

Conscience Makes Cowards

I.
It was bitterly cold. Gladys Kennet shivered in the damp of the early morning as she paced up and down the empty street. A white mist lay over London. Under it the houses were for the most part silent still, with close-shut doors and windows. But some of them were beginning to stir. Men's carts were busy rattling up and down the streets now and workmen were hurrying to catch trains and trams. Life was commencing again after the sleep of the night, and presently the great wide doors of the prison would open to let out into life again some who had been almost as good as dead.

Gladys stopped and peered down the courtyard. A little, strange-looking group was beginning to collect—ragged women they were for the most part, all shivering in the damp cold of the morning—women very different to her, even though she was plainly dressed—women to whom there was nothing strange in waiting outside prison doors!

Something that was more than the mist struck her with a cold chill. She was like them—like these wretched women who waited! She too was waiting for a criminal to come out—she too—Gladys Kennet, of Grangeands Court, waiting just as they were!

She was plainly dressed, yet her navy-blue coat and her red hat bore an unmistakable impress. She walked slowly up the street and then back. When she reached the gates again the little crowd seemed larger. She would not be a coward! She would not shrink now! The time was over; she had come thus far; she had waited in silence and patience for this morning, and now she must be true and brave!

The doors were thrown open suddenly and a small crowd of men came out, straggling in ones and twos and threes—men with hang-dog airs, with bent heads, or else with bold faces and defiant eyes, and head carried high.

There was a rush towards them. Gladys hung back for a moment and then she too darted forward.

One had come out very differently to the rest. He stood against the gateway for a moment looking out with strange, dazed eyes at a world he seemed scarcely to recognise. He passed his hand across his face and looked again, and at that moment Gladys caught his arm.

He looked down with a great start of surprise. "Gladys—you!" Her breath was choking in her throat. "Oh, Eric! Oh, thank Heaven, Eric—at last!" He looked down at her hungrily for a moment, and then, as if realizing where and what he was, he began to unloosen her fingers from his arm.

"What brings you here?" he asked. "You ought not to have come—you ought never to have come. It only makes things worse—" "Eric—Eric, don't say those things to me," she cried. "Oh, my dearest, you knew I should wait—I told you so—I told them all so, and I do not mean to desert you now. And you can't desert me after I have waited so, Eric!"

She had forgotten everything but him. She was looking up wildly into his white, changed face and her heart was beating for him just as it had beaten nearly three years ago before they had taken him away. The little crowd had dispersed. They were out in the broad road, walking down slowly towards the noisy thoroughfare and the open shops. "Eric, you could not believe I should ever let you go?" she was saying. "Oh, you know I believed you innocent, and always shall."

"Yes—oh, my darling, I was found guilty, and it doesn't matter what anybody believes now. I have been punished. I have done my three years just as if I had been guilty. Oh, Gladys, they called me guilty, and what does it matter even what you believe now? They have branded me—shut me up with thieves and criminals. Oh, Gladys, nothing matters but that."

She tightened her fingers on his arm. "It does matter," she said, in a low voice. "Eric, dear, it matters everything. I believe you innocent; I know you never committed the forgery, and I am going to marry you." He started. "Gladys—"

Her small face was white and set. "I know what it will mean, dear," she said, "but I am prepared. You know I have some money that my mother left me. It will be enough for us to start in business with somewhere, and uncle can do what he likes. He was cruel to you—oh, he was horribly hard on us both, and I am going to marry you—at once, Eric, darling."

He stood still in the middle of the road and looked down at her. "But—" he stammered. "I thought—Sydney said—that you and he—"

She stamped her foot. "It is not true—it is not true," she cried, passionately. "I would not marry him to save my life. I would not marry him for a fortune."

"But, Gladys, it would be better. He is getting on. Your uncle thinks the world of him. He is his right hand, and I—"

"Eric, don't—don't! It has all

been dinned into my ears for three years, and it has made no difference. I can't marry Sydney. Uncle has bribed me with everything he can think of. He is going to make him a partner and goodness knows what else. But it is you I love—you I love, and you I am going to marry—and soon, Eric, dear."

II.

The great business house of Sir William Kennet and Co. was humming like a hive. The morning was in full swing. Clerks were rushing to and fro, bells ringing, lifts rattling up and down. In the outer offices an army of clerks was hard at work. Sir William himself was in the thick of business, and amongst all those five or six hundred people only one man sat inert and listless.

He was a young man with a dark, keen face, that just now looked drawn and haggard. He was bending over his desk, doing nothing except stare at a sheet of note-paper which he held in his hand. Round him, on every side, were letters waiting to be attended to. Twice a clerk had come to him with note-book and pencil, and twice Sydney Devereux had sent him away to wait.

