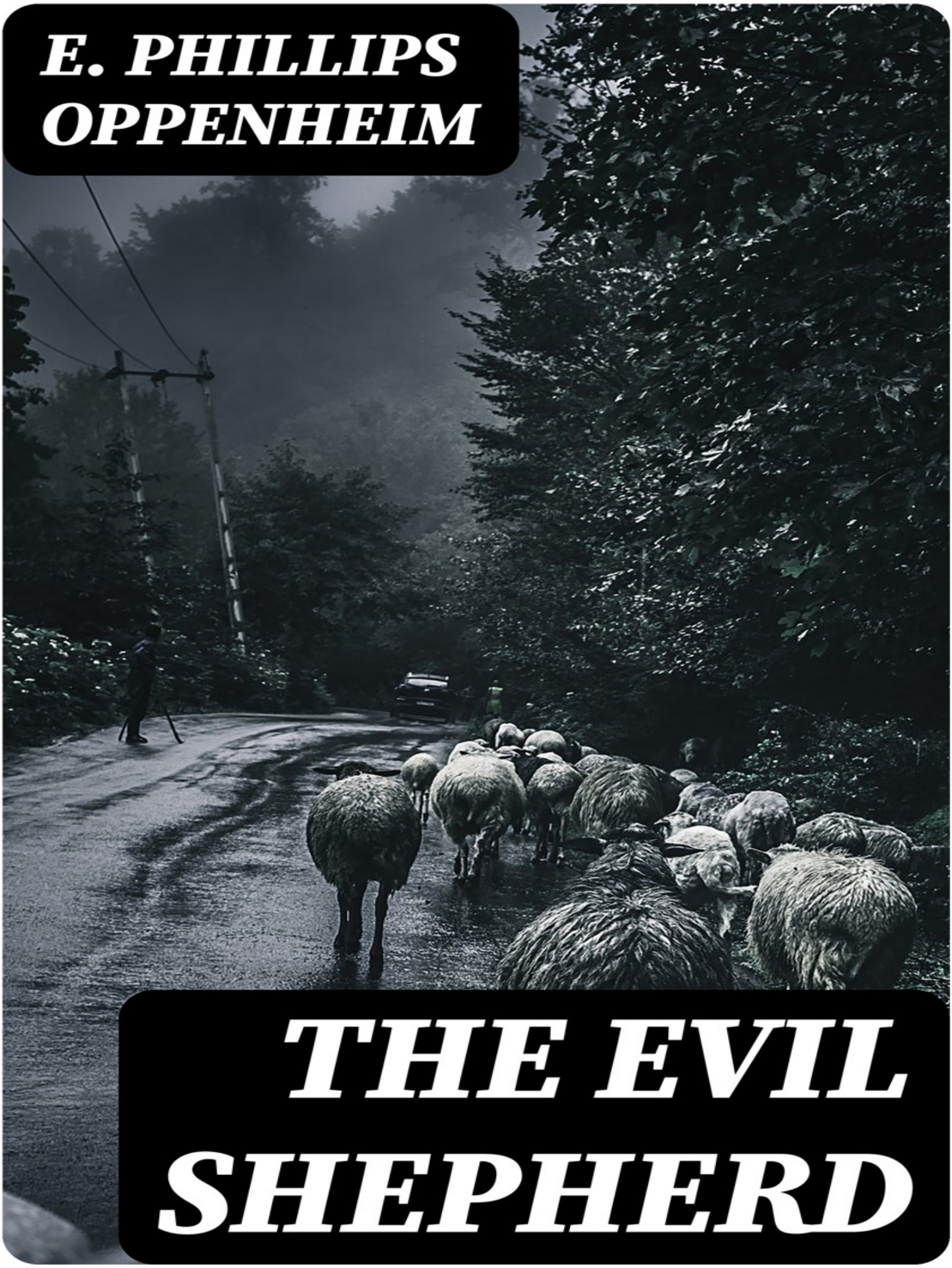
E. PHILLIPS OPPENHEIM



THE EVIL SHEPHERD

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The Evil Shepherd

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CHAPTER I

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Francis Ledsam, alert, well-satisfied with himself and the world, the echo of a little buzz of congratulations still in his ears, paused on the steps of the modern Temple of Justice to light a cigarette before calling for a taxi to take him to his club. Visions of a whisky and soda—his throat was a little parched—and a rubber of easy-going bridge at his favourite table, were already before his eyes. A woman who had followed him from the Court touched him on the shoulder.

