FLORENCE WARDEN

A WITCH OF THE HILLS, V. 1

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Warden F.

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Содержание

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A Witch of the Hills, v. 1 [of 2]

CHAPTER I

Poor little witch! I think she left all her spells and love-philters behind her, when she let herself be carried off from Ballater to Bayswater, a spot where no sorcery more poetical or more interesting than modern Spiritualism finds a congenial home. What was her star about not to teach her that human hearts can beat as passionately up among the quiet hills and the dark fir-forests as down amid the rattle and the roar of the town? Well, well; it is only in the grave that we make no mistakes; and life and love, God knows, are mysteries beyond the ken of a chuckle-headed country gentleman, with just sense enough to handle a gun and land a salmon.

And the sum and substance of all this is that the Deeside hills are very bleak in December, that the north wind sighs and sobs, whistles and howls among the ragged firs and the bending larches in a manner fearsome and eerie to a lonely man at his silent fireside, and that books are but sorry substitutes for human companions when the deer are safe in their winter retreat in the forests, and the grouse-moors are white with snow. So here's for another pine-log on the fire, and a glance back at the fourteen years which have slipped away since I shut the gates of the world behind me.

The world! The old leaven is still there then, that after fourteen years of voluntary—almost voluntary—exile, I still call that narrow circle of a few hundreds of not particularly wise, not particularly interesting people—the world! They were wise enough and interesting enough for me at three and twenty, though, when by the death of my elder brother I leapt at once from an irksome struggle, with expensive tastes, on a stingy allowance of three hundred a year, to the full enjoyment of an income of eight thousand.

How fully I appreciated the delights of that sudden change from 'ineligible' to 'eligible!' How quickly I began to feel that, in accepting an invitation, instead of receiving a favour I now conferred one! My new knowledge speedily transformed a harmless and rather obliging young man into an insufferable puppy; but the puppy was welcomed where the obliging young man had hardly been tolerated. Beautifully gradual the change was, both in me and in my friends; for we were all well bred, and knew how to charge the old formulas with new meaning. 'You will be sure to come, won't you?' from a hostess to me, was no longer a crumb of kindness, it was an entreaty. 'You are very kind,' from me, expressed now not gratitude, but condescension. A rather nice girl, who had been scolded for dancing with me too often, was now, like the little children sent out in the streets to beg, praised or blamed by her mother according to the degree of attention I had paid her. I did not share the contempt of the other men of my own age for this manœuvring mamma and the rest of her kind, though I daresay I spoke of them in the same tone as they did. In the first place, I was flattered by their homage to my new position, interested as it was; and in the second, in their presence we were all so much alike, in dress, manner, and what by courtesy is called conversation, that the poor ladies might well be excused for judging our merits by the only tangible point of difference—our relative wealth.

In our tastes, our vices, real or assumed, there was equally little to choose between us. We knew little about art and less about literature. In politics we were dogged and illogical partisans of politicians, and cared nothing for principles. Religion we left to women, who shared with horses the chief place in our thoughts. Nature having fortunately denied to the latter animals the power of speech, there was no danger of the two classes of our favourites coming into active rivalry.

In the intoxication of early manhood, while the mind was still in the background to the senses, the surface of things provided entertainment enough for us. Characters and even characteristics were merged in a uniformity of folly without malice, and vice without depravity. If we gambled, we lost

money which did no good while in our hands; if we gave light love, it was to ladies who asked for no more; if we drank, we only clouded intellects which were never employed in thought.

Looking back on that time from the serene eminence of nine and thirty, I can see that I was a fool, but also that I got my money's worth for my folly, which is more than I can say for all my later aberrations of intellect. And if, on the brink of forty, I find I can give a less logical account of my actions and feelings than I could at the opening of life, it is appalling to think what a consummate ass I may be if I live another twenty years! I begin to wish I had set myself some less humiliating task, to fill my lonely hours by a mountain winter fireside, than this of tracing the process by which the idiot of five and twenty became the lunatic of five and thirty. Well, it's too late to go back, now that I have called up the old ghosts and felt again the terrible fascination of the touch of the now gaunt fingers. So here's for a dash at my work with the best grace I can.

I had been enjoying my accession to fortune for about eighteen months, during which I had devoted what mind and soul I possessed wholly to the work of catering for the gratification of my senses, when I fell for the first time seriously in love, as the natural sequence of having exhausted the novelty of coarser excitements.

Lady Helen Normanton was the third daughter of the Marquis of Castleford, a beauty in her first season, who had made a sensation on her presentation, and had attracted the avowed admiration of no less a person than the Earl of Saxmundham, such a great catch, with his rumoured revenues of eighty or ninety thousand a year, that for a comparative pauper with a small and already encumbered estate like mine to dare to appear in the lists against him seemed the height of conceit or the depth of idiotcy. But Lady Helen's eyes were bright enough, and her smile sweet enough, to turn any man's head. They caused me to form the first set purpose of my life, and I dashed into my wooing with a head-long earnestness that soon made my passion the talk of my friends. I had one advantage on my side upon which I must confess that I largely relied; I was good-looking enough to have earned the sobriquet of 'Handsome Harry,' and I was quite as much alive to my personal attractions, quite as anxious to show them to the best advantage, as any female professional beauty. It was agony to think that, having already exhausted my imagination in the invention of devices by which, in the restricted area of man's costume, I should always appear a little better dressed than any one else, I could do nothing more for my love than I had done for my vanity. As a last resource I curled my hair.

The boldness of my devotion soon began to tell. The Earl of Saxmundham was fifty-two, had a snub nose, and was already bald. Lady Helen was very young, sweet and simple, and perhaps scarcely realised yet what much handsomer horses and gowns and diamonds are to be got with eighty thousand a year than with eight. So she smiled at me and danced with me, and said nothing at all in the sweetest way when I poured out my passion in supper-rooms and conservatories, and giggled with the most adorable childlikeness when I kissed her little hand, still young enough to be rather red, and told her that she had inspired me with the wish to be great for her sake. And the end of it was that the Earl began to retreat, and that I was snubbed, and that these snubs, being to me an earnest of victory, I became ten times more openly, outrageously daring than before, and my suit being vigorously upheld by one of her brothers, who had become an oracle in the family on the simple basis of being difficult to please, I was at last most reluctantly accepted as Lady Helen's betrothed lover.

