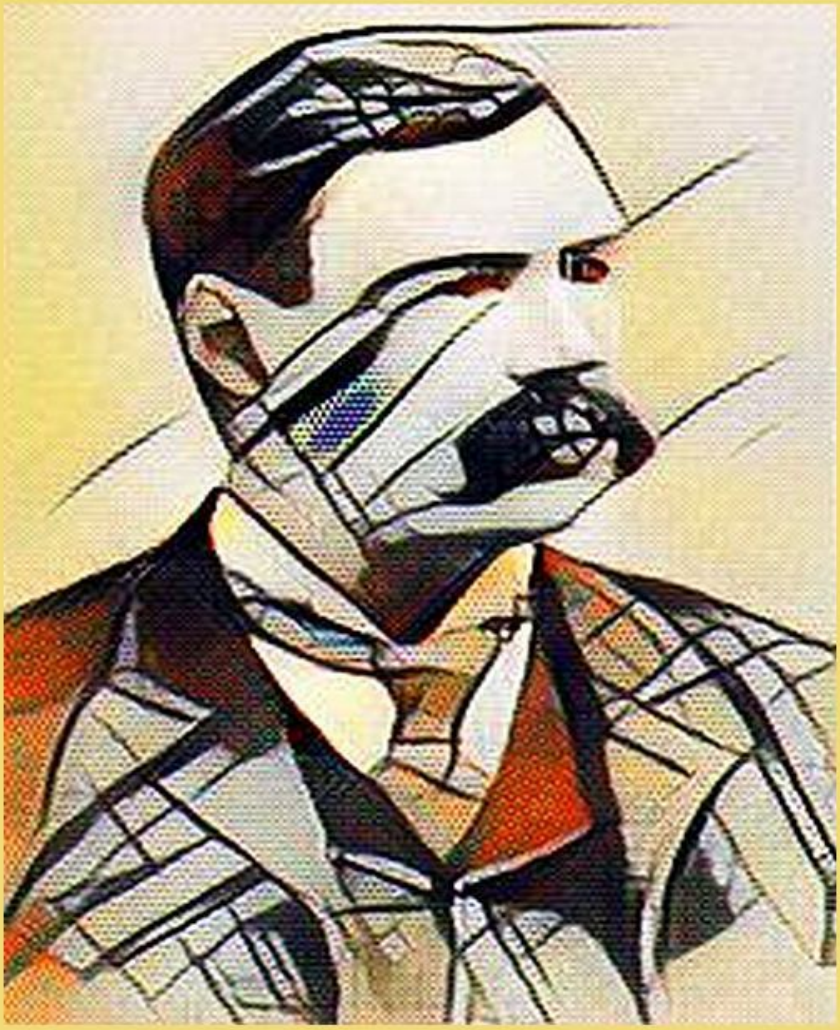
HAROLD FREDERIC



THE MARKET PLACE

The Market-Place

HAROLD FREDERIC

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Chapter I

THE battle was over, and the victor remained on the field—sitting alone with the hurly-burly of his thoughts.

His triumph was so sweeping and comprehensive as to be somewhat shapeless to the view. He had a sense of fascinated pain when he tried to define to himself what its limits would probably be. Vistas of unchecked, expanding conquest stretched away in every direction. He held at his mercy everything within sight. Indeed, it rested entirely with him to say whether there should be any such thing as mercy at all—and until he chose to utter the restraining word the rout of the vanquished would go on with multiplying terrors and ruin. He could crush and torture and despoil his enemies until he was tired. The responsibility of having to decide when he would stop grinding their faces might come to weigh upon him later on, but he would not give it room in his mind to-night.

A picture of these faces of his victims shaped itself out of the flames in the grate. They were moulded in a family likeness, these phantom visages: they were all Jewish, all malignant, all distorted with fright. They implored him with eyes in which panic asserted itself above rage and cunning. Only here and there did he recall a name with which to label one of these countenances; very few of them raised a memory of individual rancour. The faces were those of men he had seen, no doubt, but their persecution of him had been impersonal; his great revenge was equally so. As he looked, in truth, there was only one face—a composite mask of what he had done battle with, and overthrown, and would trample implacably under foot. He stared with a conqueror's cold frown at it, and gave an abrupt laugh which started harsh echoes in the stillness of the Board

Room. Then he shook off the reverie, and got to his feet. He shivered a little at the sudden touch of a chill.

A bottle of brandy, surrounded by glasses, stood on the table where the two least-considered of his lieutenants, the dummy Directors, had left it. He poured a small quantity and sipped it. During the whole eventful day it had not occurred to him before to drink; the taste of the neat liquor seemed on the instant to calm and refresh his brain. With more deliberation, he took a cigar from the broad, floridly-decorated open box beside the bottle, lit it, and blew a long draught of smoke thoughtfully through his nostrils. Then he put his hands in his pockets, looked again into the fire, and sighed a wondering smile. God in heaven! it was actually true!