“Can I speak to you for a moment, Mr. Ledsam?”

The barrister frowned slightly as he swung around to confront his questioner. It was such a familiar form of address.

“What do you want?” he asked, a little curtly.

“A few minutes' conversation with you,” was the calm reply. “The matter is important.”

The woman's tone and manner, notwithstanding her plain, inconspicuous clothes, commanded attention. Francis Ledsam was a little puzzled. Small things meant much to him in life, and he had been looking forward almost with the zest of a schoolboy to that hour of relaxation at his club. He was impatient of even a brief delay, a sentiment which he tried to express in his response.

“What do you want to speak to me about?” he repeated bluntly. “I shall be in my rooms in the Temple to-morrow morning, any time after eleven.”

“It is necessary for me to speak to you now,” she insisted. “There is a tea-shop across the way. Please

accompany me there."

Ledsam, a little surprised at the coolness of her request, subjected his accoster to a closer scrutiny. As he did so, his irritation diminished. He shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"If you really have business with me," he said, "I will give you a few minutes."

They crossed the street together, the woman self-possessed, negative, wholly without the embarrassment of one performing an unusual action. Her companion felt the awakening of curiosity. Zealously though she had, to all appearance, endeavoured to conceal the fact, she was without a doubt personable. Her voice and manner lacked nothing of refinement. Yet her attraction to Francis Ledsam, who, although a perfectly normal human being, was no seeker after promiscuous adventures, did not lie in these externals. As a barrister whose success at the criminal bar had been phenomenal, he had attained to a certain knowledge of human nature. He was able, at any rate, to realise that this woman was no imposter. He knew that she had vital things to say.

They passed into the tea-shop and found an empty corner. Ledsam hung up his hat and gave an order. The woman slowly began to remove her gloves. When she pushed back her veil, her vis-a-vis received almost a shock. She was quite as good-looking as he had imagined, but she was far younger—she was indeed little more than a girl. Her eyes were of a deep shade of hazel brown, her eyebrows were delicately marked, her features and poise admirable. Yet her skin was entirely colourless. She was as pale as one whose eyes have been closed in death. Her lips, although in

no way highly coloured, were like streaks of scarlet blossom upon a marble image. The contrast between her appearance and that of her companion was curiously marked. Francis Ledsam conformed in no way to the accepted physical type of his profession. He was over six feet in height, broad-shouldered and powerfully made. His features were cast in a large mould, he was of fair, almost sandy complexion, even his mouth was more humourous than incisive. His eyes alone, grey and exceedingly magnetic, suggested the gifts which without a doubt lay behind his massive forehead.

“I am anxious to avoid any possible mistake,” she began. “Your name is Francis Ledsam?”

“It is,” he admitted.

“You are the very successful criminal barrister,” she continued, “who has just been paid an extravagant fee to defend Oliver Hilditch.”

“I might take exception to the term 'extravagant',” Ledsam observed drily. “Otherwise, your information appears to be singularly correct. I do not know whether you have heard the verdict. If not, you may be interested to know that I succeeded in obtaining the man's acquittal.”

“I know that you did,” the woman replied. “I was in the Court when the verdict was brought in. It has since occurred to me that I should like you to understand exactly what you have done, the responsibility you have incurred.”

Ledsam raised his eyebrows.

“Responsibility?” he repeated. “What I have done is simple enough. I have earned a very large fee and won my case.”

“You have secured the acquittal of Oliver Hilditch,” she persisted. “He is by this time a free man. Now I am going to speak to you of that responsibility. I am going to tell you a little about the man who owes his freedom to your eloquence.”

It was exactly twenty minutes after their entrance into the teashop when the woman finished her monologue. She began to draw on her gloves again. Before them were two untasted cups of tea and an untouched plate of bread and butter. From a corner of the room the waitress was watching them curiously.

“Good God!” Francis Ledsam exclaimed at last, suddenly realising his whereabouts. “Do you mean to affirm solemnly that what you have been telling me is the truth?”

The woman continued to button her gloves. “It is the truth,” she said.

