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TEMPTED TO MURDER.

IF I were to tell you that you are a potential murderer, you would not even be angry with me—you would simply smile at such an absolutely preposterous notion. And so, in the face of such an accusation, should I have smiled—once upon a time.

Judge for yourself if I should not have had the right to smile. My name, by the way, is Alfred Lambourn, and I consider my name as of some consequence to my argument, because I happen to be one of a family which can carry back its history for an exceptional number of generations, and without being able to name a single member of it who was not perfectly respectable and perfectly sane—not taking into account a certain hereditary tendency to let ourselves be imposed on and our money slip unaccountably through our fingers in the most contented manner.

My friend was Sir Reginald Gervase—of course you must allow just as much accuracy to my proper names as you please. He had one of the largest estates in Fomshire, and lived mostly at St. Moor's, a splendid place near Spendrith, which is on the wildest and rockiest part of that grand and magnificent coast, as all the world knows. My description of him is short—he was, literally, the best and finest fellow in the whole world. Were Lady Gervase writing this story, I have no doubt she would say a great deal more of him; mine must be a man's praise of a man. He had not a single fault that I could ever discover, and yet was as far from being a prig as the South is from the North Pole. He was nearly my match—which is saying something—in point of chest and biceps, and infinitely more than mine, or most men's, in brains; and his heart was larger still. I sometimes used to think it his single misfortune that he was so rich and so happy and so full of sense of all the duties that his birthright had thrown upon him. Had the fortune left him the struggling barrister that he was when I first met him in London, he would have made himself a great man, instead of merely growing into something much greater. For he had by no means been born to a Baronetcy and the ownership of St. Moor's. He unexpectedly inherited it from a cousin of about his own age, and apparently as strong and as healthy as himself, who had been struck down by death when hardly thirty years old. It was a change to turn most men's brains, and to send half of them to the devil. Sir Reginald took his wealth and his position with less elation than he had taken his first brief, went abroad for a while, and then came back to settle down for good at St. Moor's. The first thing he did—which was in an hour or two—was to become first favorite of the whole country, and that among his poorer, even more than among his richer, neighbors. The next was to send for me, then managing clerk to a London firm, to be his friend and counselor. The next was to marry as wisely as man ever did in this world. He had fallen over head and ears in love with the best girl in all England, and she with him. Before long they had a family of two boys and two girls, and were fortunate in them all. The eldest was called Reginald, of course, being a first-born Gervase. The next was called Marion, after her mother. Then came my own god-son, Alfred, and then Nora. Their names have nothing to do in the matter, but it is pleasant for myself to write them. It is hardly more to the purpose than to say that I, too, was on

the eve of marriage, after a long and weary waiting, but this, too, I like to tell, because this also was due to the position in which Sir Reginald had placed me. What did I not owe to him?

For two months every summer St. Moor's was left empty while the master and mistress were in town, for they were by no means people who looked upon rusting and falling out of the great world's stream as one of the duties of those who have to do their best with the course of a comparatively small one. Though I missed them I approved of their absence, for I could not get rid of my ambition for my friend; it would be something if, as member of Fomshire, he could have the chance of doing for England some little of what he was doing for one of her remoter corners. One warm afternoon, while they were away in town, I was engaged alone in my office with some drainage plans, half at work upon them, and half thinking about what I could do, in the face of an approaching election, to get Sir Reginald Gervase to stand for Fomshire. It was too hot to work very desperately after an early dinner; and I am afraid I must confess that the rich blue of the sky without, the soft wind that scarcely took the trouble to carry the weight of its own scent through the window, the caw of the rooks on their way home, and the regular heave and rush of the sea against the wall of rocks close by united to set me dreaming of anything but of drains. I was myself in love, remember, and Venus came from the sea much on such an afternoon.