He could not dictate letters yet. He could do nothing. He wanted to think.

He stared at the paper and read the words over again:—

"Eric Chesterton was released this morning. Was met by a pretty girl in navy-blue clothes and red hat. They drove away together in a hansom."

Sydney's brows contracted. A very ugly look darkened his rather handsome face.

"Bah! If he is out, what then? And the girl—it could not have been Gladys—it could not have been."

He got up hastily and, crossing the room, opened a door which led into Sir William's private room. Sir William was alone, and looked up sharply as Sydney came in.

"Ah, Sydney!" he said. "Anything urgent?"

Sydney hesitated.

"I think I must have left a memorandum behind in your safe at your house last night," he said, a little huskily, at last. "I had better go and get it before I do anything else, for, you remember, there is a meeting at twelve."

"To be sure," Sir William pulled his keys from his pocket. "You are sure you put it back in my safe?" he asked. "Well, it ought to be there. I don't do business out of office hours my boy. Gladys is always grumbling at me about it—says I ought not to go into accounts with my dessert, and insists on sitting with me while I eat my nuts, just to see I don't do it. When she is your wife, Sydney, you must let her keep that up. It's a bad thing to carry business home. Well, go and get the paper."

He handed the keys to Sydney, who turned and crossed the room slowly.

"By the way, Sydney," Sir William said, suddenly, "you'll see Gladys, no doubt. Tell her to expect you to dinner to-night. If you can come I'll take someone home with me to make a fourth, and then—then, perhaps, Sydney, my boy, you and she can settle things. I want you married. Speak to her and arrange it to-night. She knows my wishes, and you ought to have no difficulty now."

Sydney's throat was dry. "Did you know," he asked, abruptly, "that Eric Chesterton was to come out this morning?"

Sir William looked up with a little start. "Why, no," he cried. "Are you sure of it?"

Sydney nodded, and Sir William sank back in his seat with a frown between his brows, which cleared quickly after a minute.

"Well, she won't be such a fool as to think of that fellow now," he said, sharply. "She must have had her lesson, and I was emphatic enough. A forger! Good heavens, Sydney, I can't understand women. How could she make excuses and stick to a man who had sullied his honor as Eric Chesterton had done? Why do women stick to blackguards as they do, Sydney? I can't understand them. I'd give Eric twenty years if I could, just as I'd give twenty years to any man who stole in the shameful way he did."

"But"—Sydney's voice came strained and husky—"but who knows what temptation he may have had?" he said.

"Bah!" broke in Sir William. "I've heard you say that before, but temptation is no excuse for a man. It is no excuse for thieving as Chesterton did. Gladys calls me hard, but of all sins a man can commit forgery is to me least worthy of forgiveness. It is the coldest-blooded of crimes. A man may do something desperate in a moment of passion—something for which he may not be quite responsible—but in order to forge he has to sit down and think and plan and wait. It is a deliberate, cold-blooded, crime, and how anyone could forgive it I don't understand, and Gladys least of all. She believed him innocent, of course; but—speak to her again to-night. Her obstinacy is beginning to try my temper, and I'll guarantee that she says 'yes' to you when you ask her to become your wife."

His mind was made up about Eric Chesterton, who had forged his name to a cheque three years ago; and about Sydney Devereux, who, he was convinced, was the best husband possible for his niece Gladys. That she did not fall in love to his order and throw up the thief and forger, Eric Chesterton, was so astonishing that all his mind and will were bent on

securing his wish. He resolved to spare nothing to make her yield. It was the first time that anyone had opposed him for years, and it roused all his fierce determination. She should marry Sydney Devereux or suffer for it.

At the door Sydney looked back for an instant and then slowly went out—back to his own office. He rang a bell, gave some orders as to what was to be done during his absence, and then, slipping into an overcoat, went out into the yard behind the great building where Sir William's motor stood. The chauffeur was nowhere to be seen. Sydney looked round, and then suddenly got into the car. He would drive himself. He could not stay—could not wait.

Sydney shot out into the open street. It was thick with traffic. The morning was in full swing by now, and the city was full—throbbing with business life.

Sydney ran away from it all—down from the city, through the crowded streets, out into the open. Hyde Park Corner ran past him, and the park, green and bright lay on his right. He looked towards it dully, remembering in a queer way the morning rides he had had with Gladys during the past two or three years. He had done wonderful things in that time. His luck had been fabulous. He had got on by tremendous strides, and had risen from being an insignificant nobody into Sir William's personal friend.

