Short Stories by Marie Belloc Lowndes

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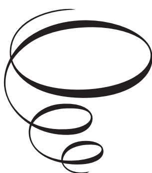
A Monstrous Regiment of Women

Edited by

Elyssa Warkentin

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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INTRODUCTORY NOTE

Marie Belloc Lowndes (1868-1947) was one of the most prolific and bestselling writers of her day, penning dozens of short stories, some forty-four novels, seven plays, four volumes of memoirs, several biographies, and an immense body of journalistic work, both signed and unsigned. Several of her novels were adapted for stage and, later, for film.[1] Her influence on British literary and journalistic production in the early twentieth century was substantial, but often invisible: she also mentored scores of aspiring women writers through the perils and pitfalls of what was considered, still, a somewhat indecorous career for women, and was deeply involved with the Society for Women Journalists, the Women Writers' Suffrage League, and the Society of Authors. With the sole exception of her famed 1913 novel *The Lodger*, however,[2] she remains largely unknown and out of print today.

Like many genre writers, Lowndes was never a critical favourite. Her work appealed more to the book-buying masses than to the gatekeepers of literary legitimacy: the reviewers and, later, the academics. Lowndes wrote crime fiction like her contemporary and sometime-rival Agatha Christie, but her focus was always on the psychological reasons for the crime—"why-dunnits," instead of "who-dunnits." Her stories were often overtly preoccupied with the so-called "Woman Question" that so concerned late nineteenth and early twentieth century public discourse: what is women's proper role in society, and in marriage? Lowndes returned to this theme obsessively in virtually all her writing, where criminality becomes a lens through which Lowndes explores women's deviance and the sometimes high price of conformity.

The short stories selected for this volume all participate in these discussions in one way or another. In each story, Lowndes returns to the question of what makes women "good," what social conditions make them vulnerable to crime, and what motivates them to commit "evil" deeds.

The thirteen short stories that follow have been selected from various periods in Lowndes's writing life and from varied publication venues and genres. They are presented chronologically, demonstrating the evolution of

[1] Including *The Lodger*, which became a young Alfred Hitchcock's third feature.

[2] Available in critical edition from Cambridge Scholars Publishing.

Lowndes's style and thematic interests. Some are true-crime stories, ripped from the headlines or from the history books. Others are entirely of her own invention: seemingly inexplicable murders made obvious through an incisive investigation of a woman's psyche. There are portraits of marriages, both happy and unhappy, of faithless husbands and duplicitous wives, of women without scruples and of women driven mad by conscience. In short, these are Lowndes's most popular, most characteristic, and most culturally and artistically significant works of short fiction.

Long after Lowndes's death, a critic wrote rather ambivalently, "Mrs. Belloc Lowndes was one of that monstrous regiment of writing women who flourished in Edwardian England and gave to that period something of its unique literary quality."[3] This collection allows Lowndes to take her rightful place with the important and celebrated writers of her day, leading her monstrous regiment out of the shadows of obscurity.

[3] "View from the tea table," *TLS* 17.9 (1971), 1180.

Chapter One

The Moving Finger Writes

This early story (also known by the alternate title of "Mr. Jarvice's Wife") was published in McClure's Magazine *in 1908. It touches upon many of Lowndes' career-long thematic obsessions: infidelity, sexual double-standards, the psychological motivations for crime, and the unexpected consequences of seemingly small moral lapses.*

* * * * *

I

"… and having writ,
Moves on; nor all your Piety nor Wit
Can lure it back to cancel half a Line.
Nor all your Tears wash out a word of it."[1]

"About that letter of your uncle's? I take it you have no one to suggest?"

Thomas Carden glanced anxiously at the son in whom he had so great a confidence, and who was the secret pride of his eyes, the only love of his austere, hard-working life.

The two were a great contrast to one another. The older man was short and slight, with the delicate, refined, spiritual face so often seen in that disappearing generation of Englishmen who found time to cultivate the things of the mind as well as the material interests of life; a contrast, indeed, to the tall, singularly handsome, alert-looking man whom he had just addressed, and whose perfect physical condition made him appear somewhat younger than his thirty-two years.