This man of forty found himself fluttering with a novel exhilaration, which yet was not novel. Upon reflection, he perceived that he felt as if he were a boy again—a boy excited by pleasure. It surprised as much as it delighted him to experience this frank and direct joy of a child. He caught the inkling of an idea that perhaps his years were an illusion. He had latterly been thinking of himself as middle-aged; the grey hairs thickening at his temples had vaguely depressed him. Now all at once he saw that he was not old at all. The buoyancy of veritable youth bubbled in his veins. He began walking up and down the room, regarding new halcyon visions with a sparkling eye. He was no longer conscious of the hated foe beneath his feet; they trod instead elastic upon the clouds.

The sound of someone moving about in the hallway outside, and of trying a door near by, suddenly caught his attention. He stood still and listened with alertness for a surprised instant, then shrugged his shoulders and began moving again. It must be nearly seven o'clock; although the allotment work had kept the clerks later than usual that day, everybody connected with the offices had certainly gone home. He realized that his nerves had played him a

trick in giving that alarmed momentary start—and smiled almost tenderly as he remembered how notable and even glorious a warrant those nerves had for their unsettled state. They would be all right after a night's real rest. He would know how to sleep NOW, thank God!

But yes—there was somebody outside—and this time knocking with assurance at the right door, the entrance to the outer office. After a second's consideration, he went into this unlighted outer office, and called out through the opaque glass an enquiry. The sound of his voice, as it analyzed itself in his own ears, seemed unduly peremptory. The answer which came back brought a flash of wonderment to his eyes. He hurriedly unlocked and opened the door.

"I saw the lights in what I made out to be the Board Room," said the newcomer, as he entered. "I assumed it must be you. Hope I don't interrupt anything."

"Nothing could have given me greater pleasure, Lord Plowden," replied the other, leading the way back to the inner apartment. "In fact, I couldn't have asked anything better."

The tone of his voice had a certain anxious note in it not quite in harmony with this declaration. He turned, under the drop-light overhanging the Board-table, and shook hands with his guest, as if to atone for this doubtful accent. "I shake hands with you again," he said, speaking rapidly, "because this afternoon it was what you may call formal; it didn't count. And—my God!—you're the man I owe it all to."

"Oh, you mustn't go as far as that—even in the absence of witnesses," replied Lord Plowden, lightly. "I'll take off my coat for a few minutes," he went on, very much at his ease. "It's hot in here. It's by the merest chance I happened to be detained in the City—and I saw your lights, and this afternoon we had no opportunity whatever for a quiet talk. No—I won't drink anything before dinner, but I'll light a cigar. I want to say to you, Thorpe," he concluded, as he

seated himself "that I think what you've done is very wonderful. The Marquis thinks so too—but I shouldn't like to swear that he understands much about it."

The implication that the speaker did understand remained in the air like a tangible object. Thorpe took a chair, and the two men exchanged a silent, intent look. Their faces, dusky red on the side of the glow from the fire, pallid where the electric light fell slantwise upon them from above, had for a moment a mysterious something in common. Then the tension of the glance was relaxed—and on the instant no two men in London looked less alike.

Lord Plowden was familiarly spoken of as a handsome man. Thorpe had even heard him called the handsomest man in England—though this seemed in all likelihood an exaggeration. But handsome he undoubtedly was—tall without suggesting the thought of height to the observer, erect yet graceful, powerfully built, while preserving the effect of slenderness. His face in repose had the outline of the more youthful guardsman-type—regular, finely-cut, impassive to hardness. When he talked, or followed with interest the talk of others, it revealed almost an excess of animation. Then one noted the flashing subtlety of his glance, the swift facility of his smile and comprehending brows, and saw that it was not the guardsman face at all. His skin was fresh-hued, and there was a shade of warm brown in his small, well-ordered moustache, but his hair, wavy and worn longer than the fashion, seemed black. There were perceptible veins of grey in it, though he had only entered his thirty-fifth year. He was dressed habitually with the utmost possible care.

The contrast between this personage and the older man confronting him was abrupt. Thorpe was also tall, but of a burly and slouching figure. His face, shrouded in a high-growing, dust-coloured beard, invited no attention. One seemed always to have known this face—thick-featured, immobile, undistinguished. Its accessories for the time

being were even more than ordinarily unimpressive. Both hair and beard were ragged with neglect. His commonplace, dark clothes looked as if he had slept in them. The hands resting on his big knees were coarse in shape, and roughened, and ill-kept.

"I couldn't have asked anything better than your dropping in," he repeated now, speaking with a drag, as of caution, on his words. "Witnesses or no witnesses, I'm anxious to have you understand that I realize what I owe to you."

"I only wish it were a great deal more than it is," replied the other, with a frank smile.

"Oh, it'll mount up to considerable, as it stands," said Thorpe.

