

Fred M. White

The Sundial

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Published by Good Press, 2022

goodpress@okpublishing.info

EAN 4064066093600

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CHAPTER I

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A BLIGHTED LIFE

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The bitterness of it tasted dry and insipid in John Charlock's mouth, like Dead Sea fruit. It was only lately that he had found out that all he had longed and hoped for since the early days was nothing more than vexation of spirit.

This process had been gradual, but it was none the less painful for that. It mattered nothing now that fame and fortune had come to him through the medium of his brush and pencil. For Charlock had fought his way up from the bottom. He had known what it was to starve. He had often slept in the open parks. And now everything was changed, and he stood almost unrivalled as a portrait-painter. And at the same time he appeared to have found the one woman who could make his happiness complete.

It was only five years ago, yet it seemed to Charlock like a lifetime. Perhaps he had been to blame; perhaps he had been harsh and hard, but the gulf between his wife and himself seemed to have been bridged over since the boy came.

And the child was slipping away, as an evening primrose blooms and dies within the compass of a night.... It had been a weary vigil and cruel withal, since there was only one end. The doctor held out no hope. He had told him that the boy could not last till morning, and that was why

Charlock had sent the nurse away, so that he might be with his child till the end. Very quietly he crept back to the bed again and stood looking down at the small, white face. The features were so colourless that death might have come already, save that the lips were parting and the eyelids twitched. The child had spoken his last words. Charlock would never hear that voice again.

The end was very, very near. The tiny life was drifting out to sea with the tide. As Charlock stood there his eye noted the sudden change, his quick ear caught a fluttering sigh. There was no need to tell him that the boy had gone.

Well, that was over, at any rate. Charlock felt quite calm and collected. There was no great grief in his heart. He supposed it was all for the best. Perhaps it would have been a pity if little Jack had grown up to the knowledge of a divided household. But it would be a divided household no longer. And the sooner Kate Charlock realised that the better. Of course, she would have all the sympathy and he would have all the blame. Not that he cared much about that. A great artist like John Charlock was beyond the measure of ordinary criticism. No doubt his was a sour, saturnine nature. No doubt Kate Charlock was pitied by all who knew her. It seemed almost a tragedy that a woman so pure and beautiful should be allied to so uncouth a being as Charlock. These strange thoughts ran through the painter's mind like a thread of scarlet intermingled with a warp of black.

Well, the boy was dead. Charlock repeated the words over and over again, as if forcing himself to realise it. He had sat there for hours watching the small light burn lower

and lower in its socket, while his wife slept in her own room. She had persistently refused to believe that there was anything radically wrong with the boy, though she had asked Charlock to call her in case a crisis might arise. Perhaps Charlock had forgotten about his wife. But the boy was dead, and Kate Charlock lay asleep, happily oblivious to the toy tragedy.

But she would have to be told. She must be aroused at once. Quietly Charlock crossed the corridor and entered his wife's room. He gave a quick, contemptuous glance at all the signs of extravagance and luxury which was the dominant note of the place. Here was a Duchesse dressing-table, littered with silver toilet appliances. The air was heavy with perfume. A pair of wax candles gleamed on either side of the dressing-table. In an armchair close by a figure in black lay fast asleep. The hangings from the bed were thrown back, and on the bed itself lay a heap of discarded clothing. With a sudden outburst of anger Charlock shook the figure in the armchair. The woman opened her eyes.

"What has become of your mistress?" Charlock asked hoarsely. "Now, don't tell any of your lies to me! Where has she gone?"

The maid began to whimper, but it was no use to wriggle and prevaricate under those stern eyes. There was something in the square, grim face of John Charlock that caused most people to fear him. He looked positively cruel.

"She has gone out, sir," the maid stammered.

"Oh, she has gone out, and she left you to wait up for her? She went early? It was a few minutes past ten when

your mistress came to bed, and I was to wake her if anything—happened."

An insolent look came over the maid's face.