Ledsam sat up and looked around him. He was a little dazed. He had almost the feeling of a man recovering from the influence of some anaesthetic. Before his eyes were still passing visions of terrible deeds, of naked, ugly passion, of man's unscrupulous savagery. During those few minutes he had been transported to New York and Paris, London and Rome. Crimes had been spoken of which made the murder for which Oliver Hilditch had just been tried seem like a trifling indiscretion. Hard though his mentality, sternly matter-of-fact as was his outlook, he was still unable to fully believe in himself, his surroundings, or in this woman who had just dropped a veil over her ashen cheeks. Reason persisted in asserting itself.

“But if you knew all this,” he demanded, “why on earth didn't you come forward and give evidence?”

“Because,” she answered calmly, as she rose to her feet, “my evidence would not have been admissible. I am Oliver Hilditch's wife.”

CHAPTER II

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Francis Ledsam arrived at his club, the Sheridan, an hour later than he had anticipâtéd. He nodded to the veteran hall-porter, hung up his hat and stick, and climbed the great staircase to the card-room without any distinct recollection of performing any of these simple and reasonable actions. In the cardroom he exchanged a few greetings with friends, accepted without comment or without the slightest tinge of gratification a little chorus of chafing congratulations upon his latest triumph, and left the room without any inclination to play, although there was a vacant place at his favourite table. From sheer purposelessness he wandered back again into the hall, and here came his first gleam of returning sensation. He came face to face with his most intimate friend, Andrew Wilmore. The latter, who had just hung up his coat and hat, greeted him with a growl of welcome.

“So you've brought it off again, Francis!”

“Touch and go,” the barrister remarked. “I managed to squeak home.”

Wilmore laid his hand upon his friend's shoulder and led the way towards two easy-chairs in the lounge.

“I tell you what it is, old chap,” he confided, “you'll be making yourself unpopular before long. Another criminal at large, thanks to that glib tongue and subtle brain of yours. The crooks of London will present you with a testimonial when you're made a judge.”

“So you think that Oliver Hilditch was guilty, then?” Francis asked curiously.

“My dear fellow, how do I know or care?” was the indifferent reply. “I shouldn't have thought that there had been any doubt about it. You probably know, anyway.”

“That's just what I didn't when I got up to make my speech,” Francis assured his friend emphatically. “The fellow was given an opportunity of making a clean breast of it, of course—Wensley, his lawyer, advised him to, in fact—but the story he told me was precisely the story he told at the inquest.”

They were established now in their easy-chairs, and Wilmore summoned a waiter.

“Two large whiskies and sodas,” he ordered. “Francis,” he went on, studying his companion intently, “what's the matter with you? You don't look as though your few days in the country last week had done you any good.”

Francis glanced around as though to be sure that they were alone.

“I was all right when I came up, Andrew,” he muttered. “This case has upset me.”

“Upset you? But why the dickens should it?” the other demanded, in a puzzled tone. “It was quite an ordinary case, in its way, and you won it.”

“I won it,” Francis admitted.

“Your defence was the most ingenious thing I ever heard.”

“Mostly suggested, now I come to think of it,” the barrister remarked grimly, “by the prisoner himself.”

“But why are you upset about it, anyway?” Wilmore persisted.

Francis rose to his feet, shook himself, and with his elbow resting upon the mantelpiece leaned down towards his friend. He could not rid himself altogether of this sense of unreality. He had the feeling that he had passed through one of the great crises of his life.

“I'll tell you, Andrew. You're about the only man in the world I could tell. I've gone crazy.”

“I thought you looked as though you'd been seeing spooks,” Wilmore murmured sympathetically.

“I have seen a spook,” Francis rejoined, with almost passionate seriousness, “a spook who lifted an invisible curtain with invisible fingers, and pointed to such a drama of horrors as De Quincey, Poe and Sue combined could never have imagined. Oliver Hilditch was guilty, Andrew. He murdered the man Jordan—murdered him in cold blood.”

“I'm not surprised to hear that,” was the somewhat puzzled reply.

“He was guilty, Andrew, not only of the murder of this man, his partner, but of innumerable other crimes and brutalities,” Francis went on. “He is a fiend in human form, if ever there was one, and I have set him loose once more to prey upon Society. I am morally responsible for his next robbery, his next murder, the continued purgatory of those forced to associate with him.”