He could hear that there was a kind of reservation in his voice; the suspicion that his companion detected it embarrassed him. He found himself in the position of fencing with a man to whom all his feelings impelled him to be perfectly open. He paused, and was awkwardly conscious of constraint in the silence which ensued. "You are very kind to put it in that way," said Lord Plowden, at last. He seemed also to be finding words for his thoughts with a certain difficulty. He turned his cigar round in his white fingers meditatively. "I gather that your success has been complete—as complete as you yourself could have desired. I congratulate you with all my heart."

"No—don't say my success—say our success," put in Thorpe.

"But, my dear man," the other corrected him, "my interest, compared with yours, is hardly more than nominal. I'm a Director, of course, and I'm not displeased that my few shares should be worth something instead of nothing, but——"

Thorpe lifted one of his heavy hands. "That isn't my view of the thing at all. To be frank, I was turning over in my mind, just awhile ago, before you came in, some way of

arranging all that on a different footing. If you'll trust it to me, I think you'll find it's all right."

Something in the form of this remark seemed to restore to Lord Plowden his accustomed fluency of speech.

"I came here to say precisely that thing," he began—"that I do trust it to you. We have never had any very definite talk on the subject—and pray don't think that I want to go into details now. I'd much rather not, in fact. But what I do want to say to you is this: I believe in you. I feel sure that you are going to go far, as the saying is. Well, I want to tie myself to your star. Do you see what I mean? You are going to be a power in finance. You are going to be able to make and unmake men as you choose. I should be very much obliged indeed if you would make me."

Thorpe regarded the handsome and titled man of fashion with what seemed to the other a lethargic gaze. In truth, his mind was toiling with strenuous activity to master, in all its bearings, the significance of what had been said. This habit of the abstracted and lack-lustre eye, the while he was hard at work thinking, was a fortuitous asset which he had never up to that time learned that he possessed. Unconsciously, he dampened the spirits of his companion.

"Don't imagine I'm trying to force myself upon you," Lord Plowden said, growing cool in the face of this slow stare. "I'm asking nothing at all. I had the impulse to come and say to you that you are a great man, and that you've done a great thing—and done it, moreover, in a very great way."

"You know how it was done!" The wondering exclamation forced itself from Thorpe's unready lips. He bent forward a little, and took a new visual hold, as it were, of his companion's countenance.

Lord Plowden smiled. "Did you think I was such a hopeless duffer, then?" he rejoined.

For answer, Thorpe leant back in his chair, crossed his legs, and patted his knee contentedly. All at once his face

had lightened; a genial speculation returned to his grey eyes.

"Well, I was in a curious position about you, you see," he began to explain. The relief with which he spoke was palpable. "I could not for the life of me make up my mind whether to tell you about it or not. Let's see—this is Thursday; did I see you Tuesday? At any rate, the scheme didn't dawn on me myself until toward evening Tuesday. But yesterday, of course, I could have told you—and again this afternoon—but, as I say, I couldn't make up my mind. Once I had it on the tip of my tongue—but somehow I didn't. And you—you never gave me a hint that you saw what was going on."

Again Lord Plowden smiled. "I voted with you," he put in softly.

Thorpe laughed, and relit his cigar. "Well, I couldn't have asked anything better than this," he declared once again. "It beats all the rest put together, to my mind."

"Perhaps I don't quite follow your meaning," commented the other tentatively.

"Why man," Thorpe explained, hesitating a little in his choice of words, but speaking with evident fervour; "I was more anxious about you—and the way you'd take it—than about anything else. I give you my word I was. I couldn't tell at all how you'd feel about the thing. You might think that it was all right, and then again you might round on me—or no, I don't mean quite that—but you might say it wasn't good enough for you, and wash your hands of the whole affair. And I can't tell you what a relief it is to find that you—that you're satisfied. Now I can go ahead."

"Ah, yes—ahead," said the younger man, thoughtfully. "Do you mind telling me—you see I'm quite in the dark as to details—how much further ahead we are likely to go? I comprehend the general nature of our advance—but how far off is the goal you have in sight?"

"God knows!" answered Thorpe, with a rising thrill of excitement in his voice. "I don't give it any limit. I don't see why we should stop at all. We've got them in such a position that—why, good heavens! we can squeeze them to death, crush them like quartz." He chuckled grimly at the suggestion of his simile. "We'll get more ounces to the ton out of our crushings than they ever heard of on the Rand, too."

"Might I ask," interposed the other, "who may 'they' be?"

Thorpe hesitated, and knitted his brows in the effort to remember names. "Oh, there are a lot of them," he said, vaguely. "I think I told you of the way that Kaffir crowd pretended to think well of me, and let me believe they were going to take me up, and then, because I wouldn't give them everything—the very shirt off my back—turned and put their knife into me. I don't know them apart, hardly—they've all got names like Rhine wines—but I know the gang as a whole, and if I don't lift the roof clean off their particular synagogue, then my name is mud."

Lord Plowden smiled. "I've always the greatest difficulty to remember that you are an Englishman—a Londoner born," he declared pleasantly. "You don't talk in the least like one. On shipboard I made sure you were an American—a very characteristic one, I thought—of some curious Western variety, you know. I never was more surprised in my life than when you told me, the other day, that you only left England a few years ago."