"If you want to know, she's gone to Mrs. Bromley-Martin's," she said. "It's no business of mine, and, though I am a servant, I am not used to being spoken to like this. If you looked after your wife a bit better there wouldn't be so much talk."

"Talk!" Charlock echoed. "What do you mean?"

"Ask the other servants. Ask your neighbours. Ask them what Mrs. Charlock does in the garden by night. It is all very well to be fond of solitude. If it could only speak, that old sundial could tell a story or two. Once they used to hide love-letters in trees. Nowadays they have got a better idea than that. If I were you——"

But Charlock was not listening. It was doubtful, even, if he had noticed the studied insolence of the French maid. He strode back to the chamber of death and locked the door behind him. He was thinking of men who had killed their wives for less than this. He was filled with the heartless cruelty of it, the cold-blooded cruelty and deceit. How could a mother have slipped away in this fashion, knowing that her child was so ill? It was no excuse that she had been sanguine of his recovery. From the very first she had refused to believe that there was anything wrong with the boy. And doubtless that was why she had gone off, thinking that her husband would be none the wiser. And once he had regarded her as one of the best of women and the sweetest. He had not been much of a squire of dames, except from a business point of view. But Kate Chantrey had been different

from the rest. Her beauty was so *spirituelle*. Those great brown eyes of hers were clear and pure and soulful as those of a Madonna.

Bare-headed, Charlock walked through the garden and out into the road. The dawn was breaking in the east and pearly mists were rolling up the valleys. But Charlock saw none of these things. In a vague kind of way he noticed the old sundial at the bottom of the garden, with the fountain round it—that marvellous piece of carving which had been one of his extravagances on his last trip to Venice. It looked fair and chaste in the light of the early morn. There was nothing about it to suggest a vulgar *liaison* such as that at which Hortense, the French maid, had hinted. Charlock would have dismissed the idea contemptuously, but somehow he could not get it out of his mind; and yet it must have been mere servants' gossip. Kate Charlock was too inordinately selfish, too fond of the luxuries that her husband's money provided, to compromise herself even for so fascinating a man as Arnold Rent. Charlock knew that Rent was a friend of his wife's, a man whom she professed to understand and sympathise with. But the matter had never troubled him before. He could trust Kate. Assuredly he had confidence in her so long as her interests were his.

He came at length to his destination. He walked across the lawn of Mrs. Bromley-Martin's house. He could see two figures on the balcony. With a bitter smile he recognised his wife.

"The woman pays," he muttered to himself. "Oh, yes, the woman pays right enough, but it is generally the man who finds the money. Presumably God in His wisdom has some

use for women like that, but it is hard to see where that fool of a fellow comes in. I dare say he fancies her ill-used and ill-treated, and tied to a brute unworthy of a mate at all. And yet as I stand here, knowing everything, I am not surprised that Rent should be deceived. Well, he shall have his chance to learn his lesson as I learnt mine. It seems almost a pity to intrude upon a scene of high emotion like that, but it must be done."

Charlock bent to listen again. There was no word of the conversation that escaped him. Then he saw the hostess emerge and claim his wife's attention. A wild desire to rush into the drawing-room, to overturn chairs and card-tables and drive those puppets into the open air seized him. They longed for a new sensation. They were very near having one at that moment. Checking the insane impulse, Charlock passed through the open window and entered the drawing-room. The close, highly spiced atmosphere seemed to choke him. His mind went back, now, to the great trouble which he had just gone through. There sat the woman who should have shared his vigil, smiling and sorting her cards as if she had not a care in the world.

It was hard to restrain the reproaches that rose to his lips. It was a tense task to approach the card-table quietly and lay his hand upon his wife's arm. It was small wonder, too, that the grip should have been close as that of a vise.

CHAPTER II

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"THE DESIRE OF THE MOTH"

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"It would be quite safe," Kate Charlock had said to herself. John was so foolish about the boy. He always took the gloomiest view of everything. She would retire to her bedroom and would pretend to be asleep. She could dress herself and slip across to Mrs. Bromley-Martin's and pass the night in the fascinating pursuit of bridge. Nobody would know. She would be back by daylight. And then she could take her husband's place by the boy's bedside.

