Fred M. Wh<mark>it</mark>e



Fred M. White

A Crime On Canvas



Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4066338099754

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CHAPTER I - PRIDE OF BIRTH **CHAPTER II - THE PAINTED FACE** CHAPTER III - THE SECOND FACE CHAPTER IV - WANTED—A FRIEND **CHAPTER V - A DARKER CLOUD CHAPTER VI - THE DAWN OF FREEDOM** CHAPTER VII - THE BRAND OF SHAME CHAPTER. VIII - A COMPACT CHAPTER. IX - FACE TO FACE CHAPTER. X - IN THE STUDIO **CHAPTER XI - A HAUNTING DOUBT** CHAPTER, XII - MR. DOVELUCK CHAPTER XIII - A STRANGE. GATHERING CHAPTER XIV - A STARTLING MESSAGE **CHAPTER XV -. IN PURSUIT CHAPTER XVI - IN THE STUDIO** CHAPTER XVII - BEYOND REPAIR CHAPTER XVIII - A TRAGIC. INTERLUDE CHAPTER XIX - BETWEEN TWO FIRES CHAPTER XX - TOO MUCH TO ASK **CHAPTER XXI - FOLLOWING IT UP** CHAPTER XXII - "MR. THIRTEEN" **CHAPTER XXIII - A NEW PHASE** CHAPTER XXIV - THE ONLY WAY CHAPTER XXV - SOMETHING CONCEALED CHAPTER XXVI - THE UNEXPECTED, HAPPENS **CHAPTER XXVII - ONE TOO MANY** CHAPTER XXVIII - THE FACE AGAIN CHAPTER XXIX - WHO WAS THE ARTIST? CHAPTER XXX - THE PROGRESS OF THE, PICTURE CHAPTER XXXI - A VISIT TO THE. MILLIONAIRE **CHAPTER XXXII - A DEALER IN. ANTIQUES** CHAPTER XXXIII - THE DEAD HAND CHAPTER XXXIV - RECOGNIZED CHAPTER XXXV -. WANTED! CHAPTER XXXVI - FRESH FOOD FOR THE. PRESS **CHAPTER XXXVII - CRITICAL OPINION** CHAPTER XXXVIII - A POINT TO THE. PRISONER CHAPTER XXXIX - THE CASE. OF A POINT FOR THE PRISONER **CHAPTER XL - THE LITTLE BOTTLE** CHAPTER XLI - A VOICE IN THE DARK CHAPTER XLII - AN UNBIDDEN GUEST CHAPTER XLIII - THE SPUR OF. CIRCUMSTANCE CHAPTER XLIV - THICKER THAN WATER CHAPTER XLV - THE PRIDE OF. LUCIFER CHAPTER XLVI - BY FORCE OF ARMS CHAPTER XLVII - A GLIMPSE OF THE. TRUTH **CHAPTER XLVIII - A RING OF IRON** CHAPTER XLIX - THE AMATEUR. CRACKSMAN CHAPTER L - BACK FROM THE GRAVE CHAPTER LI - THE CROWN OF FOLLY CHAPTER LII - THE LIGHT OF DAY THE END



alt=""

Frontispiece

CHAPTER I - PRIDE OF BIRTH

Table of Contents

THERE is no more distinguished family in England than the Blantyres of Glenallan. Its very name is a sufficient passport into the best society. Nevertheless, those who know shrug their shoulders, glance significantly at one another, and leave the rest to discreet silence. Be that as it may, however, the Blantyres are still important people in their own neighbourhood. Their estates are as extensive as ever, and their revenues have suffered no diminution, even in these democratic days, when few old families can boast of the power and influence they wielded a hundred years ago.

At the time the story opens the Blantyre estates and title were vested in Sir Arthur Blantyre, an elderly man of somewhat close and eccentric habits. No one could say anything against him; no breath of scandal dimmed his fame. And yet there was not a single tenant or neighbour on the estate who had not some strange story to tell in regard to his landlord.