My success gave me the sort of prestige of curiosity which passionate earnestness, in this age when we associate passion with seedy Bohemians and earnestness with Methodist preachers, can easily excite among a generation of men who, having no stimulating iron bars or stone walls between them and their lady-loves, can reserve the best of their energies for other and more exciting pursuits. I was the respectable Paris to a proper and perfectly well-conducted Helen, the Romeo to a new Juliet. My wooing and engagement became a society topic, the subject of many interesting fictions. Spreading to circles a little more remote, in the absence of any Downing Street blunder or Clapham tragedy, the story became more romantic still. I myself overheard on the Underground Railway the exciting narration of how I forced my way at night into the Marquis's bedroom, after having concealed

myself for some hours behind a Japanese screen in the library; how, revolver in hand, I had forced the unwilling parent to accede to my demand for his daughter's hand, and much more of the same kind, listened to with incredulity, but still with interest.

It was hard that, after the *éclat* of such a beginning, our engagement should have continued on commonplace lines, but so it did. My love for this fair girl, being the first deep emotion of a life which had begun to pall upon me by its frivolity, had struck far down and moved to life within me the best feelings of a man's nature. I began to be ashamed of myself, to feel that I was a futile coxcomb, only saved from being ridiculous by being one of a crowd of others like me. I gave up betting, that I might have more money to spend on presents for her; less legitimate pleasures I renounced as a matter of course, with shame that the arms which were to protect my darling should have been so profaned; vanity having made me a 'masher,' love made me a man. Unluckily, Helen was too young and too innocent to appreciate the difference; her eyes still glowed at the sight of French bonbons, she liked compliments better than conversation, and burst into tears when one evening, as she was dressed for a ball, I broke, in kissing her, the heads of some lilies of the valley she was wearing. The little petulant push she gave me opened my eyes to the fact that no sooner had I discovered myself to be a fool in one way than I had straightway fallen into as great an error in another direction. It dawned upon me for the first time, as I sat opposite to Helen and her mother in the barouche on our way to the ball, what a horrible likeness there was, seen in this halflight of the carriage lamps, between Helen with her sweet blue eyes and features so delicately lovely that they made one think of Queen Titania, with an uncomfortable thought of one's self as the ass, and the placid Marchioness, whose features at other times one never noticed, so utterly insignificant a nonentity was she by reason of the vacuous stolidity which was carried by her to the point of absolute distinction. Would Helen be like that at forty? Worse still, was Helen like that now? It was a horrible thought, which subsequent experience unhappily did not tend to dispel. My first serious love had worked too great a revolution in me, had made me conscious of needs unfelt before, so that I now found that mere innocence in the woman who was to be the goddess of my life was not enough; I must have capacity for thought, for passion.

All this I had taken for granted at first, while the struggle to win her occupied all my energies; but when from the mad aspirant I became the proud betrothed, I had leisure to find out that the beautiful, dreamy, far-away eyes of my *fiancée* in no way denoted a poetic temperament, that her romance consisted merely in the preference for a handsome face to an ugly one, and in the inability to understand that she, an Earl's daughter and a spoilt child, could by any possibility fail to obtain anything to which she had taken a fancy. I was surprised at the rapidity with which I, a man seriously and deeply in love, came to these conclusions about the girl who had inspired my passion. I could even, looking into the future, foretell the kind of life we should lead together as man and wife, when she, fallen from the ideal position of inspiring goddess to that of a tame pet rabbit, bored to death by my solemnity when I was serious, and frightened by my impetuosity when I was gay, would discover, with quick woman's instinct, that the best of myself was no longer given to her, and cavilling at the neglect of a husband whose society oppressed her, would find compensation for her wrongs among more frivolous companions. So that, weary of frivolity myself, my wife would avenge my defection.

I suppose almost every man, in the sober hours which alternate with the paroxysms of the wildest passions, can form a tolerably correct forecast of his life with the woman who likes to believe that she has cast him into an infatuation whose force is blinding. The picture is always with him, showing now in bright colours, now in dark; varying a little in its outlines from time to time, but remaining substantially the same, and more or less accurate according to the measure of his intellect and experience; not at all the picture of even an earthly paradise, but yet with charms which satisfy human longings, and make it hard to part with. So I, having made up my mind that beauty, gentleness and modesty, good birth and fairly good temper were the only attributes of my future wife on which I could rely, philosophically decided that they formed as good an equipment as I had any right to expect,

doubled my offerings of flowers and bonbons, and transferred the disquisitions on art, literature, religion and politics, in which I had begun to indulge, to her brother.

Lord Edgar Normanton was a tall, fair, broad-shouldered young man, who, while joining in all the frivolous amusements of his age and station, did so in a grave, leisurely, and reflective manner, which caused him to be looked up to as one capable of higher things, whose presence at a cricket match was a condescension, and who appeared at balls with some occult purpose connected with the study of human nature. I had always looked upon his special friendship for me as an honour, of which I felt that my new departure, in deciding that I had sown wild oats enough, made me more worthy. It never occurred to me to ask myself or anybody else whether his wild oats were sown. It was enough for me that he was glad when mine were. With the loyalty of most young men to their ideals of their own sex, I would far rather have discovered a new and unsuspected flaw in Helen's character than have learnt anything to shake my respect for her brother. Women, when not considered as angels, can only be looked upon as fascinating but inferior creatures, whose faults must be overlooked as irremediable, in consideration of their contributions to the comfort or the pleasure of man. One may argue about them, but, except as a relaxation, one cannot argue with them.