“You're dotty, Francis,” his friend declared shortly.

“I told you I was crazy,” was the desperate reply. “So would you be if you'd sat opposite that woman for half-an-hour, and heard her story.”

“What woman?” Wilmore demanded, leaning forward in his chair and gazing at his friend with increasing uneasiness.

“A woman who met me outside the Court and told me the story of Oliver Hilditch's life.”

“A stranger?”

“A complete stranger to me. It transpired that she was his wife.”

Wilmore lit a cigarette.

“Believe her?”

“There are times when one doesn't believe or disbelieve,” Francis answered. “One knows.”

Wilmore nodded.

“All the same, you're crazy,” he declared. “Even if you did save the fellow from the gallows, you were only doing your job, doing your duty to the best of poor ability. You had no reason to believe him guilty.”

“That's just as it happened,” Francis pointed out. “I really didn't care at the time whether he was or not. I had to proceed on the assumption that he was not, of course, but on the other hand I should have fought just as hard for him if I had known him to be guilty.”

“And you wouldn't now—to-morrow, say?”

“Never again.”

“Because of that woman's story?”

“Because of the woman.”

There was a short silence. Then Wilmore asked a very obvious question.

“What sort of a person was she?”

Francis Ledsam was several moments before he replied. The question was one which he had been expecting, one which he had already asked himself many times, yet he was unprepared with any definite reply.

“I wish I could answer you, Andrew,” his friend confessed. “As a matter of fact, I can't. I can only speak of the impression she left upon me, and you are about the only person breathing to whom I could speak of that.”

Wilmore nodded sympathetically. He knew that, man of the world though Francis Ledsam appeared, he was nevertheless a highly imaginative person, something of an idealist as regards women, unwilling as a rule to discuss them, keeping them, in a general way, outside his daily life.

“Go ahead, old fellow,” he invited. “You know I understand.”

“She left the impression upon me,” Francis continued quietly, “of a woman who had ceased to live. She was young, she was beautiful, she had all the gifts—culture, poise and breeding—but she had ceased to live. We sat with a marble table between us, and a few feet of oil-covered floor. Those few feet, Andrew, were like an impassable gulf. She spoke from the shores of another world. I listened and answered, spoke and listened again. And when she told her story, she went. I can't shake off the effect she had upon me, Andrew. I feel as though I had taken a step to the right or to the left over the edge of the world.”

Andrew Wilmore studied his friend thoughtfully.

He was full of sympathy and understanding. His one desire at that moment was not to make a mistake. He decided to leave unasked the obvious question.

“I know,” he said simply. “Are you dining anywhere?”

“I thought of staying on here,” was the indifferent reply.

“We won't do anything of the sort,” Wilmore insisted. “There's scarcely a soul in to-night, and the place is too

humpy for a man who's been seeing spooks. Get back to your rooms and change. I'll wait here."

"What about you?"

"I have some clothes in my locker. Don't be long. And, by-the-bye, which shall it be—Bohemia or Mayfair? I'll telephone for a table. London's so infernally full, these days."

Francis hesitated.

"I really don't care," he confessed. "Now I think of it, I shall be glad to get away from here, though. I don't want any more congratulations on saving Oliver Hilditch's life. Let's go where we are least likely to meet any one we know."

"Respectability and a starched shirt-front, then," Wilmore decided. "We'll go to Claridge's."

CHAPTER III

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The two men occupied a table set against the wall, not far from the entrance to the restaurant, and throughout the progress of the earlier part of their meal were able to watch the constant incoming stream of their fellow-guests. They were, in their way, an interesting contrast physically, neither of them good-looking according to ordinary standards, but both with many pleasant characteristics. Andrew Wilmore, slight and dark, with sallow cheeks and brown eyes, looked very much what he was—a moderately successful journalist and writer of stories, a keen golfer, a bachelor who preferred a pipe to cigars, and lived at Richmond because he could not find a flat in London which he could afford, large enough for his somewhat expansive habits. Francis Ledsam was of a sturdier type, with features perhaps better known to the world owing to the constant activities of the cartoonist. His reputation during the last few years had carried him, notwithstanding his comparative youth—he was only thirty-five years of age—into the very front ranks of his profession, and his income was one of which men spoke with bated breath. He came of a family of landed proprietors, whose younger sons for generations had drifted always either to the Bar or the Law, and his name was well known in the purlieus of Lincoln's Inn before he himself had made it famous. He was a persistent refuser of invitations, and his acquaintances in the fashionable world were comparatively few. Yet every now and then he felt a mild interest in the people whom his companion assiduously pointed out to him.