She had forgotten everything in the excitement of the moment. She leant forward as the game finished.

"Mrs. Charlock cuts out," the dealer murmured.

She rose reluctantly and another gambler eagerly took her place. The subdued lights of the shaded candles touched drawn faces. Now and again came a cry of annoyance from some plunger whose luck was past bearing. Outside, the silence of the night was coming to an end. The trees murmured with the first touch of the morning breeze. As Kate Charlock crossed the room towards one of the French windows a man followed her. One of the card-players elevated his eyebrows and smiled significantly at his partner, who happened also to be his hostess. Her eyes twinkled in reply.

"Who is the man?" he asked.

"Arnold Rent," was the reply. "They say he is going to be President of the Royal Society. He is a man of various attainments. He is writing a series of essays on the follies of Society. I believe electricity is his specialty. But he says he came here to-night to gain experience."

"That was ingenious of him," the questioner said sarcastically. "He couldn't have come to a better house. All the follies and frivolities worth seeing can be found here."

"That is right enough," Mrs. Bromley-Martin said placidly. "I thought it was awfully sweet of him to choose me out of so many others. I am living in hopes that perhaps he will mention my name in one of his essays, and then how furiously jealous all the rest will be! Still, I like Arnold Rent. He is so terribly cynical. In the old days he would have made an ideal libertine."

The man under discussion crossed the room and stood by Kate Charlock's side. She turned her beautiful face to him, her eyes smiled a welcome. It was by no means the first time the two had met under Mrs. Bromley-Martin's roof.

"There is a seat on the balcony," Rent said. "Shall we sit there and chat for five minutes? The atmosphere of that room is positively poison to me. It seems incredible that civilised men and women, endowed with all the blessings of life, can sit down and deliberately pass their nights like this."

A gentle sigh escaped Kate Charlock's lips. Her face glowed with sympathy; there was a sad expression on the lovely features.

"Is it as bad as you expected, then?" she asked.

"Oh, worse, infinitely worse. In their way these people are just as heathenish as the Romans of the Empire were. What a strange thing fashion is! Your friends come down here ostensibly from the Cowes Regatta, but they have played nothing but bridge all day since Monday. It disgusts me to see young girls given over to the vice of gambling, heedless of aught else. Forgive me if I wonder why you come here. It cannot be out of sympathy with women like Mrs. Bromley-Martin and her class."

"Perhaps not," Kate Charlock murmured. She sighed again in the same gentle fashion. Her eyes had a far-away look in them. "Perhaps I am like the man who is on the verge of a breakdown from overwork, or the man who falls back upon brandy to drown some overwhelming sorrow."

The words came slowly and sadly. In the first flush of the dawn Rent did not fail to see the look of patient unhappiness on the face of his companion. Many fair women Arnold Rent had seen in his time, but never one who appealed to him as Kate Charlock did then. He had been too seriously engaged in study to think of women in the abstract. This tall, fair creature in silver grey appeared to be asking mutely for his sympathy. It was such a perfect face, too, a face that seemed to be out of place here. There was a suggestion of sadness in the glorious eyes, as if the woman nursed some secret sorrow and hid it bravely from the world. Nine men out of ten would have picked out Kate Charlock as a perfect confidante in the hour of trouble or affliction. And Arnold Rent had heard whispers of the story of her life. He turned to her quickly, forgetting his cynicism.

"Do you speak from experience?" he asked.

A wave of colour swept over her face.

"You have no right to ask that question," she said.

"That is true, but I am not speaking out of vulgar curiosity. It was yourself who hinted that you came here to escape your own thoughts."

"Did I say as much as that?" Kate Charlock asked absently. "You must make allowance for us poor women who have seen enough of the world to know that it is the woman who always pays."

"So you are one of the women who pay, are you? Do you know, I guessed that the first time I saw you. There is something sad and pathetic about you. And yet I am sure you are brave and strong. But, tell me, is the trouble likely to last?"