Perhaps this was mainly because Sir Arthur Blantyre kept entirely to himself. He could hardly expect to be popular, seeing that he had not succeeded to the title till late in life; and when he came into the grand old house and still grander estates, he was accompanied only by a young girl, who addressed him as grandfather. The late baronet had been a bachelor—one of the hard-living, hard-riding school, who, when he did speak of his successor, always alluded to him in terms of contempt; indeed, until Sir Arthur Blantyre first crossed the threshold of Glenallan he had never even seen the home of his ancestors. He was known to have been poor before his accession, and rumour had it that before the old Squire's death he had lived for the most part in France. Certainly his dress and manner supported this report, for the new baronet was not in the least like his predecessors. He was tall and slight. He wore his snow-white hair rather long. There was something Continental about his white moustache and imperial. He took not the slightest interest in field sports and the other matters that go to make a country gentleman popular with his neighbours. And as to his estates, he handed over their management to an agent in an adjacent town, while, so far as he himself was concerned, his time was devoted to his library. At the end of four or five years there were outlying tenants on the estate who could say with truth that they had never even spoken to their landlord. In the country all this makes for unpopularity, and it was no exaggeration to say that Sir Arthur Blantyre was disliked by his subordinates and tenants.

Not that this seemed to trouble the baronet much. There were people who averred that he had troubles and worries enough of his own. His health was good. He enjoyed a princely income. But he was never seen to smile. A look of melancholy and unhappiness never left his face, and from time to time in his dark eyes there was the shadow of fear.

At first the neighbours had called in plenty. But one and all were chilled with their reception, and gradually the flow of visitors ceased. For the last two years or so no neighbour had ever come up the famous avenue of elms leading to the

house. Ever since she had been under that roof Ethel Blantyre had never known what it was to have a friend. At the beginning Sir Arthur had seemed disposed to be on fairly good terms with the vicar of the parish and one other person, a Frenchman named Le Blanc. But the vicar was dead. There had been some scandal in connexion with a son of his of which people spoke in whispers, though Ethel could never understand what it meant. And she had a distinct recollection of a terrible guarrel between her grandfather and Le Blanc, during which blows were struck and blood was shed. This had taken place at dead of night in Glenallan library, and Ethel had been a more or less unwilling witness of the scene. Once she had ventured to speak to her grandfather about it, but the lightning flash of rage in his eyes and the lurid anger on his face warned her not to pursue the topic. For three years she had held her peace, wondering if she were ever to see Lawrence Hatton, the son of the old vicar, again. He had been her only friend and playmate, so that her heart still held a tender place for him; indeed, these two had been something more than friends, though Sir Arthur Blantyre would have laughed the notion to scorn.

There was no one to tell Ethel anything. She had to ferret out information from the servants as best she could. All she knew was that Lawrence Hatton had been tried for some offence, and that he was now working out his sentence in gaol. It seemed incredible, almost monstrous, and Ethel was filled with indignation whenever she thought of it. But facts are inexorable things. The unhappy vicar had gone down to his grave in shame and humiliation, and the prison taint lay heavily on his only son. There had been another young man, too, whom Ethel remembered vividly—the son of the Frenchman Le Blanc. He was handsomer, more brilliant and more fascinating than young Hatton, but Ethel had never liked him, and even as an innocent child there was something about him that chilled and repelled her and warned her to keep him at a distance. There were people who said that Le Blanc the younger was making a great reputation as an artist. But as to that Ethel neither knew nor cared.

And so her dreary life went on in that cold, desolate house which seemed to be full of ghosts and shadows. Glenallan was a show-place in its way. It was full of magnificent pictures and furniture. The place was replete with historic memories. And yet Ethel would have cheerfully exchanged its splendour and beauty, its well-kept gardens and noble environment, for a cottage where she might have a little warmth and love and sunshine. She was no longer afraid as once she had been. She had grown accustomed to those gloomy corridors. They did not seem to be full of ghosts and spectres as when she had first come. She had her own recreations and amusements. But, all the same, she was exceedingly lonely. For Sir Arthur was in the habit of mysteriously disappearing periodically and remaining away for weeks. Where he went and what he did he told nobody. But every time he returned Ethel thought he looked more careworn and more anxious than before.

