

The Evil Shepherd

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Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

They passed into the tea-shop and found an empty corner. Ledsam hung up his hat and gave an order. The woman slowly began to remove her gloves. When she pushed back her veil, her vis-a-vis received almost a shock. She was quite as good-looking as he had imagined, but she was far younger--she was indeed little more than a girl. Her eyes were of a deep shade of hazel brown, her eyebrows were delicately marked, her features and poise admirable. Yet her skin was entirely colourless. She was as pale as one whose eyes have been closed in death. Her lips, although in no way highly coloured, were like streaks of scarlet blossom upon a marble image. The contrast between her appearance and that of her companion was curiously marked. Francis Ledsam conformed in no way to the accepted physical type of his profession. He was over six feet in height, broad-shouldered and powerfully made. His features were cast in a large mould, he was of fair, almost sandy complexion, even his mouth was more humourous than incisive. His eyes alone, grey and exceedingly magnetic, suggested the gifts which without a doubt lay behind his massive forehead.

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

"It is," he admitted.

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

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

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

Ledsam raised his eyebrows.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 2

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

"So you've brought it off again, Francis!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"I won it," Francis admitted.

"Your defence was the most ingenious thing I ever heard."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"You're dotty, Francis," his friend declared shortly.

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

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

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

"A stranger?"

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

Wilmore lit a cigarette.

"Believe her?"

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

Wilmore nodded.

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

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

"And you wouldn't now--to-morrow, say?"

"Never again."

"Because of that woman's story?"

"Because of the woman."

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

"What sort of a person was she?"

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

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

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

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

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

Andrew Wilmore studied his friend thoughtfully.

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

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

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

"We won't do anything of the sort," Wilmore insisted. "There's scarcely a soul in to-night, and the place is too humpy for a man who's been seeing spooks. Get back to your rooms and change. I'll wait here."

"What about you?"

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

Francis hesitated.

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

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

Chapter 3

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

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

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

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

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

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

"It was a very simple and straightforward case," Francis said slowly. "Oliver Hilditch is the principal partner in an American financial company which has recently opened offices in the West End. He seems to have arrived in England about two years ago, to

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