated the word again and again. It was suggestive of some handsome, degenerate bar-loafer—the type of man who often attracts the admiration of a dashing and clever woman. Yet there was something almost amusing in the suggestion. That man could not be Adela's father. It was incredible that she had had her being in some gorgeous butterfly known to man as Sophie Letolle. Oh, no, surely she had a clean and more refined ancestry than that. Adela had assumed so much from the first. She had known no care, no spoilt darling in Society to-day occupied a better position than she. The whole thing was a mistake. This man had come to the wrong house; he had taken her for someone else. She must put him right at once.

"Stop!" she said. "There is something wrong here. Do you know who I am?"

An absurd, almost senile affection gleamed in her visitor's eyes.

"You are Adela Burton, the adopted daughter of the celebrated Sam Burton, the American millionaire. It is astonishing what the British public will swallow if you only go the right way about it. I could sit down and laugh when I see you in the lap of luxury, with your portrait in all the papers, and ever so many peers at your feet. What would they say if they knew the truth? The paragraphs about you I have read, heaps and heaps of them! The gorgeous things they have said about Sam Burton! And all the while there hasn't been any Sam Burton at all. At least, not in the sense that people suppose. My dear girl, I hope, for your sake, that you are an admirer of Dickens' works."

"I have a great liking for most of them."

"Then you will remember 'Great Expectations?' Do you recall Pip and his wonderful fortune?"

Adela nodded. It was coming to her mind with illuminating flashes. She recollected the story of Pip and his phantom fortune—that memorable scene when Pip's fairy godfather appeared in the shape of the desperate hunted broken-down convict, whom the lad had helped so many years before in the old churchyard on the marshes. And as this picture began to stand out warm and tangible, a dreadful fear gripped Adela by her white throat and held her speechless. The man was mumbling, but a horrible grin overspread his features.

"Don't you see the analogy?" he said. "Pip helped a convict, and in after years the old man helped him. There was a time when you helped me. You were only a tiny tot, and probably the incident has faded from your mind. But your pluck and courage got me out of a tight place, and I've never forgotten it. I was always a sentimentalist at heart. Besides, you were fond of me then. I fancy I can feel those kisses of yours on my lips now!"

The power of speech returned to Adela in an uncontrollable torrent. A thousand questions trembled on her lips, but she kept herself in with an effort. The atmosphere had grown suddenly cooler. She felt cold and shivered from head to foot.

"You had better tell me whom you are."

"So you haven't guessed? Do you mean to tell me that you are in the dark still? Then let me introduce myself. I am the famous millionaire; the only and original Sam Burton."

III - TRAGEDY OR FARCE?

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Adela groped her way to a chair, as if she were blind or fumbling in the dark. It never occurred to her to doubt what the intruder said. She took it all absolutely for gospel. There was no hint of mirth about the speaker. Evidently he was in deadly earnest. He stood with his hands under his long coat tails like a statesman in the hour of his triumph. The leering look of affection was on his face. Adela shuddered as she wondered whether he would expect her to kiss him.

But one fact stood out as clearly as a beacon light on a stormy sea. The man was a criminal. He had not told her so, but Adela knew that as plainly as if the facts had been proclaimed in a court of law. The veriest tyro in crime would have stigmatised Burton as a shy man with a shady reputation. He had the tone and accent of a gentleman, it is true, and he had passed most of his time, doubtless, in cultivating refined society. But there was no getting away from the hideous suggestiveness of his mouth, and the wicked cunning in his blue eyes.

Nor could she escape the fact that this man had loaded her with benefits. If this were Sam Burton, and the girl saw no reason to question it, she was under a debt to him that she could never repay, and she could not even claim relationship. For years past he had devoted his life to her happiness and comfort. He had educated her, paid her extravagant bills uncomplainingly, surrounded her with every luxury and extravagance that the heart could desire. He had confessed to being a sentimentalist. This was the one clean,

sweet romance of his otherwise spotted existence. He had been carried away by the genius and power of Charles Dickens' work. He had elected to play the role of the old convict, and Adela was Pip in another form. Was this a ghastly tragedy or a screaming farce?