Edgar was openly delighted at my engagement with his sister, which he considered merely in the light of a tie to bring us two men closer together. Such a little nonentity as I found he considered his sister to be might think herself lucky to be honoured by such a use.

This was the position of affairs when a memorable shooting party in Norfolk, of which both Edgar and I formed members, resulted in an accident which was to bring my love affair to an end as sensational as its beginning.

CHAPTER II

We were engaged upon that hospitable abomination at a shooting party—a champagne luncheon. Having made a very fair bag for my morning's work, and being tired with my exertions, I was inclined to think that the serious business of the day was over for me, and that I might take it easy as regarded further effort. Edgar, who, since his discovery that my fervour on the subject of his sister had grown less ardent, was inclined to assume more of the character of mentor towards me than I cared about, had seated himself on the ground beside me; but I had found an opportunity of changing seats, for I felt less well-disposed towards him that morning than I had ever been before.

The fact was that the gentle Helen had snubbed me two evenings previously for a demonstration of affection which I had carefully prepared, lest she, too, should have noticed the waning in my love. Upon this I had retreated, with a very odd mixture of feelings towards my *fiancée*, and there had been a reserve between us for the whole of the evening, which Edgar somewhat unwisely interfered to break. Looking upon myself as the injured person, I had resented the homily he felt himself called upon to administer, and though I made my peace with Helen next day, I avoided her brother. He made two or three good-natured overtures to me in the manner of an experienced nurse to a froward child, but on the morning of the shooting party I was still as far as ever from being reconciled to the paternal intervention of Edgar the Wise and the Good.

'The Ladies!' cried one of the party, leaning lazily back on his arm and raising his glass.

'Say "Woman,"' I amended; 'it's more comprehensive.'

'Well, but "The Ladies!" ought to be comprehensive enough for you just now, Maude,' said some one, glancing mischievously at Edgar, whose solemnity was increasing, and scenting something warmer than controversy.

'Not now, nor ever!' said I, with more daring than good taste. 'In "Woman" we can secretly worship an ideal better than ourselves. In "The Ladies" we must bow down to creatures lower than ourselves, whose beauty deceives us, whose frivolity degrades us, and whom nothing more sacred than our care and their own coldness protects from the fate of fellow-women whom before them we do not dare to name.'

Everybody looked up in astonishment, and Edgar's red healthy face became purple with anger.

'A man who holds such opinions concerning ladies is probably better qualified to judge that other class which he has the singular taste to mention in the same sentence with them.'

'Perhaps. It is easier to find mercy for victims than for tyrants.'

Edgar rose to his feet with the ponderous dignity of an offended giant.

'If I had known your opinions on this subject a little earlier, Mr. Maude, I should never have allowed you to form an alliance with my family.'

I rose too, as hot as he; and secretly alarmed and repentant at the lengths to which my recklessness had carried me, I was not ready to submit to the didactic rough-riding of the man who had long ago himself instilled into me his own supreme contempt for the weaker sex.

'Perhaps I, Lord Edgar, should have thought the honour too dearly bought if I had known that it involved my acceptance of a self-appointed keeper of my conscience.'

Our host, Sir Wilfrid Speke, now interfered to calm the passions which were rapidly getting the better of us, and thrusting my gun under my arm, he literally carried me off, and marching me to a covert on the slope of a hill where was a noted 'warm corner,' he told me good-humouredly to 'let the birds have it,' and left me to myself and them.

I was in a very bad temper. Enraged by the recollection of Helen's simpering coldness, by her brother's recently-assumed dictatorship, and by my own reckless want of self-control a few minutes before, I was not in the mood for sport. Was this to be the result of my determination to take life more seriously, that I discovered my *fiancée* to be a fool, my most honoured friend a bore, and myself

capable of undreamt-of depths of bad taste and ill-temper? I would go back to my old life of languid chatter and irresponsible dissipation, I would content myself again with my fame as the 'handsomest man in town,' would accept my future wife for what she was, and not for what she ought to be, give her the inane, half-hearted attentions which were so much more to her taste than earnestness and devotion, and see thought and Lord Edgar at the devil.

I felt much more inclined to shoot myself than to open fire on the pheasants, but head-long carelessness, and not tragic intention, caused the accident which ensued. In getting through a gap in a hedge, my gun was caught by a briar as I mounted to the higher ground on the other side; I tried to free it, and handling it incautiously, a sudden shock to my face and right shoulder told me that I had shot myself. I was blinded for the moment, and trying to raise my right arm I felt acute pain, and the next instant I felt the warm blood trickling down my neck.

I tried to walk, but I staggered about and could make no progress, so I leaned against a tree and shouted; but my head growing dizzy, I soon found myself on the ground, filled with one wish—that I might live long enough for some one to find me, and receive the last instructions by which I could atone to pretty Helen for the vulgar earnestness of my love.

My next recollection is of a dull murmur of voices heard, as it seemed, in the distance, then of pain grown suddenly more acute as I was moved; all the time I could see nothing, and I had only just time to understand that I was being carried along by friends whose voices I recognised, when I fell again into unconsciousness.

I recovered to find myself back at Sir Wilfrid's; a doctor was dressing my wounded head and examining my shoulder; there was a bandage across my eyes, and on trying to speak I found that the right side of my face was also bound up. I passed the night in some pain, and must have been for part of it light-headed, as I discovered two or three days later, when Edgar, much moved, told me that I had implored everybody who came near me to witness that I left all I possessed to Lady Helen Normanton, and had begged for the pen and paper I could not have used, to execute my proposed will.