"I am afraid so," Kate Charlock murmured. "It is such a terrible thing for a woman to be tied to a man who has no sympathy with her. But I am speaking disloyally of my husband."

Arnold Rent pursued the subject no further. He had heard something of the kind of man that John Charlock, the famous artist, was. Despite his brilliant genius, despite the position which he had attained from the ranks of the people, he was spoken of as a boor and a savage brute where his beautiful wife was concerned. Strange, Rent thought cynically, how frequently men like these win the pearls among womanhood. He was about to say something of this kind when the hostess darted suddenly out and pounced upon Kate Charlock. With a sigh of protest the latter rose.

"You must come and take my hand," Mrs. Bromley-Martin shrieked. "I am called away for the moment."

With a self-sacrificing smile Kate Charlock returned to the drawing-room, followed by Rent. After the sweetness of the morning air, the atmosphere of the room was close and repellent. The gamblers sat jaded and weary, their faces ghastly where the light fell upon them, but the greedy light in their eyes was still as keen as ever. Rent could hear the swish of the cards as they slid over the green baize tables. He could hear the click of gold and the rustle of bank paper. His heart beat faster as he stood watching. What chance could there be for the common people, he asked himself, when the rich amused themselves like this? It was so demoralising, too. It seemed almost impossible to believe that the keen-eyed, eager woman sorting her cards dexterously could be the same sweet creature who had been seated by his side a few moments ago. If ever woman was in need of spiritual support, that woman was Kate Charlock. What a glorious thing it would be to play the game of platonic friend, to show her how to suffer her misfortunes calmly. She was the sort of woman, too, who in happier auspices might be a maker of history. Rent could understand men going mad for the sake of a face like that, or travelling to the end of the world to obey her lightest wish. He wondered what manner of man it was that treated so beautiful a creature with cruel indifference.

He was still wondering when the open French window was flung back and an intruder entered. The intruder was not in evening dress. He was attired in a shabby flannel suit, his hair was dishevelled, his short brown beard in disorder. The man's face was a strong one, and there was an almost sinister suggestion of power about the short, blunt nose and

deep-set, gleaming eyes. There was anger as well as bitter contempt written on the features as he strode across the room towards the table where Kate Charlock was seated. By instinct Arnold Rent knew that he was face to face with Mrs. Charlock's husband.

The stranger strode up to her and laid his hand on her arm. Her features turned a shade paler as she glanced up.

"John," she faltered. Just for a moment it occurred to Rent that the woman's face had a guilty air. "What are you doing here like this? Is anything wrong?"

"Oh, I know I am out of place," the stranger said grimly. "Mrs. Bromley-Martin has asked me more than once to call, and now I am here. I have come for *you*."

The speaker's stern, clear tones rang through the room, and cards were dropped for the moment. The hostess laughed.

"Oh, don't mention it," she said. "I love originality. You can't think how tired one gets sometimes of bridge in a drawing-room."

All eyes were turned upon Charlock, and he seemed to have become master of the situation. He walked to the windows and jerked up the blinds. The clear glow of the morning fell on tired eyes and painted faces that looked ghastly white and drawn. There was no sign of a smile on Charlock's face.

"Take the tables and play outside," he said. "That will be something new, something for the papers to chatter about. But I am intruding here, and I want my wife. You will come at once. I beg your pardon, I am sure I did not mean to hurt

you, but I am a little beside myself to-night. You will know why presently. I will go outside and wait for you."

CHAPTER III

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"HOME, SWEET HOME!"

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Unconsciously, Charlock had tightened his grip on his wife's bare arm. A cry of pain escaped her, a murmuring, uncomplaining cry which drew a hum of sympathy from the onlookers. The red band on the white flesh was plainly visible. Rent, standing by the table, ventured a word of expostulation. Charlock saw that he was a handsome man, with a clean-shaven, sensitive face, though the eyes were resolute, and the firm lines about the mouth denoted strength of character. So much the better. As to the rest, he wore the dress coat of modern civilisation. This was Kate's sympathetic friend. There was something like a sneer on Charlock's face as he turned to Rent.