"Oh, hardly a 'few years'; more like fifteen," Thorpe corrected him. He studied his companion's face with slow deliberation.

"I'm going to say something that you mustn't take amiss," he remarked, after a little pause. "If you'd known that I was an Englishman, when we first met, there on the steamer, I kind o' suspect that you and I'd never have got much beyond a nodding acquaintance—and even that mostly on my side. I don't mean that I intended to conceal anything—

that is, not specially—but I've often thought since that it was a mighty good thing I did. Now isn't that true—that if you had taken me for one of your own countrymen you'd have given me the cold shoulder?"

"I dare say there's a good deal in what you say," the other admitted, gently enough, but without contrition. "Things naturally shape themselves that way, rather, you know. If they didn't, why then the whole position would become difficult. But you are an American, to all intents and purposes."

"Oh, no—I never took any step towards getting naturalized," Thorpe protested. "I always intended to come back here. Or no, I won't say that—because most of the time I was dog-poor—and this isn't the place for a poor man. But I always said to myself that if ever I pulled it off—if I ever found my self a rich man—THEN I'd come piking across the Atlantic as fast as triple-expansion engines would carry me."

The young man smiled again, with a whimsical gleam in his eye. "And you ARE a rich man, now," he observed, after a momentary pause.

"We are both rich men," replied Thorpe, gravely.

He held up a dissuading hand, as the other would have spoken. "This is how it seems to me the thing figures itself out: It can't be said that your name on the Board, or the Marquis's either, was of much use so far as the public were concerned. To tell the truth, I saw some time ago that they wouldn't be. Titles on prospectuses are played out in London. I've rather a notion, indeed, that they're apt to do more harm than good—just at present, at least. But all that aside—you are the man who was civil to me at the start, when you knew nothing whatever about my scheme, and you are the man who was good to me later on, when I didn't know where to turn for a friendly word. Very well; here I am! I've made my coup! And I'd be a sweep, wouldn't I? to forget to-day what I was so glad to remember a week ago.

But you see, I don't forget! The capital of the Company is 500,000 pounds, all in pound shares. We offered the public only a fifth of them. The other four hundred thousand shares are mine as vendor—and I have ear-marked in my mind one hundred thousand of them to be yours."

Lord Plowden's face paled at the significance of these words. "It is too much—you don't reflect what it is you are saying," he murmured confusedly. "Not a bit of it," the other reassured him. "Everything that I've said goes."

The peer, trembling a little, rose to his feet. "It is a preposterously big reward for the merest act of courtesy," he insisted. "Of course it takes my breath away for joy—and yet I feel I oughtn't to be consenting to it at all. And it has its unpleasant side—it buries me under a mountain of obligation. I don't know what to do or what to say."

"Well, leave the saying and doing to me, then," replied Thorpe, with a gesture before which the other resumed his seat. "Just a word more—and then I suppose we'd better be going. Look at it in this way. Your grandfather was Lord Chancellor of England, and your father was a General in the Crimea. My grandfather kept a small second-hand book-shop, and my father followed him in the business. In one sense, that puts us ten thousand miles apart. But in another sense, we'll say that we like each other, and that there are ways in which we can be of immense use to each other, and that brings us close together. You need money—and here it is for you. I need—what shall I say?—a kind of friendly lead in the matter of establishing myself on the right footing, among the right people—and that's what you can do for me. Mind—I'd prefer to put it all in quite another way; I'd like to say it was all niceness on your part, all gratitude on mine. But if you want to consider it on a business basis—why there you have it also—perfectly plain and clear."

He got up as he finished, and Lord Plowden rose as well. The two men shook hands in silence.

When the latter spoke, it was to say: "Do you know how to open one of those soda-water bottles? I've tried, but I can never get the trick. I think I should like to have a drink —after this."

When they had put down their glasses, and the younger man was getting into his great-coat, Thorpe bestowed the brandy and cigars within a cabinet at the corner of the room, and carefully turned a key upon them.

"If you're going West, let me give you a lift," said Lord Plowden, hat in hand. "I can set you down wherever you like. Unfortunately I've to go out to dinner, and I must race, as it is, to get dressed."

Thorpe shook his head. "No, go along," he bade him. "I've some odds and ends of things to do on the way."

"Then when shall I see you?"—began the other, and halted suddenly with a new thought in his glance. "But what are you doing Saturday?" he asked, in a brisker tone. "It's a dies non here. Come down with me to-morrow evening, to my place in Kent. We will shoot on Saturday, and drive about on Sunday, if you like—and there we can talk at our leisure. Yes, that is what you must do. I have a gun for you. Shall we say, then—Charing Cross at 9:55? Or better still, say 5:15, and we will dine at home."

The elder man pondered his answer—frowning at the problem before him with visible anxiety. "I'm afraid I'd better not come—it's very good of you all the same."