During the next few days Edgar hardly left my bedside. My head and eyes were still kept tightly bandaged, so that I could neither see nor speak, nor take solid food. Seeing me in this piteous condition, Edgar, like the good fellow he was, decided that sermons were out of season, and that I must be amused. His humour, however, being of a somewhat slow and cumbrous kind adapted to his size, I took advantage of my enforced silence to let him joke on unheeded, while my own thoughts wandered dreamily away to my life of the past few years, and to the odd, quickly discovered mistake in which it had lately culminated. I was surprised by the persistency with which Helen's placid silliness tormented me, fresh instances of it coming every hour into my mind until I began to ask myself whether the little blue-eyed lady had really been born into the world with a soul at all. And so, no longer suffering bodily pain, I lay day after day, very much absorbed by my own self-questionings, and by strange dreams of a new Helen, who came to me with the fair face and soft eyes of the old, but with bright intelligence in her gaze, whispering with her delicate lips words of love and tenderness.

I woke up suddenly one night, still hot with my sleeping fancy that this revised edition of my *fiancée* had been with me. I had seemed to feel her breath upon my cheek, even to feel the touch of her lips upon my ear, as she told me my illness had taught her how much she loved me. I thought I was answering her in passionate words with a great thrill of joy in my heart, when I woke up and found myself as usual in darkness and silence.

'Edgar!' I called out; 'Edgar!'

He answered sleepily from a little way off, 'Yes. Do you want anything?'

'No, thank you.'

A pause.

'I say,' I went on a few moments later, 'nobody has been in the room, have they?'

'No, no-o-body,' with a yawn. 'At least, I may have dozed, but I don't think–'

'No, of course not.' But I was horribly wide awake by this time. Some of the bandages round my head having been removed for the first time the evening before, I had liberty of speech again, of which I seemed resolved to make the most. 'I say, Edgar, there's a fire flickering in the grate, isn't there?'

'Yes, why?'

'Well, if I can see that quite well, why on earth do they still keep the bandages over my eyes? I know they were afraid of my going blind. But I haven't; so what's it for?'

'I don't know,' mumbled Edgar, rather blankly. He added hastily, 'I suppose the doctor knows best; you'd better leave them alone.'

'Oh yes.'

A long silence, during which Edgar, under the impression that it was part of a sick nurse's duty when the patient showed signs of restlessness, pottered about the room, and at last fell over something.

'I say, Edgar,' I began again, 'isn't my face a good deal battered about on the right side?'

I heard him stop, and there was a little clash of glasses. Then he spoke, with some constraint.

'Yes, a little. I daresay it will be some time before it gets all right. But you've no internal injuries or broken bones, and that's the great thing.'

The last statement was made so effusively that it was not difficult for me to gather that my face was more deeply injured than he liked to admit.

'I know quite well,' said I composedly, 'that I shall have to swell the proud ranks of the plain after this; I must cultivate my intellect and my virtues, like the poor girls whom we don't dance with! I've lost a finger, too, haven't I? On my right hand?'

'Only two joints of it,' answered Edgar, with laboured cheerfulness.

'What would poor Helen say to me if she could see me now?' I suggested, rather diffidently.

'Say! Why, what every true woman would say, that she loved you ten times better now you were disfigured than she did when you were the counterpart of every other good-looking popinjay in town!'

This, uttered with much ponderous vehemence, was by no means reassuring to me. In the first place, it confirmed the idea that my injuries would leave permanent marks. In the second place, it led me to ask myself whether, Helen's chief merit in my eyes having been good looks, my chief merit in her eyes might not have been the same.

As I said nothing, Edgar, now fully awake, came nearer to the bed, and said solemnly: 'You do Helen injustice, Harry.'

'And you taught me to do her injustice, Edgar.'

At first he said nothing to this, and I knew that he understood me. But presently I felt his hand laid emphatically on my left shoulder, and he began in a low earnest voice: 'Look here, old chap, that's not quite fair. I may have inveighed against the intellectual inferiority of women scores of times when you encouraged me by feeble protest. I may have spoken of my own sister as an example of the sweet and silly. When you saw her and became infatuated about her I listened to your rhapsodies in silence because I couldn't endorse your opinion that she was an angel. But I was glad you had taken a fancy to the child, and I knew that you might have done much worse. Well, my opinions have undergone no transformation. The women of the middle class, whom it is now the fashion to educate, the women of the lower class, who have to work, may be considered as reasoning creatures, varying, as men do, in their reasoning powers. But the women of the upper classes, *pur sang*, who are equally above education and labour, may be ranked all together, with the exception of those whom alliance with the class below has regenerated, as more or less fascinating idiots, whose minds are cramped by unnatural and ignorant prejudices, and in whom an occasional ray of intelligence disperses itself in mere freaks of art, of philanthropy, or of religion.'

'Then, if you are logical, you may end by marrying a barmaid.'

'I think not. Barmaids are young women who, by the exacting demands of their calling, are bound to be healthy, active, intelligent and shrewd. Consider how such a woman would be thrown away in the ridiculous and empty existence led by our wives! How she would laugh at the shallow

interests of the women around her, and despise her do-nothing husband! Without counting that she might be demoralised by her new position, and add the mistakes of a parvenue to the foibles of the class into which she was admitted!'

'Then, on the whole, you will–'

'Remain single, or take for wife the usual fool of my own class, who will have the usual fool of her own class for a husband.'

'But, Edgar,' said I, after a short pause, 'I am not so calm as you are, and my mind is less well-regulated than yours. I want something in my wife that you would not want from yours. The docile acceptance of my love would never content me; I want it returned.'

But this view of the case had the effect of irritating Edgar, who naturally resented the idea of any other nature having deeper needs than his own.

'It is unreasonable to expect, from our physical and mental inferior, powers equal to our own,' he said, in a tone of dismissal of the subject.

'Then how am I to expect from Helen the power of looking at my disfigured face without horror, when I am by no means sure that I could have felt redoubled devotion if a similar accident had happened to her?'

'Women are different from us, and not to be judged by the same rules. Beauty—of some sort—is a duty with them, while every one knows that an ugly man makes quicker progress with them than a handsome one.'

'Well, I should like to judge what sort of progress with them my ugliness is likely to make. Give me a looking-glass.'

But he would not. He said the doctor had forbidden me to use my eyes yet, that my face was still unhealed, and the bandages must not be moved. And finally he declined to talk to me any longer, and told me to go to sleep.