"I am extremely sorry," he said. "You will forgive me, but I am quite out of place here. And in that respect I ought to have your sympathy and support, my dear sir."

The other man's face flushed, and he bit his lip. The retort was so obvious, so keen and pungent, that many of the onlookers made no efforts to restrain their amusement. Kate Charlock rose from the table and turned to the stranger.

"Would you mind getting my wrap for me, Mr. Rent?" she said. "I am sure, John, that Mrs. Bromley-Martin will excuse you, and I know you would prefer to wait outside for me."

Charlock muttered something, and turned upon his heel. It was no time now for nice conventionalities. After the close and stuffy atmosphere the outer air was cool and refreshing. Charlock passed his hand across his eyes. He was trying to realise what had happened during the last few minutes. He could remember nothing of what he had said and done. There was but one picture uppermost in his mind—the picture of a tiny figure lying white and motionless upon a bed. That was all Charlock's world to-night.

While he stood waiting, Kate Charlock lingered in the hall for a moment with Arnold Rent. There was an angry gleam in the man's eyes as he folded the wrap round his companion's shoulders.

"You poor, dear child," he burst out. "So that is your husband? You will forgive me for daring to speak like this ——"

"One forgives everything when it is dictated by kindness such as yours," Kate Charlock murmured. "But I assure you it is nothing. It is only his manner. If you think I am in danger you are mistaken."

"But his face," Rent protested. "The look in his eyes. I was watching him when he caught sight of you. I saw murder written there. I could not rest if I stayed here. You will not mind if I follow you as far as your house? I will take care not to be seen. You may think this is an extraordinary suggestion, but we have been friends for a considerable time, and you know that I would do anything for you."

There was passion as well as sincerity in the speaker's tones, and a tinge of colour crept into Kate Charlock's

cheeks. She raised a pair of dewy eyes to her companion's face.

"You are more than kind," she murmured, "but I know your life is one long self-sacrifice. I know what penance it must be to you to spend a long evening among shallow, heartless people such as these, but your mission lies with people like us——"

"But you do not identify yourself with them, surely?" Rent cried. "No, no, you are a broken-hearted, disappointed woman, striving to forget your unhappiness. I confess I am sorry to see you here to-night, but your future is in no danger. If we had only met before——"

"Hush, hush," Kate Charlock said hastily. "You must not talk like that. I—I dare not listen to you. As you would not be faithless to your own vows, you would not have me faithless to mine. And so long as I can come here, and forget my miseries, so long as I can meet you, I feel that I am safe."

Arnold Rent thrilled with a curious feeling as he listened to those impassioned words. It was impossible to doubt the sincerity of them, impossible to be anything but sorry for the beautiful, unhappy speaker. Her voice was dangerously low. There was an appeal in her eyes that set Rent fairly trembling.

"I must come and see you," he said. "You will tell me the whole of your sad story. And now I must not detain you longer, seeing that your husband is waiting for you. But I am going to follow you home, all the same."

Again came the look of gratitude in Kate Charlock's dark eyes. Then she turned away, as if afraid to trust herself further, and joined John Charlock in the garden. The pearly

mists had rolled away. There was a deep, roseate flush in the eastern sky, but as yet the sun had not risen. A distant church clock struck the hour of three.

John Charlock strode along with his hands in his pockets, his sombre eyes fixed upon the ground. The silence was growing intolerable. It seemed to Kate that she must speak, that she could not endure it longer.

"How did you find out?" she asked.

"I went to your room," Charlock explained. "I found your maid fast asleep, and I compelled her to tell me where you had gone. Did I make a fool of myself to-night?"

"You were not polite," the woman murmured, "and——"

"And all your friends are profoundly sorry for you. It must be a terrible thing for a woman of your temperament to be allied to a brute like myself. And to think that I should humiliate you by dragging you home like this! Your lot is indeed a hard one. Think how happy we might have been had I only been blessed with a more amiable temperament! Think how you have helped me in my work, and how unflinchingly you have spent my money!"