“A fashionable restaurant, Francis, is rather like your Law Courts—it levels people up,” the latter remarked. “Louis, the head-waiter, is the judge, and the position allotted in the room is the sentence. I wonder who is going to have the little table next but one to us. Some favoured person, evidently.”

Francis glanced in the direction indicated without curiosity. The table in question was laid for two and was distinguished by a wonderful cluster of red roses.

“Why is it,” the novelist continued speculatively, “that, whenever we take another man's wife out, we think it necessary to order red roses?”

“And why is it,” Francis queried, a little grimly, “that a dear fellow like you, Andrew, believes it his duty to talk of trifles for his pal's sake, when all the time he is thinking of something else? I know you're dying to talk about the Hilditch case, aren't you? Well, go ahead.”

“I'm only interested in this last development,” Wilmore confessed. “Of course, I read the newspaper reports. To tell you the truth, for a murder trial it seemed to me to rather lack colour.”

“It was a very simple and straightforward case,” Francis said slowly. “Oliver Hilditch is the principal partner in an American financial company which has recently opened offices in the West End. He seems to have arrived in England about two years ago, to have taken a house in Hill Street, and to have spent a great deal of money. A month or so ago, his partner from New York arrived in London, a man named Jordan of whom nothing was known. It has since transpired, however, that his journey to Europe was

undertaken because he was unable to obtain certain figures relating to the business, from Hilditch. Oliver Hilditch met him at Southampton, travelled with him to London and found him a room at the Savoy. The next day, the whole of the time seems to have been spent in the office, and it is certain, from the evidence of the clerk, that some disagreement took place between the two men. They dined together, however, apparently on good terms, at the Cafe Royal, and parted in Regent Street soon after ten. At twelve o'clock, Jordan's body was picked up on the pavement in Hill Street, within a few paces of Heidrich's door. He had been stabbed through the heart with some needle-like weapon, and was quite dead."

"Was there any vital cause of quarrel between them?" Wilmore enquired.

"Impossible to say," Francis replied. "The financial position of the company depends entirely upon the value of a large quantity of speculative bonds, but as there was only one clerk employed, it was impossible to get at any figures. Hilditch declared that Jordan had only a small share in the business, from which he had drawn a considerable income for years, and that he had not the slightest cause for complaint."

"What were Hilditch's movements that evening?" Wilmore asked.

"Not a soul seems to have seen him after he left Regent Street," was the somewhat puzzled answer. "His own story was quite straightforward and has never been contradicted. He let himself into his house with a latch-key after his return

from the Cafe Royal, drank a whisky and soda in the library, and went to bed before half-past eleven. The whole affair—”

Francis broke off abruptly in the middle of his sentence. He sat with his eyes fixed upon the door, silent and speechless.

“What in Heaven's name is the matter, old fellow?” Wilmore demanded, gazing at his companion in blank amazement.

The latter pulled himself together with an effort. The sight of the two new arrivals talking to Louis on the threshold of the restaurant, seemed for the moment to have drawn every scrap of colour from his cheeks. Nevertheless, his recovery was almost instantaneous.

“If you want to know any more,” he said calmly, “you had better go and ask him to tell you the whole story himself. There he is.”

“And the woman with him?” Wilmore exclaimed under his breath.

“His wife!”

CHAPTER IV

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To reach their table, the one concerning which Francis and his friend had been speculating, the new arrivals, piloted by Louis, had to pass within a few feet of the two men. The woman, serene, coldly beautiful, dressed like a Frenchwoman in unrelieved black, with extraordinary attention to details, passed them by with a careless glance and subsided into the chair which Louis was holding. Her companion, however, as he recognised Francis hesitated. His expression of somewhat austere gloom was lightened. A pleasant but tentative smile parted his lips. He ventured upon a salutation, half a nod, half a more formal bow, a salutation which Francis instinctively returned. Andrew Wilmore looked on with curiosity.