I was not satisfied. I knew that I was getting well fast, that there was no need to keep me in bed, and I felt curious as to the reason of my still being kept so close a prisoner. So I found an opportunity when I had been left, as they thought, asleep, to remove the bandage from my eyes with my left hand. My sight seemed as good as ever, but the skin round about my right eye seemed to be tightly drawn. The window-blinds were down, and as evening was coming on there was only light enough to distinguish dimly the objects in the room by the help of the flickering flame of the fire. I got out of bed and walked to the toilet-table, but the looking-glass had been taken away; to the mantelpiece, with the same result. I grew impatient, angry, and rather anxious. There was a hand-glass in my dressing-bag, if I could only find that; I remembered that I had left it in the dressing-room. I dashed into the room, and as that, too, was darkened, I turned to draw up the blind. By that movement I came face to face with a sight so appalling that, of all the misfortunes my accident has ever brought upon me, none, I think, has given me a shock for the first moment so horrible. I saw before me the figure of a man with the face of a devil.

The right eyebrow, the right side of the moustache were gone, and the hair as far as the back of the right ear. The whole of this side of the face, from forehead to chin, was a puckered drawn mass of blackened shrivelled skin, distorted into grotesque seams and furrows. The right end of the eye and the right corner of the mouth were drawn up, giving to the whole face a sinister and evil expression.

After a few moments' contemplation of my new self, I turned away from the glass, feeling sick with disgust and horror. In the first shock of my discovery, no reflection that I was looking upon the fearful sight at its worst, and that the healing work was still going on underneath the scarred and desiccated skin, came to console me.

My back turned upon my own image, my stupefaction gave place to rapid thought. I saw in a moment that the old course of my life was at one blow broken up, that I must begin again as if I had been born that day. I must go away, not only from my own friends, but from the chance of coming in contact with them again. I must leave England. Also, since if I were to make my resolution known

I should be inundated with kindly meant dissuasions, I must breathe no hint of my intention until I was quite able to carry it into execution. I was sure that no one but the doctor, and perhaps Edgar, had seen my face in its present condition, and that no description could give to others any idea of its appearance. I felt that my bodily health and strength were all that they had ever been, and that nothing but the wish to keep the knowledge of my disfigurement from me as long as possible had prompted the doctor's orders to me to remain in bed and to retain the bandages. It now, too, occurred to me that delay might bring some slight modification of my hideousness, and I resolved to let nature do what little she could, and not to set out on my travels until the mask which now covered one-half my face had fallen off, and disclosed whatever fresh horrors might be underneath. Then I would, without letting any one see my face, start for some German Spa for the benefit of my health; before I had been away three months I should be forgotten, and free to wend my way wherever I pleased. This idea, to a man to whom life had begun to present something like a deadlock, was not without charm. Society was a bore, love a delusion; now was the chance to find out what else there was worth learning in life.

I heard Edgar's voice in the distance, and had only time to rush back to bed, put on the bandages round my face, and turn on my side as if asleep, before he came into the room.

CHAPTER III

As I heard Edgar creaking softly about the room, giving the impression, even as I lay with my eyes shut, unable to observe his elaborate movements, of great weight trying to be light, my heart smote me at the thought of deceiving him with the rest. 'The elephant,' it had been a joke between ourselves for me to call him; and like a great elephant he was, huge, intelligent, gentle, not without a certain massive beauty, with keen feelings of loyalty, and a long slow-smouldering memory, with inclinations towards a laborious and somewhat painful sportiveness. Rebel against his sententious homilies as I occasionally might, he was a good old fellow, and I was fond of him. I moved a little to show him I was awake, and then said:

'Hallo, Edgar, is that you?'

'Yes. How do you feel?'

'Oh, ever so much better. I shall be getting up soon now.'

'Well, you mustn't be in too great a hurry. You have been patient so long, it would be a pity to destroy your credit just at the last.'

'I am only waiting for my face to heal now, of course. But, I say, Edgar, it will take a long time for that to get all right. Why, part of my cheek was completely blown away. It will be months, at least, before I dare show myself. I think I shall go to some German baths, and, you know, I don't know how long I may have to stay there. In the meantime–'

'In the meantime, what?'

'Your sister—Helen—must know that she is free.'

'But supposing she doesn't want to be free? Supposing–'

'Supposing she has a fancy for being tied to a death's-head? No, Edgar, she must be released at once. I want you to write a letter from me to her, if you will. The sooner it is over the better for both of us.'

I suppose Edgar felt that my attitude was not one of pure resignation, for he made no further effort to dissuade me, but went instantly in search of pens and paper. He was so very submissive, however, in taking this step, which I knew to be distasteful to him, that I was quite sure, before the letter was half written, that he was 'up to' something. So, when it was finished, I was mean enough to insist on his leaving it with me, together with the directed envelope; and after reading it carefully through myself as soon as I was alone, I made the housekeeper fold it and seal it up in my presence, and directed her to get it posted at once.

The letter said:

> My Dearest Helen—You have no doubt long ago heard the reason of my silence, and forgiven me for it, I am sure. I am sorry to tell you that my head [I felt an odd shyness of saying "my face"] has been injured so seriously that it will be a long time before I can return to town; I am going straight to Germany as soon as I am able to leave here, and cannot yet tell when I shall be in England again. Under these circumstances, although I know that you would overlook my new imperfections with the same sweetness with which you have forgiven my older defects, I feel that I cannot impose again upon your generosity. I therefore set you free, begging you to do me one last kindness by not returning to me the little souvenirs that you have from time to time been good enough to accept from me. And please don't send me back my letters, if you have ever received them with any pleasure. Burn them if you like. I will send back yours if you wish; but, as no woman will ever look with love upon my face again, your womanly dignity will suffer but little if you let me still keep them. There are only eight of them. And there is a glove, of course, and a packet

> of dried flowers, of course, and the little silver match-box. All these I shall insist upon keeping, whether you like it or not. They could not compromise anybody; the little glove could pass for a child's. You will trust me with them all, will you not? You see this isn't the usual broken-off match with its prelude of disastrous squabbles and wrangles. Some jealous demon who saw I did not deserve my good fortune has broken my hopes of happiness abruptly, and released you from a chain which I am afraid my ill-temper had already begun to make irksome to you. Forgive me now, and bear as kindly a recollection of me as you can. God bless you, Helen. I shall always treasure the remembrance of your little fairy face, and remember gratefully your sweet forbearance with me.—Yours most sincerely and affectionately,
> *Henry Lyttleton Maude.*

I hoped the child would not think this letter too cold and formal. My heart yearned towards her now with a longing more tender than before; I felt oppressed by the necessity of foregoing the shallow little love which, as the handsomest man about town, I had begun to consider far beneath my deserts.