"Nonsense," retorted the other. "My mother will be very glad indeed to see you. There is no one else there—unless, perhaps, my sister has some friend down. We shall make a purely family party."

Thorpe hesitated for only a further second. "All right. Charing Cross, 5:15," he said then, with the grave brevity of one who announces a momentous decision.

He stood still, looking into the fire, for a few moments after his companion had gone. Then, going to a closet at the end of the room, he brought forth his coat and hat;

something prompted him to hold them up, and scrutinize them under the bright light of the electric globe. He put them on, then, with a smile, half-scornful, half-amused, playing in his beard.

The touch of a button precipitated darkness upon the Board Room. He made his way out, and downstairs to the street. It was a rainy, windy October night, sloppy underfoot, dripping overhead. At the corner before him, a cabman, motionless under his unshapely covered hat and glistening rubber cape, sat perched aloft on his seat, apparently asleep. Thorpe hailed him, with a peremptory tone, and gave the brusque order, "Strand!" as he clambered into the hansom.

Chapter II

"LOUISA, the long and short of it is this," said Thorpe, half an hour later: "you never did believe in me, as a sister should do."

He was seated alone with this sister, in a small, low, rather dismally-appointed room, half-heartedly lighted by two flickering gasjets. They sat somewhat apart, confronting a fireplace, where only the laid materials for a fire disclosed themselves in the cold grate. Above the mantel hung an enlarged photograph of a scowling old man. Thorpe's gaze recurred automatically at brief intervals to this portrait—which somehow produced the effect upon him of responsibility for the cheerlessness of the room. There were other pictures on the walls of which he was dimly conscious—small, faded, old prints about Dido and AEneas and Agamemnon, which seemed to be coming back to him out of the mists of his childhood.

Vagrant impressions and associations of this childhood strayed with quaint inconsequence across the field of his preoccupied mind. The peculiar odour of the ancient book-shop on the floor below remained like snuff in his nostrils. Somewhere underneath, or in the wainscoting at the side, he could hear the assiduous gnawing of a rat. Was it the same rat, he wondered with a mental grin, that used to keep him awake nights, in one of the rooms next to this, with that same foolish noise, when he was a boy?

"I know you always say that," replied Louisa, impassively.

She was years older than her brother, but, without a trace of artifice or intention, contrived to look the younger of the two. Her thick hair, drawn simply from her temples into a knot behind, was of that palest brown which

assimilates grey. Her face, long, plain, masculine in contour and spirit, conveyed no message as to years. Long and spare of figure, she sat upright in her straight-backed chair, with her large, capable hands on her knees.

"I believed in you as much as you'd let me," she went on, indifferently, almost wearily. "But I don't see that it mattered to you whether I did or didn't. You went your own way: you did what you wanted to do. What had I to do with it? I don't suppose I even knew what part of the world you were in more than once in two or three years. How should I know whether you were going to succeed, when I didn't even know what it was you were at? Certainly you hadn't succeeded here in London—but elsewhere you might or you might not—how could I tell? And moreover, I don't feel that I know you very well; you've grown into something very different from the boy Joel that left the shop—it must be twenty years ago. I can only know about you and your affairs what you tell me."

"But my point is," pursued Thorpe, watching her face with a curiously intent glance, "you never said to yourself: 'I KNOW he's going to succeed. I KNOW he'll be a rich man before he dies.'"

She shook her head dispassionately. Her manner expressed fatigued failure to comprehend why he was making so much of this purposeless point.

"No—I don't remember ever having said that to myself," she admitted, listlessly. Then a comment upon his words occurred to her, and she spoke with more animation: "You don't seem to understand, Joel, that what was very important to you, didn't occupy me at all. You were always talking about getting rich; you kept the idea before you of sometime, at a stroke, finding yourself a millionaire. That's been the idea of your life. But what do I know about all that? My work has been to keep a roof over my head—to keep the little business from disappearing altogether. It's been hard enough, I can tell you, these last few years, with

the big jobbers cutting the hearts out of the small traders. I had the invalid husband to support for between three and four years—a dead weight on me every week—and then the children to look after, to clothe and educate."

At the last word she hesitated suddenly, and looked at him. "Don't think I'm ungrateful"—she went on, with a troubled effort at a smile—"but I almost wish you'd never sent me that four hundred pounds at all. What it means is that they've had two years at schools where now I shan't be able to keep them any longer. They'll be spoiled for my kind of life—and they won't have a fair chance for any other. I don't know what will become of them."

The profound apprehension in the mother's voice did not dull the gleam in Thorpe's eyes. He even began a smile in the shadows of his unkempt moustache.

"But when I sent that money, for example, two years ago, and over," he persisted, doggedly—"and I told you there'd be more where that came from, and that I stood to pull off the great event—even then, now, you didn't believe in your innermost heart that I knew what I was talking about, did you?"