“So that is Oliver Hilditch,” he murmured.

“That is the man,” Francis observed, “of whom last evening half the people in this restaurant were probably asking themselves whether or not he was guilty of murder. To-night they will be wondering what he is going to order for dinner. It is a strange world.”

“Strange indeed,” Wilmore assented. “This afternoon he was in the dock, with his fate in the balance—the condemned cell or a favoured table at Claridge's. And your meeting! One can imagine him gripping your hands, with tears in his eyes, his voice broken with emotion, sobbing out his thanks. And instead you exchange polite bows. I would not have missed this situation for anything.”

“Tradesman!” Francis scoffed. “One can guess already at the plot of your next novel.”

“He has courage,” Wilmore declared. “He has also a very beautiful companion. Were you serious, Francis, when you told me that that was his wife?”

“She herself was my informant,” was the quiet reply.

Wilmore was puzzled.

“But she passed you just now without even a glance of recognition, and I thought you told me at the club this afternoon that all your knowledge of his evil ways came from her. Besides, she looks at least twenty years younger than he does.”

Francis, who had been watching his glass filled with champagne, raised it to his lips and drank its contents steadily to the last drop.

“I can only tell you what I know, Andrew,” he said, as he set down the empty glass. “The woman who is with him now is the woman who spoke to me outside the Old Bailey this afternoon. We went to a tea-shop together. She told me the story of his career. I have never listened to so horrible a recital in my life.”

“And yet they are here together, dining tete-a-tete, on a night when it must have needed more than ordinary courage for either of them to have been seen in public at all,” Wilmore pointed out.

“It is as astounding to me as it is to you,” Francis confessed. “From the way she spoke, I should never have dreamed that they were living together.”

“And from his appearance,” Wilmore remarked, as he called the waiter to bring some cigarettes, “I should never

have imagined that he was anything else save a high-principled, well-born, straightforward sort of chap. I never saw a less criminal type of face."

They each in turn glanced at the subject of their discussion. Oliver Hilditch's good-looks had been the subject of many press comments during the last few days. They were certainly undeniable. His face was a little lined but his hair was thick and brown. His features were regular, his forehead high and thoughtful, his mouth a trifle thin but straight and shapely. Francis gazed at him like a man entranced. The hours seemed to have slipped away. He was back in the tea-shop, listening to the woman who spoke of terrible things. He felt again his shivering abhorrence of her cold, clearly narrated story. Again he shrank from the horrors from which with merciless fingers she had stripped the coverings. He seemed to see once more the agony in her white face, to hear the eternal pain aching and throbbing in her monotonous tone. He rose suddenly to his feet.

"Andrew," he begged, "tell the fellow to bring the bill outside. We'll have our coffee and liqueurs there."

Wilmore acquiesced willingly enough, but even as they turned towards the door Francis realised what was in store for him. Oliver Hilditch had risen to his feet. With a courteous little gesture he intercepted the passer-by. Francis found himself standing side by side with the man for whose life he had pleaded that afternoon, within a few feet of the woman whose terrible story seemed to have poisoned the very atmosphere he breathed, to have shown him a new

horror in life, to have temporarily, at any rate, undermined every joy and ambition he possessed.

“Mr. Ledsam,” Hilditch said, speaking with quiet dignity, “I hope that you will forgive the liberty I take in speaking to you here. I looked for you the moment I was free this afternoon, but found that you had left the Court. I owe you my good name, probably my life. Thanks are poor things but they must be spoken.”

“You owe me nothing at all,” Francis replied, in a tone which even he found harsh. “I had a brief before me and a cause to plead. It was a chapter out of my daily work.”

“That work can be well done or ill,” the other reminded him gently. “In your case, my presence here proves how well it was done. I wish to present you to my wife, who shares my gratitude.”

Francis bowed to the woman, who now, at her husband's words, raised her eyes. For the first time he saw her smile. It seemed to him that the effort made her less beautiful.

“Your pleading was very wonderful, Mr. Ledsam,” she said, a very subtle note of mockery faintly apparent in her tone. “We poor mortals find it difficult to understand that with you all that show of passionate earnestness is merely—what did you call it?—a chapter in your day's work? It is a great gift to be able to argue from the brain and plead as though from the heart.”