For the first time the girl laughed. It was a hard laugh with a touch of hysteria behind it. She glanced from the self-satisfied figure standing before the fireplace to the evidence of wealth and refinement around her. She could see the outlay of a fortune almost within reach of her own slender ringed fingers. This picture had a history of its own, and the halo of the big cheque about it. There was a carpet, which had cost half a score of lives to make. Here was a piece of statuary beyond the purse of anyone but a millionaire. And this was only Adela's country cottage. There was a flat in St. Veronica's Mansions, Westminster, compared with which this bungalow was simplicity itself. Every penny of the money had come from the pockets of the imagined millionaire, but was probably the fruit of audacity and crime! Possibly the stranger had a suspicion of the trend of Adela's thoughts, for he stretched out one of his long, slim fingers and pointed to a Corot half hidden behind a feathery bank of palms.

"I remember that picture," he said. "It used to hang in the house of a virtuoso in Florence. You would laugh if you knew how it came into my possession. Didn't I send it you on your twentieth birthday? Yes, I am sure I did. I remember it because I forwarded those old Dresden beakers at the same time. We got lots of stuff from the chateau of that mad Hungarian Prince when his castle was burned down. As a matter of fact, there wasn't any fire at all. I think that was

about the best and most simple scheme I ever invented. Over forty thousand pounds' worth of plunder, and no one so much as suspected. I sent you a certain trio of Rembrandts, too. Where are they?"

"In my London flat," said Adela feebly. She was past emotion, or anger, or tears. She lay back in her chair limp and listless, fascinated in spite of herself.

"That's right," Burton said encouragingly. "I am glad you are taking it in the right way, because, you see, the game is pretty well played out. I am not the man I was, and if the doctors tell me truly I haven't very long to live. I daresay you remember that business a year or two ago in Paris over the Countess De Trouville's diamonds. I believe the affair created a considerable sensation. I got it bullet in my left lung then, and have never quite recovered. But for that I might have kept up the glorious game to the finish. But, what does it matter to a clever girl like you? You are in the very first flight. You pass for a girl with a fabulous fortune. You are even more beautiful than I expected you to be. Ah, the salt of the earth—that's what you are—the salt of the earth."

The speaker turned the phrase around his tongue a dozen times, as it he liked the flavor of it.

"You'll get nothing more from me," he said. "I am played out. I have enemies, too, ready to give me away. The police know that I am in England. It was only by the greatest good luck that I escaped them to-night."

The speaker stopped to cough again. Once more he pressed his handkerchief to his thin lips. For the first time Adela noted how white and drawn he was. She became

conscious of his labored breathing. She was recovering, now. The first crushing weight of the blow was passing away. No wild desire to cross-examine troubled her. She knew that this man was speaking the truth. She felt very much now as Pip had felt when the hunted convict turned up in the old chambers at the Thavies Inn.

At one stroke the whole fabric of her dreams had been shattered. As a matter of hard, cold fact, she was not the salt of the earth at all. She was merely the offspring of some impossible creature whose face had been her fortune and whose audacity had been her bank-book. Of all the carved and gilt frauds at present haunting London she was the worst. For the last year or two she had been courted and flattered, she had basked in the smiles of royalty, she had been the guest of more than one ducal house. Modern society without Adela Burton seemed almost impossible. Of course, there had been a good deal of anxiety of late, especially since the American remittances had ceased. But Adela had not seriously troubled about that. She had looked forward to seeing her benefactor, but she had never dreamt to meet him in a guise like this. Now she knew she was as big an impostor as himself.

Her path lay clear before her. But would she take it? In her heart of hearts she knew she would do nothing of the kind. Besides, she could always fall back upon Mark Callader. Callader was going to marry her for her money. Indeed, he had made little disguise of the fact. On the whole, Adela would have the best of the deal.

"Won't you sit down?" she asked.

Burton did not appear to be listening to her. He stood up rigidly, as a fox might do when he hears the hounds. His tense expectation, the hard, drawn lines of his mouth filled Adela with apprehension.

"There is nothing to be afraid of," she said.

"Not for you, my dear, you are all right. The police don't know everything yet. Little do they dream of the connection between myself and Miss Adela Burton. But I should like to know—what's that?"

Adela heard the sound of footsteps crunching on the gravel, the quick, impatient ripple of the front-door bell. The whole aspect of the man changed. A cruel, vengeful light lurked in his eyes. He was breathing thick and fast. A moment before he had been holding an envelope in which something sparkled. He placed the contents in his breast pocket, but the envelope slipped, unnoticed by him, to the floor. Before Adela could speak he had vanished in the direction of the bath-room. Then she heard the front door open, and a man strode into the room.

"Are you quite alone?" he asked.

"Yes," Adela said mechanically. "But what are you, of all men, doing here?"

"I came with the police. There is a man I am looking for. I ran against him by accident at Victoria, but he managed to elude me. I suppose he hasn't been here?"