What this gloom was and what it meant the girl did not know, for her grandfather said little or nothing to her. He seemed to regard her merely as a girl, as a more or less necessary adjunct to the house. And yet there were moments when his eyes turned upon her appealingly, as if he would fain take her into his confidence and seek the benefit of her assistance and advice. But these intervals were rare.

And so in summer and winter alike the dreary life went on with nothing to break its black monotony. Occasionally Ethel would have welcomed any diversion, however serious. Anything would be better than the weariness and desolation of her present existence. What, she wondered, was the mystery that hung over the house? In the midst of all this wealth and luxury, what was it that caused her grandfather to look so pale and haggard, that hung about him like some cursed thing?

Ethel was pondering the matter as she sat at the breakfast-table making her grandfather's coffee. The little cedar-panelled room was gay with flowers which she had looted from the conservatories. The sun shone in through the rose windows, making a cosy picture which to the casual eye suggested envy and admiration. This did not serve to elevate Ethel's spirits in the least. One day was so like another that even the presence or absence of the blessed sunshine counted for nothing. Sir Arthur was not down yet. His pile of letters lay unopened by his plate. He came in by and by and kissed his granddaughter carelessly. Then, without a word, he began to open his correspondence. There were dark lines under his eyes. His hand shook like that of a man who had been drinking heavily the previous night. But Sir Arthur indulged in no dissipation. He held it in the deepest abhorrence.

He murmured something more or less polite as he turned over his letters. He slipped his coffee daintily, though he made a mere pretence of eating his breakfast. Ethel could see his slim hands with their sparkling rings tremble as he slipped open the envelopes of his letters with a pocketknife. Then, from one of them, he took what appeared to be a small piece of folded canvas and opened it languidly. All at once the words he was speaking seemed to freeze upon his lips. His face congealed and glazed with horror. One quivering hand was outstretched, so that he might look on the scrap of cloth as if to make sure of the evidence of his senses.

"God in Heaven!" he murmured, and his voice trembled like that of a man in the grip of intense physical agony, "to think that after all this time——"

The words trailed off into a broken whisper. With an incoherent stammer, Sir Arthur half rose to his feet. His coffee cup fell with a crash. Then he, too, sank silently to the floor.

CHAPTER II - THE PAINTED FACE

Table of Contents

ETHEL uttered no cry, nor summoned assistance. In some vague, intangible way she felt as if she had gone through the whole thing before, as if she were acting exactly as her grandfather would wish. She knew what a self-contained man he was, and how annoyed he would be were his servants to see him at that moment. It appeared to Ethel, too, as if, sooner or later, this black thing was inevitable. No man could go on for ever with such a cloud hanging over him as seemed to overshadow the life of Sir Arthur Blantyre.

The girl was cool and collected. She leant down by her grandfather's side and raised his head from the floor. Already a little colour was creeping back into his face, the whiteness was leaving his lips. As he sat up, half unconscious and oblivious to his surroundings, he still clutched the fragment of cloth in a tenacious grip. Ethel would have been less than human if she had not glanced at the innocent-looking object which had been the cause of all this emotion. Her grandfather must have been moved to the very depths of his being to give way like this.

The old Adam surging up in Ethel's heart took possession of her, and she looked eagerly at the strip of canvas in Sir Arthur's hand. What could there be in it to cause such an agitation? For the scrap of canvas contained nothing more repulsive than a lovely, innocent face, painted by a master hand. It was little more than a miniature, though, to judge from its ragged edges and oval shape, it might have been cut with a pair of scissors from a frame. As to the rest, it was a girl's face, fair and smiling, radiantly beautiful, with eyes dark, appealing and pathetic. Ethel's knowledge of art matters was limited. But it needed no critic to tell her that this was no idealization of the painter's dream, but a true and faithful portrait. Despite the beauty of the drawing and the sweet simplicity of the face, the artist in some subtle way had made the features suggest trial and suffering.

As Ethel gazed intently upon this picture her feeling of curiosity gave way to another and different emotion. She seemed to have seen that face before. It was impossible, of course, but she could not rid herself of the impression that here was no stranger to her. Then there burst upon her a vivid flash of illumination. Given a little difference in age, in dress and expression and the picture would pass for a likeness of herself. There was no mistaking this fact when once it had come home to her. Who, then, was the stranger?