And yet, in spite or perhaps because of this contrast between them, the two were bound in the closest, if not exactly in the most confidential, ties of affection. And, as a matter of course, they were partners in the great metal-broking business of Josh, Carden, Thomas Carden and Son, which

[1] From *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam*, translated by Edward Fitzgerald (1859).

had been built up by three generations of astute, self-respecting citizens of Birmingham.

It was Easter Monday, and the two men were lingering over breakfast, in a way they seldom allowed themselves time to do on ordinary week-days, in the finely proportioned, book-lined dining room of one of those spacious old houses which remain to prove that the suburb of Edgbaston was still country a hundred years ago.

Theodore Carden looked across the table meditatively. He had almost forgotten his uncle's letter, for, since that letter had been read and cursorily discussed, he and his father had been talking of a matter infinitely more important to them both. The matter in question was the son's recent engagement and coming marriage, a marriage which was a source of true satisfaction to the older man. His father's unselfish joy in the good things which had befallen him touched Theodore Carden keenly, for the niche occupied in most men's minds by their intimate feminine circle was filled in that of the young man by the diminutive figure of the senior partner of Carden and Son.

As is perhaps more often the case than those who despise human nature believe, men sometimes have the grace to reverence and admire those qualities in which they know themselves to be deficient. Such a man was the younger Carden. To-day the depths had been stirred, and he let his mind dwell with a certain sense of shame and self-rebuke on his own and his father's ideals of human conduct. Even as a schoolboy, Theodore had come to realize how much more he knew of the ugly side of life than did his father. But then, old Mr. Carden was quite exceptional; he knew nothing—or so, at least, his son believed, and loved him for it—of the temptations, conflicts, victories, and falls of the average sensual man. Theodore's father had been engaged, at twenty, to a girl of his own age whom he had not been able to marry till twelve years later; she had left him a widower with this one child after five years of married life; and Thomas Carden, as he had himself once told his son in a moment of unwonted confidence, had been absolutely faithful to her before the marriage and since her death.

The woman—many people would have said the very fortunate young woman—who was so soon to become Mrs. Theodore Carden would not possess such a husband as Thomas Carden had been to his wife. And yet, in his heart, Theodore was well aware that the gentle girl he loved would probably be a happier woman than his own mother had been, for he, unlike his father, in his dealings with the other sex could call up at will that facile and yet rather rare gift of tenderness which women, so life had taught him, value far more than the deeper, inarticulate love…

Carden came back to the prosaic question of his uncle's letter with a distinct effort. "Have I anyone to suggest?" he echoed. "I have no one to suggest, father. I know, of course, exactly the sort of man Uncle Barrett is looking for; he's asking us to find him the perfect clerk every man of business has sought for at some time or other. If I were you, I should write and tell him that the man he wants us to find never has to look outside England for a job, and, what is more, would rather be a clerk here—if he's any sense—than a partner in New Zealand!"

A smile quivered for a moment over the young man's shrewd face; his uncle was evidently seeking such a man as he was himself, but such men, so Theodore Carden was able to tell himself without undue conceit, were not likely to go into voluntary exile, even for the bribe of eventual partnership in a flourishing business.

There was a pause, and then again the older man broke the silence with something entirely irrelevant to the subject which was filling the minds of his son and himself.

"You haven't looked at the *Post* this morning? There's nothing in it. Dearth of real news is, I suppose, responsible for this?" and he pointed, frowning as he spoke, to a column on the middle page headed, "The Garvice Mystery. New Developments."

Again a shrewd, good-humoured smile quivered on his son's firm mouth. "In these days newspapers have to follow, not lead, the public taste. Very few people are honestly as indifferent as you are, father, to that sort of story. Now, even I, who never met poor old Garvice, cannot help wondering how he came by his death; and yet you, who knew the man—"

"I knew him," said the other with a touch of impatience, "as I know, and as you know, dozens of our fellow-townsmen."

"Nevermind; you, at any rate, can put a face to the man's name; and yet the question as to whether he was or was not poisoned by his wife is one of indifference to you! Now I submit that in this indifference you are really a little—" he hesitated for a word, but found that none so well expressed his thought as that which had first risen to his lips—"peculiar, father."