Kate Charlock shivered and trembled, the tears gathered in her eyes, and the scarlet mouth was quivering.

"What have I done?" she protested. "Why shouldn't I go out? If I had told you I was going, you would have been annoyed with me, you might even have forbidden me. And all this because you fancy that the boy's life is in danger. It seems singular that a hard, unfeeling man like you should make such a ridiculous fuss over a child. It was kinder on my part to slip away without saying anything. It isn't as if the poor little fellow is any worse than he was yesterday."

Charlock clenched his hands behind his back. He was trembling from head to foot with an overmastering passion. A red mist floated before his eyes, and something seemed to oppress his breathing. It was only for a moment; then he was his grim self again.

"The boy is better," he said, "far better. In fact, there is no cause for anxiety any more. I will never trouble you about him again. Why, you will know presently. Now you will oblige me by coming this way.... There, fond mother! Look at that!"

The woman stood just for a moment, beginning dimly to comprehend. She placed her hand to her head. A moaning cry escaped her lips. With faltering steps she crossed the room and laid a long, slim hand on the child's face. For a while she neither spoke nor moved. No cry escaped her lips. Then, at length, she turned to face her husband. But he was gone.

He had shown her enough, and more than enough. In the face of the tragedy any word of his would be superfluous. If she did not benefit by such a lesson as this, assuredly he could teach her nothing. She had nothing to learn.

His heart was very sore and heavy within him as he walked out of the house and down the garden. Here was the garden of his dreams—the place he had planned in his mind when fame should come to him. It was here in this perfect spot that he and Kate were going to dwell for ever in their floral paradise.

What a fool he had been! Yet that fair face and those pensive eyes would have deceived a more polished man of the world than John Charlock. He knew now for a certainty

that he had given up everything for beauty devoid of heart. And one of the worst features was that the woman who cared nothing for him was wasting his money with a lavish hand. He ought to be happy and comfortable, instead of which he was up to his neck in debt and difficulty. He almost smiled as he looked at the ancient sundial which he had given so much for, merely to please his wife, but he regretted his folly now. The price of a portrait had gone to purchase that white marble. Charlock walked towards it in a sour frame of mind. He could have found it in his heart to destroy the whole thing. And yet, even in the moment of his trouble, he saw that the fountain was no longer playing in the carved basin round the base of the dial. Some dark object lay there. He fancied he could see a dress fluttering in the wind.

He moved forward more quickly. At the same moment one of the gardeners came down the path. The man came in response to Charlock's call. Together they bent over the object in the basin. Charlock's face grew pale. The gardener shouted in open-mouthed dismay. They had the object out on the grass now—a black, wet, horrible thing, with pale, sodden face.

"Hortense, my wife's maid!" Charlock whispered. "How did she get here? How could she have fallen in?"

"Excuse me, sir," the gardener said huskily, "but it looks to me like foul play. A grown person would hardly drown in so little water. And look at that ugly bruise on her forehead. You may depend upon it, there has been mischief here."

CHAPTER IV

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SACKCLOTH AND ASHES

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There was trouble and enough to spare in the house of John Charlock. A day or two had passed. The child was buried, and the blinds were drawn up once more. It was characteristic of Charlock that he held his grief sternly in hand and devoted his energy and attention in striving to get to the bottom of the mystery which surrounded the death of his wife's maid. The affair had created a sensation in the district. It was held to be so important that it had passed out of the hands of the local police into those of Scotland Yard. As to the girl's past, nothing could be discovered. No trace of her relatives could be found. And it could not be proved that she had been entangled in any love affair. Robbery was not the motive, either, for she had a well-filled purse in her pocket and wore a handsome gold watch.

Yet, in some way, Charlock felt that the woman had been more or less of a dangerous character. He had never liked her. He distrusted her manner, which had always been a mixture of humility and veiled insolence. She was just the sort of creature who would have stooped to blackmail, and from this point of view Charlock was working. But a week had passed, and nothing had happened to throw light on the mystery.