Still dazed by this startling discovery the girl was staring at the picture when Sir Arthur opened his eyes and suddenly grasped what was going on. He realized by instinct what Ethel was doing, struggled painfully to his feet and crushed the offensive painting convulsively in his hands. Then he turned almost sternly to his granddaughter.

"Give me some coffee," he gasped, "and get me some brandy from the sideboard. Now tell me the truth. Have you seen this accursed thing? I must know."

"I looked at it, of course," Ethel said with a slight accession of colour in her cheeks. "I don't want to pry into your secrets, but I couldn't very well help seeing it. But, please, drink this coffee before you say another word." Sir Arthur appeared as if about to speak, then changed his mind. He sipped his coffee slowly and thoughtfully, his dark eyes brooding over the past.

"How old are you?" he demanded abruptly.

"I think I have come to years of discretion," Ethel ventured to say. "I shall be twenty on my next birthday. If you have anything to say, I think you can trust me."

There was something of reproach in the remark and it was not without effect on Sir Arthur. All these years he had been wrapped up in himself and his troubles. It had never occurred to him that Ethel was verging upon womanhood.

"Perhaps you are right," he said, apparently speaking more to himself than his companion. "I am a lonely old man. I have no friend to assist and advise me. I wonder if I dare trust you. I wonder if I dare tell you the story of my past the story of a proud man whose sin found him out when it was too late for repentance. But, no, not yet. I cannot do it yet. I must go my own way for the time being. You are to forget what you have seen this morning. You are never to mention it to a soul. Now tell me truthfully—did you see that picture?"

"I saw it, yes," Ethel said boldly enough, "and I cannot help thinking it very strange that a thing so beautiful——"

"Ah, beauty is not always what it seems," Sir Arthur burst out. "There is a beauty so diabolical and so fair that it lures men to destruction. You know nothing of that. Now, another question, what did you think of the picture? Did you see any resemblance to anybody?"

"I did," Ethel said candidly. "I was very much struck with the resemblance between the picture and myself." Once more the pained look came over Sir Arthur's face. He shook his head sadly.

"I was afraid of it," he murmured. "Now there is one thing I want you to promise me. You must do your best to forget what you have seen this morning. Above all you must not dwell upon the fancied likeness between the picture and yourself. I won't say that it is a coincidence, because that would not be altogether true. In all the years we have been under this roof I don't think I have ever said so much to you before. Heaven knows, it may be for the best that my hand has been forced in this fashion. It may be that you can help me, but of that I will say no more for the present. Now leave me."

The last words were harsh and spoken in the voice which Ethel generally associated with her grandfather. The girl was excited. Her heart was beating rapidly. At last things had been violently shaken out of their old groove and the time for movement and action was come. She had the high courage and resolution of her race. She was ready to welcome anything that would lift her out of the monotony against which her whole soul rebelled. If there was trouble and danger she was ready to share it. Anything was better than the appalling dreariness of her existence.

Yet, as the day went on, Sir Arthur made no further sign. It seemed as if he meant to ignore the breakfast incident, for he sat moodily over his lunch without more than an occasional word to the girl flung to her as a man would toss a bone to his dog. It was the same at tea time in the dim oak-panelled hall where the firelight gleamed on armour and spear, on china and picture, and during the long ceremonious dinner, over which they sat until there were moments when Ethel could have jumped from her chair and cried aloud.