“We will not detain Mr. Ledsam,” Oliver Hilditch interposed, a little hastily. “He perhaps does not care to be addressed in public by a client who still carries with him the atmosphere of the prison. My wife and I wondered, Mr. Ledsam, whether you would be good enough to dine with us

one night. I think I could interest you by telling you more about my case than you know at present, and it would give us a further opportunity, and a more seemly one, for expressing our gratitude."

Francis had recovered himself by this time. He was after all a man of parts, and though he still had the feeling that he had been through one of the most momentous days of his life, his savoir faire was making its inevitable reappearance. He knew very well that the idea of that dinner would be horrible to him. He also knew that he would willingly cancel every engagement he had rather than miss it.

"You are very kind," he murmured.

"Are we fortunate enough to find you disengaged," Hilditch suggested, "to-morrow evening?"

"I am quite free," was the ready response.

"That suits you, Margaret?" Hilditch asked, turning courteously to his wife.

For a single moment her eyes were fixed upon those of her prospective guest. He read their message which pleaded for his refusal, and he denied it.

"To-morrow evening will suit me as well as any other," she acquiesced, after a brief pause.

"At eight o'clock, then—number 10 b, Hill Street," Hilditch concluded.

Francis bowed and turned away with a murmured word of polite assent. Outside, he found Wilmore deep in the discussion of the merits of various old brandies with an interested maitre d'hotel.

"Any choice, Francis?" his host enquired.

“None whatever,” was the prompt reply, “only, for God's sake, give me a double one quickly!”

The two men were on the point of departure when Oliver Hilditch and his wife left the restaurant. As though conscious that they had become the subject of discussion, as indeed was the case, thanks to the busy whispering of the various waiters, they passed without lingering through the lounge into the entrance hall, where Francis and Andrew Wilmore were already waiting for a taxicab. Almost as they appeared, a new arrival was ushered through the main entrance, followed by porters carrying luggage. He brushed past Francis so closely that the latter looked into his face, half attracted and half repelled by the waxen-like complexion, the piercing eyes, and the dignified carriage of the man whose arrival seemed to be creating some stir in the hotel. A reception clerk and a deputy manager had already hastened forward. The newcomer waved them back for a moment. Bareheaded, he had taken Margaret Hilditch's hands in his and raised them to his lips.

“I came as quickly as I could,” he said. “There was the usual delay, of course, at Marseilles, and the trains on were terrible. So all has ended well.”

Oliver Hilditch, standing by, remained speechless. It seemed for a moment as though his self-control were subjected to a severe strain.

“I had the good fortune,” he interposed, in a low tone, “to be wonderfully defended. Mr. Ledsam here—”

He glanced around. Francis, with some idea of what was coming, obeyed an imaginary summons from the head-porter, touched Andrew Wilmore upon the shoulder, and

hastened without a backward glance through the swing-doors. Wilmore turned up his coat-collar and looked doubtfully up at the rain.

“I say, old chap,” he protested, “you don't really mean to walk?”

Francis thrust his hand through his friend's arm and wheeled him round into Davies Street.

“I don't care what the mischief we do, Andrew,” he confided, “but couldn't you see what was going to happen? Oliver Hilditch was going to introduce me as his preserver to the man who had just arrived!”

“Are you afflicted with modesty, all of a sudden?” Wilmore grumbled.

“No, remorse,” was the terse reply.

CHAPTER V

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Indecision had never been one of Francis Ledsam's faults, but four times during the following day he wrote out a carefully worded telegraphic message to Mrs. Oliver Hilditch, 10 b, Hill Street, regretting his inability to dine that night, and each time he destroyed it. He carried the first message around Richmond golf course with him, intending to dispatch his caddy with it immediately on the conclusion of the round. The fresh air, however, and the concentration required by the game, seemed to dispel the nervous apprehensions with which he had anticipâtéd his visit, and over an aperitif in the club bar he tore the telegram into small pieces and found himself even able to derive a certain half-fearful pleasure from the thought of meeting again the woman who, together with her terrible story, had never for one moment been out of his thoughts. Andrew Wilmore, who had observed his action, spoke of it as they settled down to lunch.

“So you are going to keep your engagement tonight, Francis?” he observed.

The latter nodded.