Two days later I received an answer from Helen. I waited until I was alone to read it, for I still guarded my face carefully from all eyes but the doctor's. The touch of the letter, the sight of the sprawling, slap-dash handwriting which it delighted Helen to assume, in common with the other young ladies of her generation, moved me; for I could not but feel that this was the last '*billet*' by any possibility to be called '*doux*' which I should ever receive. I opened it with an apprehension that I should find the contents less moving than the envelope. I was mistaken.

> My Dearest Harry—I am afraid you have a very poor opinion of me if you think I care for nothing but personal attractions. You have always been most kind and generous to me, and you need not think because I am not intellectual myself I do not care for a man who is intellectual and all those things. I am coming down to see you myself and then if you wish to give me up you can do so—but I hope you will not throw me over so hastily. I am so sorry for your accident and that it has made you so ill, but I do not mind what else it has done.—Believe me, dearest Harry, with best love, hoping you will soon be quite recovered, yours ever lovingly,
> *Helen.*

Childish as the letter was it touched me deeply. Edgar must be right after all; I had misjudged a simple but loyal nature that only wanted an emergency to bring its nobler qualities to the surface. I told him about the letter, and added that it made giving her up harder to bear.

'Why should you give her up?' said he eagerly. 'You see she herself will not hear of it.'

'Because she does not understand the case. I am disfigured past recognition; she would shrink with horror from the sight of me. It would be a shock even to you, a strong unromantic man, to see what I have become.'

'You are too sensitive, old fellow. However shocking the change in you may be, you cannot fail to exaggerate its effect on others.'

'We shall see.'

A few days later, when the horror of my new appearance was indeed a little mitigated by the falling off of the withered outer skin which had covered the right side of my face, I tried the effect of my striking physiognomy on Edgar.

Whether he had expected some such surprise, or whether he was endowed with a splendid insensibility to ugliness, he stood the shock with the most stolid placidity.

'Well?' said I defiantly, looking at him from out my ill-matched eyes in a passion of aggressive rage.

'Well?' said he, as complacently as if I had been a turnip.

'I hope you admire this style of beauty,' I hurled out savagely.

'I don't go quite so far as that, but it's really much better than I expected.'

'You are easily pleased.'

He went on quietly. 'The chief impression your countenance gives one now is not, as you flatter yourself, of consummate ugliness, but—forgive me—of consummate villainy.'

'What!'

'You are preserved for ever from the danger of being anything but strictly virtuous and straightforward in your dealings, for no one would trust the possessor of that countenance with either a secret or a sovereign.'

This blunt frankness acted better than any softer measures could have done; it made me laugh. Looking again at myself in a glass, for I was now up and dressed, I noticed, what had escaped me before in my paralysed contemplation of the change in my own features, that the drawing up of the right-hand corners of my mouth and eye, together with the removal of every vestige of hair from that side of the face, had given me the grotesquely repulsive leer of a satyr. To crown my disadvantages, the left side of my face, seen in profile, still retained its natural appearance to mock my new hideousness.

'But I think I see a way out of all difficulties,' Edgar went on, more seriously. 'You will advance objections, I know, but you must permit your objections to be overruled. Accident can be combated by artifice, and to artifice you must resort until nature does her work and relieves you from the new necessity.'

We fought out the question, and at last I very unwillingly gave way, and submitted to the adoption of a false eyebrow, a false moustache, and a beautiful tuft of curly false hair much superior to my own, to hide the bald patch left by the accident.

Rather elated by this distinct improvement, assumed for the reception of Helen's promised visit, and encouraged by assurances that my own hair would soon grow again and enable me to discard its substitutes, I was ready to believe that the discoloration and disfigurement still visible were comparatively unimportant, and that the repellent expression, which no artifice much abated, might indeed affect strangers, but would not, in the sight of my friends, obscure their long-established impression of my amiability and sweetness.

Sir Wilfrid and Lady Speke had by this time gone up to town, leaving the place, with many kind wishes for my early and complete recovery, entirely at the disposal of myself and my unwearied nurse Edgar. So a day was fixed for the arrival of Helen and her mother. On that eventful afternoon Edgar settled me in a small sitting-room on the same floor with the room I had been occupying, before starting for the station. The blinds were drawn, and I sat with my back to this carefully-softened light. I wished, now that the ordeal was getting so near, that I had not let myself be dissuaded from my intention of sneaking quietly away without showing my disfigured face to any one. What was the use of my seeing the child again? I did indeed long foolishly for a few last words with her since she had shown unexpected depth of feeling towards me in my misfortune; but it could not end, as Edgar still obstinately hoped, in a renewal of our engagement, which I persisted in regarding as definitely broken. The meeting was only for a farewell. I was ashamed of the artifices I had used to conceal the traces of my accident, and I was feeling half inclined to tear off my false ornaments and present myself in my true hideousness, when the arrival of my visitors luckily stopped me. The room where I sat was at the back of the house, so that I had no warning of the return of the carriage until I heard Edgar's voice. I sprang up with one last look of agony at my reflection in the glass, which seemed to me at that moment a ghastly caricature of my old self, and then sat nervously down again, feeling like a doomed wretch with the executioner outside his cell.