But the girl possessed her soul in patience. She felt that the time was coming when she might be asked to be up and doing. There was more savour in life now, more enjoyment in her piano and the flowers which she loved so well; indeed, but for the flowers and their constant arrangement the hours at Glenallan would have hung heavily upon her hands. They were like friends and comrades to her. She handled them as carefully and tenderly as a mother fondles her young and delicate child. So Ethel sat there until the lights began to go out and the servants one by one crept up to bed. She was not in the least sleepy or tired. There was no need to hurry for, despite his years, Sir Arthur was a late man, and many a time had Ethel heard him come wearily up the stairs when the dawn was breaking and the birds were beginning to sing in the great Lebanon cedar trees outside, which were one of the joys and pride of Glenallan. Even as she sat, she could hear Sir Arthur pacing up and down his study. She heard him stop presently. Her quick ears detected the sound of a window being opened and a murmur of voices, borne on the breeze, drifted along the corridor. Then the hall light went out. There was a gentle flicker up and down the walls as if some one were passing with a lantern. Very softly Ethel turned out the drawing-room lights and fumbled her way to the door. There, surely enough, was the outline of a figure clad in a rough pilot jacket, which she had no difficulty in recognizing as that of her grandfather.

He passed stealthily along the interminable corridors like a thief in the night. It was curious to watch a man playing the spy under his own roof. Ethel's curiosity was aroused and her pulses were quickened. Was she a child that she should be shut out continually from her grandfather's confidence? She set her white teeth grimly together.

"It may be wrong," she murmured, "but, at any risk, I am going to follow."

CHAPTER III - THE SECOND FACE

Table of Contents

IT was not a difficult task that Ethel had set herself, seeing that her grandfather had not the least idea that he was being shadowed. The track he took was a strange one to the girl, though she had flattered herself she knew the house thoroughly. Sir Arthur appeared to be leading towards the kitchens. But he branched off presently along a passage, which, to the girl's surprise, was thickly, not to say richly, carpeted, and gave a general idea of comfort and luxury. She thought it odd she had never been through it before. But she had other thoughts to occupy her attention. With a sudden feeling that she was not behaving altogether well, she contrived to keep her grandfather in sight till he paused before a door which he proceeded to open with a patent latchkey he had taken from his pocket. He did not seem to trouble whether he was being followed or not. The idea of such a thing had never occurred to him, for he left the door open and turned up the lights.

Glenallan was still an old-fashioned house rejoicing in its old-fashioned traditions, but one innovation Sir Arthur had introduced, and that was the electric light. The room was flooded now to its utmost corner, so that Ethel could stand in the passage and see what was going on. At the first blush there was nothing to rouse her suspicions or cause her any feeling of alarm. It was just an ordinary sitting-room, evidently furnished with a view to gratify a pretty feminine taste. The carpet was of soft Aubusson silk, daintily figured after the most elegant design; the richly-gilt furniture belonged to the period of Louis Quatorze, and possessed all the graceful character of that epoch, without the garishness inseparable from the tasteless imitation. The tables and chairs were covered with priceless tapestry, and most of the pictures on the brocade-panelled walls were those of beautiful women, the work of famous French artists; indeed, the whole room might have been transported bodily from Versailles or one of the old French palaces. Doubtless some bygone Blantyre had furnished this room for herself regardless of cost, though why she had chosen an out-ofthe-way room, accessible only by a dingy corridor, Ethel could not divine.

One thing she did not fail to notice, and that was the unfinished and neglected appearance of the electric fittings. There were no beaten copper or brass electroliers, carefully selected to harmonize with the surroundings, nothing but loose flexes in solitary bulbs hanging here and there as if the work had been hastily rigged up by some amateur. It occurred to Ethel that the workman who had been responsible for the contract had been purposely excluded from this apartment.

Naturally, all this added to the mystery and excitement of the adventure. Taking her courage in her hands Ethel advanced closer, so that she could look into the room and observe what was going on. She saw her grandfather standing in front of a beautifully inlaid table on which were scattered books in priceless bindings. These he swept carelessly to the ground as if they were so much waste paper. Then he drew back one of the brocade panels in the wall and produced a large portfolio of prints or water-colour drawings. He laid the portfolio on the table and began to search amongst the contents as if looking for something. Then he gave a sigh of satisfaction as he withdrew what seemed to be a pair of paintings in oils upon canvas. For a long time he bent over the uppermost of these and examined it with the most painstaking scrutiny.