She frowned with impatience as she turned toward him. "For heaven's sake, Joel," she said, sharply—"you become a bore with that stupid nonsense. I want to be patient with you—I do indeed sympathize with you in your misfortunes—you know that well enough—but you're very tiresome with that eternal harping on what I believed and what I didn't believe. Now, are you going to stop to supper or not?—because if you are I must send the maid out. And there's another thing—would it be of any help to you to bring your things here from the hotel? You can have Alfred's room as well as not—till Christmas, at least."

"Supposing I couldn't get my luggage out of the hotel till I'd settled my bill," suggested Thorpe tentatively, in a muffled voice.

The practical woman reflected for an instant. "I was thinking," she confessed then, "that it might be cheaper to leave your things there, and buy what little you want—I don't imagine, from what I've seen, that your wardrobe is so very valuable—but no, I suppose the bill ought to be paid. Perhaps it can be managed; how much will it be?"

Thorpe musingly rose to his feet, and strolled over to her chair. With his thick hands on his sister's shoulders he stooped and kissed her on the forehead.

"You believe in me now, anyway, eh, Lou?" he said, as he straightened himself behind her.

The unaccustomed caress—so different in character from the perfunctory salute with which he had greeted her on his arrival from foreign parts, six months before—brought a flush of pleased surprise to her plain face. Then a kind of bewilderment crept into the abstracted gaze she was bending upon the fireless grate. Something extraordinary, unaccountable, was in the manner of her brother. She recalled that, in truth, he was more than half a stranger to her. How could she tell what wild, uncanny second nature had not grown up in him under those outlandish tropical skies? He had just told her that his ruin was absolute—overwhelming—yet there had been a covert smile in the recesses of his glance. Even now, she half felt, half heard, a chuckle from him, there as he stood behind her!

The swift thought that disaster had shaken his brain loomed up and possessed her. She flung herself out of the chair, and, wheeling, seized its back and drew it between them as she faced him. It was with a stare of frank dismay that she beheld him grinning at her.

"What"—she began, stammering—"What is the matter, Joel?"

He permitted himself the luxury of smiling blankly at her for a further moment. Then he tossed his head, and laughed abruptly.

"Sit down, old girl," he adjured her. "Try and hold yourself together, now—to hear some different kind of news. I've been playing it rather low down on you, for a fact. Instead of my being smashed, it's the other way about."

She continued to confront him, with a nervous clasp upon the chair-back. Her breathing troubled her as she regarded him, and tried to take in the meaning of his words.

"Do you mean—you've been lying to me about—about your Company?" she asked, confusedly.

"No—no—not at all," he replied, now all genial heartiness. "No—what I told you was gospel truth—but I was taking a rise out of you all the same." He seemed so unaffectedly pleased by his achievement in kindly duplicity that she forced an awkward smile to her lips.

"I don't understand in the least," she said, striving to remember what he had told her. "What you said was that the public had entirely failed to come in—that there weren't enough applications for shares to pay flotation expenses—those were your own words. Of course, I don't pretend to understand these City matters—but it IS the case, isn't it, that if people don't subscribe for the shares of a new company, then the company is a failure?"

"Yes, that may be said to be the case—as a general rule," he nodded at her, still beaming.

"Well, then—of course—I don't understand," she owned.

"I don't know as you'll understand it much more when I've explained it to you," he said, seating himself, and motioning her to the other chair. "But yes, of course you will. You're a business woman. You know what figures mean. And really the whole thing is as simple as A B C. You remember that I told you——"

"But are you going to stop to supper? I must send Annie out before the shops close."

"Supper? No—I couldn't eat anything. I'm too worked up for that. I'll get something at the hotel before I go to bed, if

I feel like it. But say!"—the thought suddenly struck him —"if you want to come out with me, I'll blow you off to the swaggerest dinner in London. What d'ye say?"

She shook her head. "I shall have some bread and cheese and beer at nine. That's my rule, you know. I don't like to break it. I'm always queer next day if I do. But now make haste and tell me—you're really not broken then? You have really come out well?"

For answer he rose, and drew himself to his full height, and spread his bulky shoulders backward. His grey-blue eyes looked down upon her with a triumphant glow.

"Broken?" he echoed her word, with emphasis. "My dear Louisa, I'm not the sort that gets broken. I break other people. Oh, God, how I shall break them!"

He began pacing up and down on the narrow rug before the fender, excitedly telling his story to her. Sometimes he threw the words over his shoulder; again he held her absorbed gaze with his. He took his hands often from his pockets, to illustrate or enforce by gestures the meaning of his speech—and then she found it peculiarly difficult to realize that he was her brother.

Much of the narrative, rambling and disconnected, with which he prefaced this story of the day, was vaguely familiar to her. He sketched now for her in summary, and with the sonorous voice of one deeply impressed with the dramatic values of his declamation, the chronicle of his wanderings in strange lands—and these he had frequently told her about before. Soon she perceived, however, that he was stringing them together on a new thread. One after another, these experiences of his, as he related them, turned upon the obstacles and fatal pitfalls which treachery and malice had put in his path. He seemed, by his account, to have been a hundred times almost within touch of the goal. In China, in the Dutch Indies, in those remoter parts of Australia which were a waterless waste when he knew them and might have owned them, and now were yielding

fabulous millions to fellows who had tricked and swindled him—everywhere he had missed by just a hair's breadth the golden consummation. In the Western hemisphere the tale repeated itself. There had been times in the Argentine, in Brazil just before the Empire fell, in Colorado when the Silver boom was on, in British Columbia when the first rumours of rich ore were whispered about—many times when fortune seemed veritably within his grasp. But someone had always played him false. There was never a friendship for him which could withstand the temptation of profitable treason.