I had a clerk in the outer office, who was also in love, and whom I strangely suspect of having been sleeping, too. Our office was certainly not conducted on the ordinary principles of hurry and open eyes—a client from the outside world did not call once a quarter, and was not particular welcome when he came. At any rate, Tom Brooks looked as if he was still dreaming when he stumbled into my own room and startled me with—

"A strange lady, Sir; and to see you."

It is hard to wake up all at once. For a moment I almost took for granted that it could be no one but my Lottie, who had managed to fly through the window all the way from Newcastle-upon-Tyne, at the other end of the Kingdom; what other lady, a stranger to Tom Brooks, could want to see me? But a moment more told me the absurdity of such a fancy; so I stretched myself, rubbed my eyes, and said sharply, "Then wake up and show her in."

She came in with a silky rustle; and I had certainly never seen her before. She Lottie, indeed! I never can guess a woman's age, so I must content myself with saying that my visitor could not possibly have been more than thirty-six or less than twenty years old. She was of a moderate height and graceful figure, and was dressed much more fashionably than we were used to round Spendrith. Her face was a pretty one, on the whole, clear complexioned, fair, and brightly-colored; but her mouth was, at the same time, too small and too full, her nose too long, and her dark eyes a very great deal too large, as well as being too closely set together. Still, the general effect was decidedly good, and had to be called pretty, whatever else it might be called, and however much it differed from my own two standards of beauty—Lottie Vane and Lady Gervase. My visitor looked grave and sad by nature, as if she had a story, and that an interesting one. I showed her a seat, and she sat down.

"You are Mr. Lambourn, and you are a lawyer?" she asked in a voice that made her prettiness suddenly change into something more. It was a clear, liquid voice, with some sort of special accent in it, and a kind of singing quality about her first words.

"My name is Lambourn, and I am a solicitor. You call on business, I suppose? Whom have I the honor—"

She opened a mother-of-pearl case and handed me a card—"Adrienne Lavalle." "I come to ask your advice," said she. The name looked French; and yet, though she did not speak quite like an Englishwoman, her accent was by no means distinctly that of a foreigner. Who could she be, that she came for

legal advice to Spendrith? It is true that if anybody does happen to be suddenly in want of legal advice at Spendrith, he is bound to come to me.

I bowed and waited, and she went on.

"I am told that you are able and honest," she said, "and, therefore, I come to you. You asked my name, and I gave you my card. It is one of my names, the name by which I am known. I have one more. My birth-name is Ray—Juliet Ray. Did you ever hear the name before?"

"Never in my life," said I.

"Then, before I tell you more, may I ask if you are prepared to undertake, as a lawyer and a gentleman, the cause of a woman against the most cruel wrong that ever was done by a man? A cause that will give you honor and glory throughout the land?"

"Never mind the honor and glory," said I. "The question is, whether I could find the time and spare the pains. Of course, I shall be glad to help to get justice done, just for the sake of the thing, lawyer though I am. But I must hear the story first—"

"You shall hear it; and you shall hear why I come to Spendrith for a lawyer. I did not suppose you would know the name of Juliet Ray. But I had my reason for asking, all the same. I was born in London. I had a mother, Mr. Lambourn, but no other relative in the world. My mother was on the stage. I cannot tell you all, for I do not know; but we were in Paris when my mother died, and I was seventeen years old—without any means to live, but with the need to live you understand. Perhaps you find it hard to believe, but I was as innocent then as a young girl can be."

I let silence imply assent; but I was certainly beginning to wake up, and to call my professional wits together.

"It was in Paris that I met a young man—if I must call him so—who made love to me. I took him for a man of honor. He swore, Mr. Lambourn, a million times to make me his wife, in the sight of heaven and in the sight of man. In the sight of heaven he did make me his wife; and when we were soon after in London, he married me in church, as he should have done before. He is a scoundrel!"

"But if he married you at any time, he did his best to right you, it seems to me. Well?"

"I must not call him 'scoundrel' yet. Wait: see what you will call him, if you are a man! We went abroad again—to Paris, to Vienna, to twenty places—and then one day he left me, never to return."