The door opened, and Edgar bounded up to me, dragging Helen, who seemed shy and nervous, forward on his arm.

'Here he is, Nellie. Getting well fast, you see. Where is mother? I must fetch her up.'

I saw in a moment through the dear clumsy fellow's manœuvres. He prided himself on his strategy, fancying he had only to leave us together for us to have a touching reconciliation. But I knew better. I saw her turn pale and cling to her brother's arm, and I said hastily—

'No, no. Lady Castleford is not far behind, you may be sure. I am glad to see you, Lady Helen; it is very kind of you to come. It is easier–'

'Helen has come to persuade you to get well in England among your friends instead of going abroad to be ill among strangers,' said Edgar, cutting me short. 'He's getting on well, isn't he, Helen? Come, he's well enough to have his hand shaken now.'

He drew her forward, to my inexpressible pain, for I saw the reluctance in her face. Before I could attempt a protest, a reassuring word, she had held out her hand, which I timidly took. Then she lifted her eyes to my face for the first time. For the first and last time I saw the expression of the most vivid, most acute emotion on the fairy face. The muscles were contracted, the pupils of the eyes were dilated with intense horror.

'I am very glad–' she began.

Then, before she could finish her sentence, even while I still held her little hand in mine, she fell like a crushed flower unconscious in her brother's arms.

Poor fellow! How contrite, how miserably, abjectly humble and despairing he was when he appeared later in my room, to which I had fled, like a wounded beast to its den, when little Helen's unwilling blow gave me my social death-warrant. I was able to laugh then, and to tell him truly that my only regret was for the pain the injudicious meeting had caused poor Helen.

'It was you who dictated her letter to me,' I said.

Edgar did not attempt to deny it.

'She ought to be ashamed of herself,' said he, reddening with indignation.

'No, we ought to be ashamed of ourselves. I for my vanity in thinking there was any charm in my dull personality to compensate for the loss of the only merit I could have in a girl's eyes; you for your generous idiotcy in carrying that mistake farther still. Are they gone?'

'Yes. My mother wanted to see you, but–'

'That's all right. And now, old fellow, you mustn't make any more blunders on my account; you must let me make my own. I leave England in a few days.'

'Well, I suppose you must do as you like. I'll come and see you off.'

'No,' said I firmly. 'I shall say good-bye to you here, Edgar. I have very particular reasons for it, and you must give way to me in this.'

He tried to change my mind; he wanted to know my reasons; but he was unsuccessful in both attempts. I knew how obstinate he was, and that if I once allowed him to go with me to town, he would be sure to subject me to more painful meetings in the endeavour to persuade me to remain in England. Luckily for me, the very next day the Marquis telegraphed to his son to join him immediately in Monmouthshire; and no sooner had Edgar left the house, with the sure knowledge that he should not see me again, than I fulfilled his fears by instant preparation for my own departure. I had discarded all disguises, and contented myself by masking my face as much as possible with a travelling cap and a muffler; on arriving in town I went to an hotel in Covent Garden, where I was not known, and by the evening of the following day I had provided myself with the outfit of a Transpontine villain, a low-crowned, wide-brimmed soft hat and a black Spanish cloak.

In this get-up, which, when not made too conspicuous by a stage-walk and melodramatic glances around, is really a very efficient disguise both of form and features, I knew myself to be quite safe from recognition anywhere, and having decided to start from Charing Cross for Cologne by way of Ostend on the following morning, I devoted the evening of my second day in town to a last look round.

CHAPTER IV

It was Saturday evening; a week of fog having been succeeded by a week of rain, the pavements were now well coated with black slimy mud, in which one kept one's footing as best one could, stimulated by plentiful showers of the same substance, in a still more fluid state, flung by the wheels of passing vehicles.

Oh, wisely-governed city, where there is work for thousands of starving men, while thousands of men are starving for want of work! If a boy can keep a crossing clean in a crowded thoroughfare, could not an organised gang of men, ten times as numerous and twice as active as our gentle scavengers, save the sacred boots, skirts, and trousers of the respectable classes from that brush-resisting abomination, London mud? I respectfully recommend this suggestion to my betters with the assurance that, if it is considered of any value, there are plenty more where that came from.

Starting from Covent Garden, I made my way through King Street, Garrick Street, Cranbourne Street, Leicester Square and Coventry Street, into Regent Street, and was struck by a hundred common London sights and incidents which, in the old days, when my own life was so idle and yet so absorbing, had entirely escaped my notice. Oxford Street, Bond Street, Piccadilly, St. James's Street, I made the tour of them all; past the clubs, of many of which I was a member, brushing, unrecognised, by a dozen men who had known me well, into Trafalgar Square, where the gas-lamps cast long glittering lines of light on the wet pavement, and the spire of St. Martin's and the dome of the National Gallery rose like gray shadow-palaces above in the rainy air.

I dined at a restaurant in the Strand, and then, growing confident in the security of my disguise, I thought I would take a farewell glance at an old chum who had run Edgar pretty close in my esteem. He was an actor, and was fulfilling an engagement at a theatre in the Strand. When I add that he played what are technically called 'juvenile' parts—that is to say, those of the stage lovers—my taste may seem strange, until I explain that Fabian Scott was the very worst of all the fashionable 'juveniles,' being addicted to literary and artistic pursuits and other intellectual exercises which, while permissible and innocuous to what are called 'character' actors, are ruin to 'juveniles,' whose business requires vigour rather than thought, picturesqueness rather than feeling. So that Fabian, with his thin keen face, his intensity, and some remnant of North-country stiffness, stood only in the second rank of those whom the ladies delighted to worship; and becoming neither a great artist nor a great popinjay, gave his friends a sense of not having done quite the best with himself, but was a very interesting, if somewhat excitable companion. For my own part I had then, not knowing how vitally important the question of his character would one day become to me, nothing to wish for in him save that he were a little less sour and a little more sincere.