And, besides, Charlock had other things to occupy him. He had made up his mind to end the present intolerable state of things. He was waiting now in his studio for his wife. The paint brush hung idly in his hand and his thoughts were far away. This was John Charlock in one of his most dangerous moods. He turned upon his wife a pair of sullen, brooding eyes.

"Well, what do you want?" he demanded.

"I am sorry to intrude," Mrs. Charlock said coldly, "but we cannot go on like this."

"That is true," Charlock said, a grim smile playing about the corners of his mouth. "If it is any consolation to you to know it, some change must be made. I have sat opposite to you for three days now, with hardly a word, but your thoughts have been to me like an open book. You have made up your mind what to do. Your programme is clear. Now that the child has gone, and there is no tie to bind us, you think it would be far better not to remain under this roof. Grossly extravagant though you are, you are shrewd enough, when it comes to a question of money to spend. You calculate, I suppose, that my income is about four thousand a year."

"Really, you fill me with pain," Mrs. Charlock murmured.

"Our Lady of Pain!" Charlock sneered. "Good heavens, do you want to pose after we have been married five years? Why, there is not a cranny in your soul that holds a dark place for me. I say you have reckoned it all out, and you are going to propose that I should share my income with you and give you a free hand to do as you like. This opportunity of martyrdom is not to be lost. Think how you would look

wearing a crown! What a picturesque figure of a long-suffering woman you would make! And all your friends would pity the dear saint and condemn the malignant husband. But we need not go into that. Do you know that I am over six thousand pounds in debt? I have not a single commission on hand and hardly know where to turn for the money to pay the servants' wages. This is one of the tricks that fortune plays a man who gets his living as I do. Two of my commissions are in abeyance, and two other pictures may never be paid for, because the men who ordered them are dead. It sounds like a romance, but it is literally true. And of this load of debt that hangs about my neck like a millstone, less than two hundred of it belongs to me! Putting aside the expenses of the household, which have not been heavy, in the last two years you have pledged my credit for more than four thousand pounds. You said nothing to me. You ordered what you wanted. I have one bill here for five hundred pounds from a Bond Street milliner. You may call this only thoughtlessness, if you like, but I call it mean and dishonourable. And with all your beauty and sweetness and sympathy, you are little better than a criminal. And the joke of it is, it is I who have to pay the penalty, I who will incur the contempt of honest men, while you get off scot free. But there is going to be an end of all this. Before the week is out everything shall be disposed of."

Kate Charlock looked up swiftly. There was something like a challenge in her eyes. The mantle of sweetness and resignation had fallen from her shoulders.

"Do you mean to say you will give up this house?" she demanded. "Do you mean to tell me that you will sell the

furniture? Surely there is no necessity."

"I owe all that money," Charlock said doggedly, "and I am going to pay it off. I could easily whitewash myself as other men do, but that is not my way. To be candid with you, there is a bill of sale on the things here which covers their value, and, at any time, my creditors could come in and remove everything. Now, make the best of it. Revel in your extravagance while it lasts, for the time is getting short. And you shall have your opportunity to prove to your friends that you are the saint they take you to be. Everything I can lay my hands upon I shall realise for the benefit of my creditors. I will not rest till the last farthing is paid. It will be a question of rigid economy for a couple of years, and then I shall be able to look the world in the face once more. But in future there is going to be no London or Paris for you. We shall move into a three-roomed cottage, where we shall not even keep a servant. I will take the rough work off your hands, and in return you will do the housework and cooking. I intend to keep back no more than three pounds a week from my earnings until my debts are paid. That is all I am entitled to. This you can share with me, or, if you prefer it, you can have thirty shillings a week to live upon. If you take legal proceedings to obtain more, you will find that no Court will ask a man to give his wife more than half his income."

Kate Charlock stood white and rigid, striving in vain to force a smile.

"You are mad," she said hoarsely. "You could not do it. Think of your position! Think of what the world would say!"

"Did I ever care what the world said?" Charlock cried. "What does it matter, so long as one's good name remains