"He deserted you? You did not hear from him again?"

"From him? No; never one word. Of him? No; not for many years! He left me to live as best I could, without the means, but with all the need, once more. Perhaps you will not find it hard to believe that I was no more as innocent a fool as at seventeen."

Again I let assent be implied in silence; as much I did not find it hard to believe.

"But I hear of him at last, and he is married again!"

"You mean that you wish your husband to be prosecuted for bigamy?"

"No, Mr. Lambourn. I mean that I will have my rights, and that I will have my revenge! That is what I mean!"

And I could see, beyond any question, that it was what she did mean. If her story was true, she had certainly been ill-used; but, all the same, I wished she had not come to me. I felt that, from the beginning, I had not liked Miss, or Mrs., Lavalle.

"I don't care about taking criminal matters," I said, rather coldly. "There are plenty of solicitors in the county. And if you want—since you speak of your rights—to make any sort of profitable compromise, I must decline your case on any terms. However, as you come for present advice, I suppose you can prove your marriage?"

"I can prove it as surely as that I live!" said she. "I have my lines. Will that do?"

"Certainly they will do. You will have to prove the second marriage, too—"

"He won't deny that," said she, with a smile. "And he won't deny that I

am I; and if he does, he can't deny that I was alive when his crime was committed; and if he does, there are scores and scores who will know. You ask me why I come to Spendrith? It is to make sure—to have him under my hand. I have not found him out and tracked him down to let him go again. And I come to you because you are here; because you can watch for me. When I have my rights, you will have yours too, never fear."

So she had set down my reluctance to undertake her case to a fear of not being sufficiently well paid? If I had not much liked her before, I liked her exceedingly little now. And who at Spendrith could possibly have been guilty of bigamy, and of deserting a wife abroad? I knew every living creature in the place—there was not one whom I could connect in the wildest fancy with Mrs. Lavalle.

"Who is the man you say is your husband?" asked I.

I suppose she thought that her last words had refreshed my interest in her.

"The scoundrel who is my husband?" said she. "There!"

A little theatrically she laid a document before me. It was a perfectly good and authentic copy of a register of marriage solemnized at a London church between Juliet Ray, spinster, and—Reginald Gervase!

My eyes seemed to darken and swim. What could it mean? As she sat there, triumphant in her coming vengeance or in her greed, I thought and thought; and the more I thought, the more clear the meaning grew. Some months before the date of the marriage my friend had been in Paris, I knew. Just before the same date he had returned to town. And then there was his long subsequent absence abroad for nearly a whole year. But, still, was Reginald Gervase, who held duty even above honor—if such a thing can be—a man who, under any circumstances, would, when he found himself suddenly rich and in a high position before the world, rid himself of any woman—whether his wife or not, and even if he had learned to hate and scorn her—by leaving her to starve? No doubt she must have been false to him first. But even so, the pride of my own life had gone; every illusion I had darkened at such a shadow as this must be. Perhaps he had thought her dead. But no, that could not be, unless he had willed very hard indeed to think her so.

"Leave me this paper," said I. "Call on me again to-morrow at ten; I will think over what you have told me. Excuse me now."

"You will undertake the case, then?" "I will try to do whatever is for the best, Miss Lavalle."

"Who is Miss Lavalle?" asked she, as she left me. "I am Lady Gervase."

I locked the copy of the register in a safe, where I kept my own private personal papers, shut up my office, and went out to walk myself cool. I had met with a skeleton from St. Moor's, indeed! I could see the whole miserable history as if it had been written out for me. The young barrister had made a fool of himself, as many otherwise wise men have done. He had been entrapped by this woman in Paris. Perhaps the pitifulness of her unprotected condition had imposed upon him quite as much as her bright cheeks and her great black eyes. She had stuck to him and drawn him into marriage; no doubt his sense of honor had helped her, however much his reason must have opposed her. It was she, no doubt, who had swallowed up the whole of his little fortune and kept him under water. It was she who had been the cause of those long vacations in Paris, which he used to make even during his term time. And then, when fortune came to him, he had gone abroad to hide what had, no doubt, proved a disgraceful marriage. And then, no less beyond doubt, he had discovered unfaithfulness in her and had left her, half ashamed, half relieved, as such a man would have left such a woman, simply, utterly, and without a word of blame. And then true love had come into his heart. Perhaps he really believed his first wife dead. Perhaps the belief was too much due to the wish—who knows? It was not for me to judge Reginald Gervase. I knew the man as he was, whatever he had done,