The stage-door was up a narrow and dirty court leading from the Strand. At the opening of the court stood a stout fair man, who looked like a German, and whose coarse, swollen face and dull eyes bore witness to a life of low dissipation. He was respectably but not well dressed, and he swung the cheap and showy walking-stick in his hand slowly backwards and forwards, in a stolidly swaggering and aggressive manner. I should not have noticed him so particularly, but for the fact that he filled the narrow entrance to the passage so completely that I had to ask him to let me pass. Instead of immediately complying, he looked at me from my feet to my head with surly, half-tipsy insolence, and gave a short thick laugh.

'Oh, so you're one of the swells, I suppose, who come hanging round stage-doors to tempt hard-working respectable women away from their lawful husbands! But it won't do. I tell you it won't do!'

I pushed him aside with one vigorous thrust and went up the court, followed by the outraged gentleman, who made no attempt to molest me except by a torrent of abusive eloquence, from which I gathered that he was the husband of one of the actresses at the theatre, and that she did not appreciate the virtues of her lord and master as he considered she ought, but that, nevertheless, he persisted

in affording her the protection of his manly arm, and would do so in spite of all the d–d 'mashers' in London.

At this point the stage-doorkeeper came out of his little box, and informed the angry gentleman that if he went on disgracing the place by his scandalous conduct his wife's services would be dispensed with; 'and if there's no money for her to earn, there'll be no beer for you to drink, Mr. Ellmer,' continued the little old man, with more point than politeness.

The threat had instant effect. Mr. Ellmer subsided into indignant mumbling, and went down the court again.

I had forgotten myself in interest at the rout of Mr. Ellmer, to whom I had taken a rabid dislike, and was standing in the full, if feeble light of the gas over the stage-door, when an inner door was thrust open, and the next moment Fabian Scott was shaking my hand heartily.

'Hallo, Harry! I am glad to see you again. I was afraid you were going away without a word to your old friends; but you were always better than your reputation. Got over your accident all right —eh?'

'As well as could be expected, I suppose. I start for Germany to-morrow.'

'Ah!' By this one exclamation he signified that he understood the case, and knew that my mind was definitely made up. Actors are men of the world, and I felt the relief of talking to him after the stolid and obstinate misapprehension with which dear old Edgar persisted in meeting my reasons for saying good-bye to society. 'It was good of you not to go without coming here,' he went on, appreciating the fact that my visit must have entailed an effort.

'To tell the truth, I meant to see you without your seeing me; but I got interested in a moral victory just obtained by your doorkeeper over an eloquent visitor, and so you caught me.'

Scott glanced at the swaggering Ellmer.

'Drunken brute!' said he, with much disgust. 'His wife—a hard-working little woman, who acts under the name of Miss Bailey—has had to bring her child to the theatre with her to-night, for fear he should get home before her and frighten the poor little thing. Look! here they come. One wonders how a wild beast can be the father of an angel.'

Scott was an ardent worshipper of beauty; but I, a cooler mortal, could not think his raptures excessive when he stood aside to make way for a slim, pale, pretty woman, to whose hand there clung a child so beautiful that my whole heart revolted at the thought that the tipsy ruffian a few paces off was her father. Both mother and child were shabbily dressed, in clothes which gave one the idea that November had overtaken them before they could afford to replace the garments of July. The little one was about eight years old, a slender creature with a flower-like face, round which, from under a home-made red velvet cap, her light-brown hair fell in a naturally curly tangle. Something in her blue eyes reminded me of the childlike charm of Helen's. Scott stopped them to say good-night, effusively addressing the child as his little sweetheart, and telling her that if the boy who gave her an apple last Sunday gave her another the next day, he should find out where he lived and murder that boy.

'Beware, Babiole, of arousing the jealousy of a desperate man,' he ended, folding his arms and tossing back his head.

The child took his outburst quite seriously.

'If he offers me another apple I must take it,' she answered in a sweet demure little voice. 'It would be rude to refuse. But you needn't be angry, for I can like you too.'

'Like me *too*!' thundered Scott, with melodramatic gestures. 'Heaven and earth! This is how the girl dares to trifle with the fiercest passion that ever surged in a human breast!'

'If you're fierce I shan't like you,' said the little one, in her measured way. 'Papa's fierce, and he frightens me and mamma.'

'Will you like me, little madam?' I ventured; and, knowing that my disfigured face was well concealed, I held out my hand. 'I will love you very gently.'

I made my voice as soft as I could, but the deep tones or the sombre black figure frightened her. The quaint matronly demeanour suddenly gave way to a child's fright, and she hid her face in the folds of her mother's black cloth jacket. Then mamma began to rebuke in a voice and manner oddly like the child's; and Fabian seized Babiole and lifted her up to kiss her.

'And now will you give me a kiss?' said he to her.

'Yes, Mr. Scott.' She gave him a kiss with the same demure simplicity.

'And will you promise to kiss nobody but me till you see me again?'

'Really, Mr. Scott,' interrupted the mother rather tartly, 'you shouldn't put such ideas into the child's head. They'll come quite soon enough of their own accord.'

She had one eye upon her husband, who was waiting farther down the court; and the wifely desire to be 'at him' seemed to put a little extra vinegar into her tone. With a hasty good-night to Fabian, and a frosty little bow to the unknown black figure, she said, 'Come, Babiole,' and hurried away with the child.

Scott put his arm through mine, and we followed them slowly back into the Strand, where, amidst the throng of people who had just poured out of the theatres, we soon lost sight of them. We did not go far together, for Fabian had an appointment to supper; but before we parted, he, more ready-witted than Edgar, had talked me into a promise that, when the summer came round and he had a chance of a holiday, I would let him know where I was, that he might invite himself to come and see me.

'You don't think I shall come back among you again, then?' I said curiously.

'I don't know. The taste for wandering, like all other tastes, grows with indulgence. Good-bye, Harry, and God bless you whereever you go.'

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.