Would he never be done with the pictures? They appeared to be of absorbing interest. Almost unconscious of what she was doing, the girl advanced nearer and nearer until at length she was actually inside the room. She laid an unsteady hand upon the back of a chair for support. A board creaked under her feet with a snap like a pistol shot and Sir Arthur started and rubbed his eyes. He looked round in a vague and lack-lustre way. It was some little time before he realized that he was not alone. Then he turned and caught Ethel by the shoulder in a grip that caused her to wince. She had not expected such strength in so feeble a frame.

"You are hurting me," she whispered.

"It is a wonder I did no worse," Sir Arthur said hoarsely. He seemed beside himself with rage. "So you followed me here. Why did you do so? Surely you must know how dishonourable a thing it is to spy upon my movements."

Ethel hung her head. A red wave of shame swept over her beautiful and sensitive face. For it was a dishonourable thing to do. There was nothing for it but to make a clean breast of the matter.

"I am exceedingly sorry," she faltered, "but some impulse I could not resist constrained me to follow you. You have looked so miserable and unhappy of late that I have longed to help you; but I meant no harm. I mean no harm now. If you tell me to go I will do so at once and leave you to yourself."

Sir Arthur appeared to hesitate. The anger had died out of his face. His eyes were sombre. At the same time he had not altogether forgotten himself, for he took a sheet of paper lying on the top of the portfolio and laid it over the oil painting which he had been studying so intently. The action was not lost upon Ethel.

"You are here and the mischief is done," he said. "Whether you stay or not matters little. But you must not mention to a soul what you have seen to-night. It comes as a great surprise to you, of course, to know that there is such a room under this roof so remote from the state apartments. I dare say you are asking yourself who is responsible for all this luxury and extravagance. You have probably noted that the furniture and the pictures are as fine as anything else we have in the house. Well, so far as you are concerned, your curiosity is not likely to be gratified—at least not yet. I must prove your ability and your courage first. But you have seen enough to know that I am a desolate and miserable old man, and that I have a secret trouble which has poisoned and ruined my life. If I were less proud I should not suffer so much. But, then, you see, I am a Blantyre, and I have never been allowed to forget it since the day when I was old enough to understand anything. It is through my pride that I suffer. It is through my pride that this punishment has fallen so heavily upon me. The fiend who tortures me night and day knows this. He knows how to hit me on the tenderest spot, and he knows how to take vengeance. He is none of your clumsy haters who strikes with a bludgeon, or ends a life with a knife or a revolver—his methods are far more subtle."

"I am afraid I don't understand," Ethel said. "But there are ways of striking back. Surely, in this twentieth century, it is impossible for any one to carry out the practice of the Borgias or the Brinvilliers. And if you are not strong enough yourself to cope with this trouble, you must find some friend who is able to assist you."

"Not one," Sir Arthur cried in anguished tones. "I have not a single friend on the face of God's earth. If I could find one man devoted to my interests, why, then, I might summon back my lost courage and fight the thing to the finish. What I want is a friend who is absolutely alone in the world, who has suffered as I have done myself, and who would cling to me and do my bidding from a sense that fidelity to me was the only policy possible to him. Ah, if you could find me some one like that——"

Ethel made no reply for a moment. She was filled with a brilliant idea, though she dared not give utterance to the thought that thrilled her. She knew the very man whom Sir Arthur most needed at this critical juncture. But she would not speak yet, she told herself. She would wait till the morning.

"I think some one might be found," she said.

Sir Arthur turned away from her with a gesture of despair. As he did so his arm came in contact with the sheet of paper overlying the picture on the table, so that it came fluttering to the floor. In that instant, under the broad light of the electrics, Ethel had a full view of the picture. It was a halflength drawing of a girl in a white dress with a bunch of violets at her throat. It was only possible to get a glimpse of the smiling face for a moment before the paper was replaced. But that moment was enough. It was the same face painted in exactly the same form as the scrap of canvas which had so affected Sir Arthur in the morning. Ethel turned so that her grandfather should not see the startled expression in her eyes. But he had forgotten her, and as she looked towards the door she saw, or thought she saw, a long slim hand feeling for the electric switch. Before Ethel could make up her mind whether it was a delusion or not the switches clicked noisily and the room was plunged in darkness.