But he had hung dauntlessly on. He had seen one concession slipping through his fingers, only to strain and tighten them for a clutch at another. It did not surprise his hearer—nor indeed did it particularly attract her attention—that there was nowhere in this rapid and comprehensive narrative any allusion to industry of the wage-earning sort. Apparently, he had done no work at all, in the bread-winner's sense of the word. This was so like Joel that it was taken for granted in his sister's mind. All his voyages and adventures and painful enterprises had been informed by the desire of the buccaneer—the passion to reap where others had sown, or, at the worst, to get something for nothing.

The discursive story began to narrow and concentrate itself when at last it reached Mexico. The sister changed her position in her chair, and crossed her knees when Tehuantepec was mentioned. It was from that place that Joel had sent her the amazing remittance over two years ago. Curiously enough, though, it was at this point in his narrative that he now became vague as to details. There were concessions of rubber forests mentioned, and the barter of these for other concessions with money to boot, and varying phases of a chronic trouble about where the true boundary of Guatemala ran—but she failed clearly to understand much about it all. His other schemes and

mishaps she had followed readily enough. Somehow when they came to Mexico, however, she saw everything jumbled and distorted, as through a haze. Once or twice she interrupted him to ask questions, but he seemed to attach such slight importance to her comprehending these details that she forbore. Only one fact was it necessary to grasp about the Mexican episode, apparently. When he quitted Tehuantepec, to make his way straight to London, at the beginning of the year, he left behind him a rubber plantation which he desired to sell, and brought with him between six and seven thousand pounds, with which to pay the expenses of selling it. How he had obtained either the plantation or the money did not seem to have made itself understood. No doubt, as his manner indicated when she ventured her enquiries, it was quite irrelevant to the narrative.

In Mexico, his experience had been unique, apparently, in that no villain had appeared on the scene to frustrate his plans. He at least mentioned no one who had wronged him there. When he came to London, however, there were villains and to spare. He moved to the mantel, when he arrived at this stage of the story, and made clear a space for his elbow to rest among the little trinkets and photographs with which it was burdened. He stood still thereafter, looking down at her; his voice took on a harsher note.

Much of this story, also, she knew by heart. This strange, bearded, greyish-haired brother of hers had come very often during the past half-year to the little book-shop, and the widow's home above it, his misshapen handbag full of papers, his heart full of rage, hope, grief, ambition, disgust, confidence—everything but despair. It was true, it had never been quite real to her. He was right in his suggestion that she had never wholly believed in him. She had not been able to take altogether seriously this clumsy, careworn, shabbily-dressed man who talked about millions.

It was true that he had sent her four hundred pounds for the education of her son and daughter; it was equally true that he had brought with him to London a sum which any of his ancestors, so far as she knew about them, would have deemed a fortune, and which he treated as merely so much oil, with which to lubricate the machinery of his great enterprise. She had heard, at various times, the embittered details of the disappearance of this money, little by little. Nearly a quarter of it, all told, had been appropriated by a sleek old braggart of a company-promoter, who had cozened Joel into the belief that London could be best approached through him. When at last this wretch was kicked downstairs, the effect had been only to make room for a fresh lot of bloodsuckers. There were so-called advertising agents, so-called journalists, so-called "men of influence in the City,"—a swarm of relentless and voracious harpies, who dragged from him in blackmail nearly the half of what he had left, before he summoned the courage and decision to shut them out.

Worse still, in some ways, were the men into whose hands he stumbled next—a group of City men concerned in the South African market, who impressed him very favourably at the outset. He got to know them by accident, and at the time when he began to comprehend the necessity of securing influential support for his scheme. Everything that he heard and could learn about them testified to the strength of their position in the City. Because they displayed a certain amiability of manner toward him and his project, he allowed himself to make sure of their support. It grew to be a certainty in his mind that they would see him through. He spent a good deal of money in dinners and suppers in their honour, after they had let him understand that this form of propitiation was not unpleasant to them. They chaffed him about some newspaper paragraphs, in which he was described as the "Rubber King," with an affable assumption of amusement,

under which he believed that he detected a genuine respect for his abilities.

Finally, when he had danced attendance upon them for the better part of two months, he laid before them, at the coffee-and-cigars stage of a dinner in a private room of the Savoy, the details of his proposition. They were to form a Syndicate to take over his property, and place it upon the market; in consideration of their finding the ready money for this exploitation, they were to have for themselves two-fifths of the shares in the Company ultimately to be floated. They listened to these details, and to his enthusiastic remarks about the project itself, with rather perfunctory patience, but committed themselves that evening to nothing definite. It took him nearly a week thereafter to get an answer from any of them. Then he learned that, if they took the matter up at all, it would be upon the basis of the Syndicate receiving nine-tenths of the shares.