His car turned the corner of Queens Gate sharply and ran down the wide street. He drew up before Sir William's house and got down. The man who opened the door knew him well enough, and Sydney ran in.

"Ask Miss Gladys if she will see me for a few minutes before I go," he said, as he turned into the library. "I shall not be long here."

"Miss Gladys is out, sir," said the man.

Sydney turned sharply. His face grew a little grey, and the words on the sheet of note-paper in his pocket grew suddenly clear before his eyes.

"Met by a girl in navy-blue—" "Do you know where she is?" he asked, sharply.

The man shook his head. "She left no message," he said.

"And when did she go out?" Sydney asked, huskily.

"That I can't say, sir. Before breakfast, I think, sir."

Sydney turned away. In the library before him he fumbled for a minute with Sir William's keys. What need to go through the farce of examining the safe? There was nothing there he wanted.

The butler met him in the hall. "Any message for Miss Gladys, sir?" he asked.

Sydney shook his head. "No," he said.

III.

Once more his hand was on the wheel of the car, and once more it was throbbing under him. At the top of the road he turned into Kensington Gardens and shot forward between lines of smooth green grass.

He sat staring straight ahead. He shot past the Albert Memorial, out through the gates, across the road, and into the park.

The gardens had been full, but the road seemed empty now. The long line of Rotten Row was deserted. In his left the Serpentine lay like a broad streak of silver between the trees. He slackened speed a little, and crawled along the road trying to steady his thoughts and the heat of his heart. Why was there that uncomfortable feeling upon him—that queer, cold fear that had nearly undone three years ago?

He looked round at the great park. There was no one in sight that morning. His car approached the corner, and there suddenly a small splash of color against the brown of the road caught his eye.

On a chair under the trees was a girl with a red hat!

The car shot forward sharply under his nervous grasp and then slowed down again. His hard grey eyes stared blindly at the girl under the trees, and then his heart gave a throb.

Oh might have known. He might have understood the meaning of the cold fear that was upon him if he

had not been a fool. He might have known after all those years that Gladys was loyal and faithful and true to the man she loved.

And she was with him now! The second figure under the trees grew suddenly clear to him. They were looking into each other's faces; both were alight, both were blind to everything and everyone else.

But suddenly Gladys caught sight of him and sprang to her feet. "Eric—Eric—here is Sydney!" she cried. "Let us tell him now."

She ran out waving her hand. Sydney stopped the car mechanically. "Sydney—Sydney, here is Eric!" she cried, breathlessly. "He has come home. Come and speak to him."

For a moment Sydney struggled. The last drop of blood died from his face. Speak to him—the thief, the forger, the man who had just finished "serving time"—how could he speak to him?

His attitude was strange for an honest, worthy, upright man, as Sir William had called him. Guilt, shame, and bitter hatred drew his face into hard lines. Gladys's happy eyes beamed upon him. If she knew—Heaven help him! If she could see into his heart, what would her eyes look like then?

His shaking hand turned the driving-wheel. The car shot forward sharply. He pulled the speed-lever, sounded the horn, and dashed abruptly away up the road out into the wide, open space about Hyde Park Corner.

What happened there he did not know. The traffic was busy; cabs and carriages, buses, wagons rolled past him, but he saw none of them. There was a confused noise in his ears, but above all he heard Gladys's clear voice, with the glad sound in it, "Eric has come home," and he saw nothing—nothing but her bright, happy eyes beneath her red hat.

The warning shout he did not hear. The running policeman he did not see. The broad gateway seemed to have vanished into air as he dashed towards it. Hyde Park Corner seemed empty—empty—desolate as his own life.

He turned the lever sharply. The car, like a living thing, sprang forward. As it dashed into the stone-work he threw up his hands with a cry.

"An hour at most," said the doctor. "He cannot live longer than that. If there is anyone he ought to see they should be fetched at once."

Gladys put up her hand to her shaking lips and then turned to Eric who stood beside her. They had seen the car dash forward and had followed it; and it was Eric who went now and fetched Sir William—Eric the forger!

Sydney lay very still. The hard, keen look had gone from his face. He had forgotten Gladys and the happiness in her eyes; but suddenly it came back. She was sitting beside him—there, close to him, and she was crying.

He stared at her and then all remembrance came back. His face changed abruptly. He drew a painful breath and tried to turn.

At the same instant Sir William Kennet came in. Sydney was looking at Gladys.

"Forgive—if you can," he said, in a feeble voice. "I loved you so—from the very first; and I hated Eric because of you—that was why I planned his ruin—why I forged the cheque."

"You!" The word came like a cry from Gladys's and Sir William's lips.