"Is it likely? Is it a new society fad to hide criminals? Doesn't it strike you that you are behaving absurdly, Mark?"

Mark Callader shook his head doggedly.

"I am sorry," he said. "Of course I had no business to come in like this. But we actually found that fellow's foot-

prints in your garden. Funny thing he should have come here, wasn't it?"

"Very," Adela said indifferently.

Mark Callader frowned. He stood there big and strong, a little embarrassed, and conscious of the fact. He was clean-shaven like most of his sort. He had the face of a pugilist, the heavy square features of the man who gets his living in that way. There was a blue tinge on his skin, which was slightly indented like the rind of an orange. One could imagine him in evening dress, spending his time in a sporting den, and gloating over the sickening spectacle of two human beings pounding each other to a jelly for a purse of gold. The same type of face and form is familiar at race meetings. For the rest, he was well-dressed, and up to his neck had the semblance of being a gentleman. Mark Callader could boast of a long line of ancestors, and the possession of considerable property. But there the resemblance to the man of high caste ceased. He had the courage and dogged resolution that distinguish his class. He was always at one end of the gamut of passions. There was no limit to his love and his hate, and Adela could imagine him like another Othello with his hand on the pillow and murder in his heart, should the Desdemona of the moment play him false. To sum up, he was rich, and in the smart set to which he belonged this covered a multitude of sins. A sullen, sleepy look of admiration lit up his eyes—the small, deep-sunk eyes, which he turned upon Adela. Perhaps because she loathed the type and the manner, Mark Callader fascinated her; but it was largely the fascination the snake has upon the bird.

"I am sorry I intruded in this fashion," he stammered. "But you know I never stop to think."

"Oh, I know that; I was merely thinking it strange you should have traced this fugitive here. I am afraid you have had your journey for nothing, as far as I am concerned."

"Sure you haven't seen him?"

"My dear Mark, have I not already said so?" Adela responded. There was nothing for it but to lie. However she might despise herself, she must be loyal to her convict. "As a matter of fact, you are detaining me. I ought to have gone out before now."

A sudden suspicion seized Callader.

"Then why are you not dressed?" he retorted. "You can't go out and spend the evening in that rig."

Adela would have given anything to get Callader out of the house. She hoped he would not see the evidence of her falsehood, proof which literally was at his feet, for upon a Persian prayer rug lay Burton's stained handkerchief, and close beside it the envelope which had dropped from his pocket. If Callader saw either he would never rest till his suspicions were dispelled or confirmed, and even as Adela was racking her brain for some plan to induce him to leave, he stooped down and picked up the envelope from the floor. She could see it shaking in his hand, and noticed how the blunt thumb-nail was pressed into the thick, white paper.

"What's this?" he said hoarsely. "An envelope addressed to Douglas Denne, and something inside it, too. Hang me, if it isn't a Mazarin ring—the Mazarin ring, mind."

The tiny circlet of gold glittered in the air as Callader held it up to the light. The gold workmanship was quaint and

artistic. A series of claws held three engraved diamonds in a kind of cluster. Adela recognised the ring at once; indeed, everybody with any knowledge of art had heard of the Mazarin ring. It was no time to wonder how it got there, to marvel how it had come into Burton's possession, or how it managed to slip from his pocket. It was fortunate, perhaps, for Adela that Callader was gazing at it with rapt admiration. His love and knowledge of antiques of all kinds was the man's one redeeming feature. There was no dealer in London or Paris who could teach Callader anything on the subject of art. He had the Renaissance at his finger tips. His own collections were well nigh priceless. It was known to a few that he made large sums by dealing. If he cared to run any risk to mortgage his soul for anything, it would only be for a piece of rare furniture or a famous picture. Mephistopheles himself would have chosen such bait for him.

"How did this come here?" he demanded.

"The thing speaks for itself," Adela said. She had recovered her self-possession. "Mr. Denne has been here this afternoon with some of the others playing bridge. No doubt he dropped the ring and envelope out of his pocket. Perhaps it is a good thing I have found it. Now, if you don't mind—"

"Oh, I am going. I suppose I shall see you at Denne's dinner to-morrow night. You will have a good opportunity to give him the ring back."

The front door closed. Adela was alone at last, and threw herself into a chair. She tried to analyse her confused and

painful thoughts. She was like one cast away and derelict on a dark and stormy sea.

"Is it tragedy or is it farce?" she pondered. "So I am the salt of the earth? What would they say if they knew?"