CHAPTER IV - WANTED—A FRIEND

Table of Contents

THE whole thing was so sudden and yet so natural that neither Sir Arthur nor his companion was alarmed, though Ethel was still uncertain whether her imagination had played her a trick or not. As to Blantyre, he was under the impression that something had gone wrong with the accumultators. He muttered a word or two to this effect, and fumbled his way towards the door in search of his lantern. At the same moment it seemed to Ethel that somebody had flitted by her in the direction of the table. She could feel a slight current of air such as would be caused by the movement of a body. Her senses took in the fact that the room was filled with a faint sweet perfume such as the girl had never smelt before. It was by no means unpleasant, not in the least cloying, but there was something about it not easily forgotten. A few seconds later and there came the unmistakable sound as of something torn, and then everything was still and the strange scent began to fade away until only the slightest suspicion of it was left.

By this time Ethel had recovered her senses sufficiently to realize that all this was done by means of human agency, and to grasp the fact that some one had been tampering with the switches. She felt her way across to the door and a moment later the room was blazing with light again.

"What does it mean?" Blantyre demanded.

"Why, somebody came in," Ethel cried excitedly. "I distinctly felt some one pass me. The air moved as she did so."

"But why are you sure it was a woman?" Blantyre demanded.

"How could there be any doubt of it?" Ethel asked. "Didn't you notice that peculiar scent? No man would have anything like that about him. Surely you can smell it still."

"I noticed something strange," Blantyre admitted.

"Well, that is what I mean. I know some one pushed by me towards the table. I looked to the door a minute or two ago and I saw a long, slim hand fumbling at the switch. At first I thought it was imagination. But when the light went out I felt certain that I was not mistaken. And, besides, you must have heard that extraordinary tearing noise——"

"I had not thought of that," Blantyre said hoarsely.

He came striding across the room, and bent eagerly over the picture on the table. Then he started back with a cry. It was unnecessary to ask what had happened. Ethel could see that the canvas had been folded across about two-thirds of the way up and ripped from side to side as cleanly as if a knife had cut it. The body remained on the table, but the smiling face was gone. It was singular that such a slim hand as Ethel had seen tampering with the switch should have been powerful enough to tear the painted canvas across as if it had been so much paper. She glanced at her grandfather to see what he made of it, but the old man's face was grey and damp and his hands shook as he shuffled everything back into the portfolio again and concealed it behind the damask panel.

"I am tired and worn out," he said wearily. "Don't ask me to explain. Let us go to bed and try to forget all about the matter for the present. We can discuss it in the morning." Breakfast time, however, found Sir Arthur in a different mood. He seemed to be frightened and disposed to discuss any subject rather than the events of the previous night. But Ethel was not to be put off. She gradually led up to the matter which she had nearest her heart.

"You were saying last night," she said, "that you would give anything for a friend in the hour of need. You wanted a man who would be entirely devoted to your interests, a man who would be bound to you by personal ties, and I think I have found him."

"Really," Blantyre said with a slight sneer, "who is he?"

"Lawrence Hatton," Ethel said boldly. "Oh, of course, I know that he is under a cloud and that the prison taint is upon him. But I am sure you believe he was convicted of a crime he never committed. I used to fancy that you liked Lawrence."

"I didn't dislike him," Blantyre allowed.

"Well, at any rate, I know you did your best to help him in the time of his trouble," Ethel persisted. "I admit that appearances were against him. But something tells me he is innocent. Before long he will be coming out of gaol without a friend in the world to hold out a hand to him. What I suggest may be a desperate expedient, but, I think, Lawrence Hatton is just the man you want. You might, at any rate, give him a chance. Whatever his faults may be, he was always loyal to his friends, and his courage is undoubted."

Much to Ethel's relief she saw that the sarcastic smile was fading from her grandfather's face, and that he appeared half-inclined to listen to her argument. He raised one or two objections, it is true, mainly on the score that he did not know when Hatton's time was up, or in which of His Majesty's gaols the convict was confined. These were trivial points, and Ethel had no trouble in brushing them aside.

"That we can easily find out," she said, "if I could get the papers bearing on the trial."