He conceived the idea, after he had mastered his original amazement, that they named these preposterous terms merely because they expected to be beaten down, and he summoned all his good nature and tact for the task of haggling with them. He misunderstood their first show of impatience at this, and persevered in the face of their tacit rebuffs. Then, one day, a couple of them treated him with overt rudeness, and he, astonished out of his caution, replied to them in kind. Suddenly, he could hardly tell why or how, they were all enemies of his. They closed their office doors to him; even their clerks treated him with contemptuous incivility.

This blow to his pride enraged and humiliated him, curiously enough, as no other misadventure of his life had done.

Louisa remembered vividly the description he had given to her, at the time, of this affair. She had hardly understood why it should disturb him so profoundly: to her mind, these men had done nothing so monstrous after all. But to him,

their offense swallowed up all the other indignities suffered during the years of his Ishmaelitish wanderings. A sombre lust for vengeance upon them took root in his very soul. He hated nobody else as he hated them. How often she had heard him swear, in solemn vibrating tones, that to the day of his death his most sacred ambition should be their punishment, their abasement in the dust and mire!

And now, all at once, as she looked up at him, where he leant against the mantel, these vagabond memories of hers took point and shape. It was about these very men that he was talking.

"And think of it!" he was saying, impressively. "It's magnificent enough for me to make this great hit—but I don't count it as anything at all by comparison with the fact that I make it at their expense. You remember the fellows I told you about?" he asked abruptly, deferring to the confused look on her face.

"Yes—you make it out of them," she repeated, in an uncertain voice. It occurred to her that she must have been almost asleep. "But did I miss anything? Have you been telling what it is that you have made?"

"No—that you shall have in good time. You don't seem to realize it, Louisa. I can hardly realize it myself. I am actually a very rich man. I can't tell how much I've got—in fact, it can be almost as much as I like—half a million pounds, I suppose, at the start, if I want to make it that much. Yes—it takes the breath away, doesn't it? But best of all—a thousand times best of all—practically every dollar of it comes out of those Kaffir swine—the very men that tried to rob me, and that have been trying to ruin me ever since. I tell you what I wish, Louise—I wish to God there could only be time enough, and I'd take it all in half-sovereigns—two millions of them, or three millions—and just untwist every coin, one by one, out from among their heart-strings. Oh—but it'll be all right as it is. It's enough to make a man

feel religious—to think how those thieves are going to suffer."

"Well" she said, slowly after reflection, "it all rather frightens me."

As if the chill in the air of the cheerless room had suddenly accentuated itself, she arose, took a match-box from the mantel, and, stooping, lit the fire.

He looked down at the tall, black-clad figure, bent in stiff awkwardness over the smoking grate, and his eyes softened. Then he took fresh note of the room—the faded, threadbare carpet, the sparse old furniture that had seemed ugly to even his uninformed boyish taste, the dingy walls and begrimed low ceiling—all pathetic symbols of the bleak life to which she had been condemned.

"Frightens you?" he queried, with a kind of jovial tenderness, as she got to her feet; "frightens you, eh? Why, within a month's time, old lady, you'll be riding in the Park in your own carriage, with niggers folding their arms up behind, and you'll be taking it all as easy and as natural as if you'd been born in a barouche."

He added, in response to the enquiry of her lifted brows: "Barouche? That's what we'd call in England a landau."

She stood with a foot upon the fender, her tired, passive face inclined meditatively, her rusty old black gown drawn back by one hand from the snapping sparks. "No," she said, slowly, joyless resignation mingling with pride in her voice. "I was born here over the shop."

"Well, good God! so was I," he commented, lustily. "But that's no reason why I shouldn't wind up in Park Lane—or you either."

She had nothing to say to this, apparently. After a little, she seated herself again, drawing her chair closer to the hearth. "It's years since I've lit this fire before the first of November," she remarked, with the air of defending the action to herself.

"Oh, we're celebrating," he said, rubbing his hands over the reluctant blaze. "Everything goes, tonight!"

Her face, as she looked up at him, betrayed the bewilderment of her mind. "You set out to tell me what it was all about," she reminded him. "You see I'm completely in the dark. I only hear you say that you've made a great fortune. That's all I know. Or perhaps you've told me as much as you care to."

"Why, not at all," he reassured her, pulling his own chair toward him with his foot, and sprawling into it with a grunt of relief. "If you'll draw me a glass of that beer of yours, I'll tell you all about it. It's not a thing for everybody to know, not to be breathed to a human being, for that matter—but you'll enjoy it, and it'll be safe enough with you."

As she rose, and moved toward a door, he called merrily after her: "No more beer when that keg runs dry, you know. Nothing but champagne!"