“After all, why not?” he asked, a little defiantly. “It ought to be interesting.”

“Well, there's nothing of the sordid criminal, at any rate, about Oliver Hilditch,” Wilmore declared. “Neither, if one comes to think of it, does his wife appear to be the prototype of suffering virtue. I wonder if you are wise to go, Francis?”

“Why not?” the man who had asked himself that question a dozen times already, demanded.

“Because,” Wilmore replied coolly, “underneath that steely hardness of manner for which your profession is responsible, you have a vein of sentiment, of chivalrous sentiment, I should say, which some day or other is bound to get you into trouble. The woman is beautiful enough to turn any one's head. As a matter of fact, I believe that you are more than half in love with her already.”

Francis Ledsam sat where the sunlight fell upon his strong, forceful face, shone, too, upon the table with its simple but pleasant appointments, upon the tankard of beer by his side, upon the plate of roast beef to which he was already doing ample justice. He laughed with the easy confidence of a man awakened from some haunting nightmare, relieved to find his feet once more firm upon the ground.

“I have been a fool to take the whole matter so seriously, Andrew,” he declared. “I expect to walk back to Clarges Street to-night, disillusioned. The man will probably present me with a gold pencil-case, and the woman—”

“Well, what about the woman?” Wilmore asked, after a brief pause.

“Oh, I don't know!” Francis declared, a little impatiently. “The woman is the mystery, of course. Probably my brain was a little over-excited when I came out of Court, and what I imagined to be an epic was nothing more than a tissue of exaggerations from a disappointed wife. I'm sure I'm doing the right thing to go there.... What about a four-ball this afternoon, Andrew?”

The four-ball match was played and won in normal fashion. The two men returned to town together afterwards, Wilmore to the club and Francis to his rooms in Clarges Street to prepare for dinner. At a few minutes to eight he rang the bell of number 10 b, Hill Street, and found his host and hostess awaiting him in the small drawing-room into which he was ushered. It seemed to him that the woman, still colourless, again marvellously gowned, greeted him coldly. His host, however, was almost too effusive. There was no other guest, but the prompt announcement of dinner dispelled what might have been a few moments of embarrassment after Oliver Hilditch's almost too cordial greeting. The woman laid her fingers upon her guest's coat-sleeve. The trio crossed the little hall almost in silence.

Dinner was served in a small white Georgian dining-room, with every appurtenance of almost Sybaritic luxury. The only light in the room was thrown upon the table by two purple-shaded electric lamps, and the servants who waited seemed to pass backwards and forwards like shadows in some mysterious twilight—even the faces of the three diners themselves were out of the little pool of light until they leaned forward. The dinner was chosen with taste and restraint, the wines were not only costly but rare. A watchful butler, attended now and then by a trim parlour-maid, superintended the service. Only once, when she ordered a bowl of flowers removed from the table, did their mistress address either of them. Conversation after the first few amenities speedily became almost a monologue. One man talked whilst the others listened, and the man who talked was Oliver Hilditch. He possessed the rare gift of imparting

colour and actuality in a few phrases to the strange places of which he spoke, of bringing the very thrill of strange happenings into the shadowy room. It seemed that there was scarcely a country of the world which he had not visited, a country, that is to say, where men congregate, for he admitted from the first that he was a city worshipper, that the empty places possessed no charm for him.

“I am not even a sportsman,” he confessed once, half apologetically, in reply to a question from his guest. “I have passed down the great rivers of the world without a thought of salmon, and I have driven through the forest lands and across the mountains behind a giant locomotive, without a thought of the beasts which might be lurking there, waiting to be killed. My only desire has been to reach the next place where men and women were.”

“Irrespective of nationality?” Francis queried.

“Absolutely. I have never minded much of what race—I have the trick of tongues rather strangely developed—but I like the feeling of human beings around me. I like the smell and sound and atmosphere of a great city. Then all my senses are awake, but life becomes almost turgid in my veins during the dreary hours of passing from one place to another.”

“Do you rule out scenery as well as sport from amongst the joys of travel?” Francis enquired.

“I am ashamed to make such a confession,” his host answered, “but I have never lingered for a single unnecessary moment to look at the most wonderful landscape in the world. On the other hand, I have lounged for hours in the narrowest streets of Pekin, in the markets of