"I can supply you with these," Blantyre said. "I remember reading them carefully at the time. Now let me see, where did I put them? Oh, yes, I recollect. They are in the small French cabinet in the corner of the very room you were in last night. I will give you the key and you may examine them for yourself. From the day of the trial to the present moment no one has ever seen them, so you will find them in order. Perhaps they may help you, and perhaps they may not. But you will be able to ascertain when young Hatton's sentence expires, so that you may try to get in touch with him when he comes out. I don't suppose your suggestion is the least good. But I am disposed to try the experiment."

Ethel did not rest until she had obtained the key of the room, and for a few hours she was busy poring over the newspapers which contained a full account of Lawrence Hatton's trial and sentence. They were interesting reading, and the girl's heart sank within her as she saw how the evidence was piled up against her old friend and playmate. But there was another thing which disturbed the girl and filled her with uneasiness. Blantyre had volunteered the statement that these papers had been locked away carefully, and that no one had had access to them. There was no particular reason why this statement should have been made, neither was there any reason to doubt it, except for the fact that the papers were tossed about in confusion, and that they needed sorting before Ethel could obtain a coherent account of the proceedings. This was foreign to her grandfather's tidy and methodical ways. He was the kind of man who viewed any sort of disorder with something approaching positive pain. It would be almost a matter of course that directly he had finished with the papers he would put them away in their proper sequence.

Who, therefore, had been interested in the doings of Lawrence Hatton in the meantime? Who had found his way into that room and disarranged the newspapers?

Ethel was still pondering this problem when her eyes lighted upon a piece of evidence which rendered assurance doubly sure. Inserted between one of the folded sheets was a torn scrap of a letter wrenched off the sheet of paper from top to bottom and containing part of some address, evidently in Paris, and the fraction of a date, which proved that the letter had only been written within the last two months. The slip was laid between the printed sheets and was clearly intended as a marker to show how far the last investigator had gone.

Further proof of interference was not needed. With troubled mind Ethel went on with her reading until she had come to the end. She looked at the date on the top of the last newspaper and made a rapid calculation between that and the sentence passed upon Hatton by his judge. Her heart gave a little leap as she compared the dates. Her scheme had come to her just in the nick of time, for, after making allowance for the remission of part of his sentence, which Lawrence would be sure to earn, in two days he would be released from gaol, to drift Heaven alone knew where, if no friends came forward to hold out a helping hand.

There was no time to be lost. But where was she to find the object of her search? In what gaol was Hatton confined. To ascertain this was a matter of vital importance, and admitted of no delay. Perhaps it would be possible for her grandfather to help her, Ethel thought, as she hastily began to put the papers together again. As she did so a loose card slipped from the packet and lay at her feet. It was a French postcard, addressed from a number at a post office, and on the other side just three lines:—

"Lawrence Hatton,

His Majesty's Prison,

Wandsworth."

Here was the information she so sorely needed.

CHAPTER V - A DARKER CLOUD

Table of Contents

THE discovery worried Ethel more than she cared to admit. Why should other people have suddenly taken an interest in the welfare of Lawrence Hatton after he appeared to be absolutely forgotten? And Ethel would have been less troubled in her mind if these inquiries had not been of quite so recent a date. That somebody had been rummaging amongst the newspapers within the last few weeks was evident; indeed, the fragment torn from the Parisian letter showed as much, to say nothing of the postcard which was still more startling evidence of a recent interference with the contents of the French cabinet.

Doubtless, whoever had been prying here had left the postcard by accident amongst the letters. Ethel turned it over and saw that the stamp indicated a postmark not much more than three weeks old. She took the card to the light and studied it in vain with a view to making out the postmark of the office in England to which it was delivered after being posted in Paris. But the mark was blurred and faint, and even Ethel's sharp eyes could make nothing of it. If she was to find anything out it would certainly not be here. Still she had ascertained the important fact that Lawrence Hatton's release from prison was only a matter of hours and that something would have to be done speedily if she were to see him.

Sir Arthur listened with more or less interest to all that Ethel had to say. His face brightened and his interest grew keener as Ethel produced the postcard for his inspection.