"You!" Sir William repeated. "The son of my old friend!"

The dying man did not move. "That was why," he went on, slowly. "I put it in Eric's desk—the cheque—where it would be found—it got him out of the way—it got him out of the way—but it was no good—she did not care—you, I mean, did not care—I might have known—ah, Gladys, forgive!"

She rose to her feet. Forgive? Forgive the shame and disgrace? Eric's bitter pain? Forgive the deed that had branded him a forger and a thief? How could she?

She turned away. The face of Eric

on the other side of the room met her eyes. She went up to him and put out her hands with a sob.

Eric's whisper was heard only by her. "We must forgive him—he is dying," he said.

A day or two later on every wall in Sir William Kennet's business house was posted the following announcement:—

"Sir William Kennet, having received proofs of the innocence of Eric Chesterton of the forgery with which he was charged, has decided to appoint him manager in place of the late Sydney Devereux, which position he would have occupied had it not been for this most unfortunate mistake. Sir William feels that the regrets and congratulations of the whole house will be with Mr. Chesterton on his return."

And when Sir William drove up in his motor-car with Eric at his side, the five or six hundred employes were crowding doors and passages to welcome him.

Both Eric and Sir William were a little white when they reached their rooms, and Sir William held out his hand.

"Now for a fresh start," he said.—London Tit-Bits.

PERSONAL POINTERS.
Interesting Gossip About Some Prominent People.

President Loubet, of France, was born with a passion for music. He has composed several oratorios, and is an excellent performer on the piano.

An early incident in Lord Wolseley's career was characteristic of the spirit of the man. At the end of 1854, in recognition of his services in the Crimean War, he was gazetted captain. When it was gazetted, however, that Wolseley was covered, however, that Wolseley was little more than twenty-one years old, the captaincy was cancelled. But the young man protested so vigorously against this injustice that the cancellation itself was cancelled and the captaincy restored.

The Empress Eugenie is devoted to flowers and personally superintends her garden, both at Farnborough at the Villa Cynos, her house near Cap Martin, which is famed for its roses. Armed with a pair of scissors, her hands protected by garden gloves, the Empress busies herself about her rose trees, pruning undesirable shoots and getting rid of withered leaves. Her Majesty is very popular in the neighborhood of Farnborough, where her great kindness has endeared her to everyone.

Herr Wilhelm Backhaus, the young German pianist, has won the Rubinstein prize of 5,000 fr., founded to proclaim "the finest pianist in the world." The competition took place in Paris, and there were thirty-six competitors from all parts of Europe. When Backhaus finished playing the Rubinstein Concerto both orchestra and listeners—in defiance of the traditions of such competitions—burst into a tumult of applause. He is just over twenty-one—five years below the age limit for the Rubinstein prize.

The Kaiser puts in twelve hours of work a day; he knows something about engineering and electricity; he can paint a picture and make a caricature; he can cook as well as eat; he leads in prayer and conducts a choir; he changes his dress twelve times a day and has \$500,000 worth of clothes; he bears a hundred titles and is an Admiral in three of the biggest navies; he does a hundred different things and does each one nearly as well as does the expert in that particular line—certainly a Royal Jack of all trades.

The young Crown Princess of Germany is rapidly becoming the leader of fashion in Berlin. She has set a new custom, which is becoming extremely popular. While walking she almost invariably carries a dainty, rather long, walking-stick with a gold top and ornamented with a silken bow. Her Royal Highness has a large collection of sticks, from which she is able to select one to suit any costume that she may be wearing. One very handsome mauve colored stick is finished off at the top with a fat crystal button, and bears her initials in rubies.

A good story concerning the King of the Belgians is told by a French contemporary. A few years ago King Leopold noticed at an art exhibition a small painting representing a flock of sheep in a field at sunset time. When the King expressed a wish to buy the picture and asked the price, the artist put on a guileless look and said:—"Supposing your Majesty paid for my sheep at the butcher's value, 50 fr. apiece?" The King glanced at the canvas, muttered, "Ten or twelve sheep . . . for 500 fr. to 600 fr. . . not too much for the picture," and the bargain was concluded. Three days later the painter took his canvas to the castle at Laeken. When the counting of the sheep began the artist pointed to a number of white dots in the background, and said, gravely, "Don't forget those. There are at least a thousand." "But isn't that just dust?" King Leopold asked anxiously. "No, sire; those are sheep." "On your word of honor?" "On my word of honor." And thus the King of the Belgians, whose leaning towards strict economy is well known, paid 50,000 fr. for a painting which would have been well paid for by 15,000 fr.



THE CZAR'S NEXT STEP.
Clear Out!