however weak he might have shown himself in one thing.

And what was I to do? Nothing? Nothing? When I and I only realized the nature of the blow that was about to fall? On the one hand, there was the true Reginald Gervase, my more than friend, brother and father, who had plainly been able to free himself of the old shadow, trusted, honored, loved by all the world, whose whole life was a growth in goodness and usefulness, and whose loss would be public as well as private, and felt, none could guess how far round his home. There was the wife, who believed in him as a hero, and who loved him with her whole heart and soul. There were his young children—what need I say of them? On the other hand, there was ruin, scandal, the dock, the prison cell, a wife's broken heart, and four children's lives blasted for all their days; and only because a worthless woman had not died. The thing looked too hideous to be possible; and I dreamed of such a word as—nothing! Well, thank God that he was not at St. Moor's. Every day delayed was a day gained, if only for thinking what could be done.

I was walking along the narrow coast-guard path overhanging the sea, which was the shortest cut from Spendrith to the nearest market town, when I was met by a lad who acted as rural postman, and who stopped me with a letter. I took it with scarcely a word of good evening, and opened it absently.

"Dear Lambourn!"—I read without even taking heed of the handwriting—One line in haste to say that we shall all be home to-morrow evening, almost as soon as this reaches you. Everything's all right, but Jenny would rather be safe at home just now, and so would I. Look me up for a week, there's a good fellow, about nine, and we'll have a good big talk about the drains. I feel like a school-boy off for the holidays. R. G."

It was like destiny. He and his wife—yes, I would still her so—were hurrying back full sail into the storm. I knew what their coming back sooner than usual meant; it was one of Gervase's crotchets that all his children should be of Fomshire, and of their home bred and born. Well, that made matters worse a thousand times. He was coming where that woman—I could not call her his wife—was waiting to lay hands upon him and to destroy him more terribly than even she could dream. I was not to see her again till the next day, and I did not know where she was to be found. I suppose I had acted stupidly; but it is hard to keep one's presence of mind where one's heart is concerned too deeply. How could I meet Gervase this very night with this terrible secret upon me? I could not. And yet what right had I to leave him in his fool's paradise for a single avoidable hour? I tried to ask myself what I should have done had I been simply his lawyer instead of his friend. And I could find no answer. It seemed strange that the thunder of the sea, as it rose higher and higher with the advancing tide against the cliffs, did not change its tone.

The letter-carrier could not have left me many minutes—long as they seemed—when he came running back breathlessly, shouting and pointing behind him with his arm.

"Mr. Lambourn!" he panted out, "there be some un down yonder on the Carricks as lone as lone, and not half an hour o' tide!"

I was startled out of such thoughts as even mine. I knew every inch of that coast as well as if I had been a smuggler of the old times, and nobody who knows the cliffs about Spendrith needs telling what being alone on the Carricks means within even an hour of high tide. The Carricks are a point of rather low rocks, projecting something like the blade of a scythe, or rather like the pointed ram of an ancient galley, from the base of the cliff, easily to be reached within about two hours of the highest tide; but, after that time, breaking the calmest sea into a rage, and entirely cut off from above or below. At absolutely full tide the most shoreward of these rocks was a full two fathom under high-water line. The cliff, itself a promontory, rose up sheer from the rocks for some distance, then bowed out over them, and then finished its course of some hundred and fifty feet to the overhanging path on which I was standing. All these meant,