"Am I?" said Thomas Carden slowly; "am I so, Theodore? Nay, nay, I deny that I am indifferent! Lane"—Major Lane was at that time Head Constable of Birmingham, and a lifelong friend of the speaker—"Lane was quite full of it last night. He insisted on telling me all the details of the affair, and what shocked me, my boy, was not so much the question which, of course, occupied Lane—that is, as to whether that unhappy young woman poisoned her husband or not—but the whole state of things which eh disclosed about them. Lane told me certain facts concerning

Garvice, who, as you truly say, I have known, in a sense, for years, which I should not have thought possible of any man—vile things, which should have prevented his thinking of marriage, especially marriage with a young wife."

Theodore Carden remained silent; he never discussed unsavoury subjects with his father. Moreover, he had no liking for Major Lane, though he regarded him with considerable respect, and even with a feeling of gratitude. Some years before, the Head Constable had helped the young man out of a serious scrape, the one real scrape—so Carden was complaisantly able to assure himself—engendered by his systematic pursuit of women. Even now he could not recall, without wincing, the interview he had had on that occasion with his father's friend. During that interview Carden had felt himself thoroughly condemned, and even despised, by the older man, and he had been made to feel that it was only for the sake of his father—his high-minded, unsuspicious father—that he was being saved from the public exposure of a peculiarly sordid divorce suit.

But it was in all sincerity that the young man now felt indignant with Major Lane for having distressed such a delicately spiritual soul as was Thomas Carden with the hidden details of the Garvice story. After all, what interested the public was not the question of Garvice's moral character, but whether a gently nurtured and attractive woman had carried through a sinister and ingenious crime, which, but for a mere accident, would have utterly defied detection.

Theodore Carden got up from the breakfast table and walked over to a circular bay-window which commanded charming views of the wide, sloping garden, interspersed with the streams and tiny ponds which gave the house its name of Watermead, and which enabled old Mr. Carden to indulge himself with especial ease in his hobby of water gardening.

Standing there, the young man began wondering what he should do with himself this early spring day. His fiancée had just left the quiet lodgings which she and her mother, a clergyman's widow, had occupied in Birmingham during the last few weeks, to pay visits to relatives in the South. The thought of going to any of the neighbouring houses, where he knew himself to be sure of a warm welcome, and where the news of his engagement would be received with boisterous congratulations, tempered in some cases with an underlying touch of regret and astonishment, filled him with repugnance. The girl he had chosen to be his wife was absolutely different from the women who had hitherto attracted him; he reverenced as well as loved her, and hitherto Theodore Carden had never found reverence to be in any sense a corollary of passion.

The last few days had brought a great change in his life, and one which he meant should be permanent; and yet, in spite or perhaps because of this, as he stood staring with absent eyes into his father's charming garden, he found his mind dwelling persistently on the only one of his many amorous adventures which had left a deep, and enduring, and, it must be admitted, a most delightful mark on the tablets of his memory.

The whole thing was still so vivid to him that half-involuntarily he turned round and looked down the long room to where his old father was sitting. How amazed, above all, how shocked and indignant the man for whom he had so great an affection and respect would feel, if he knew the picture which was now floating before his son's retrospective vision!

What had happened had been briefly this: One day in the previous October, Carden had taken his seat in the afternoon express which stops at Birmingham on its way from the north to Euston, or rather, having taken a leisurely survey of the train, which was, as he quickly noted, agreeably empty, he had indicated to the porter carrying his bag a carriage in which sat, alone, a singularly pretty woman.

As he afterwards had the delight of telling her, and, as he now reminded himself with a retrospective thrill of feeling, he had experienced, when his eyes first met those of the fair traveller, that incommunicable sensation, part physical, part mental, which your genuine Lothario, if an intelligent man, always welcomes with quickening pulse as the foretaste of special zest to be attached to a coming pursuit.

Carden's instinct as to such delicate questions had seldom played him false; never less so than on this occasion for, within an hour, he and the lovely stranger had reached that delightful stage of intimacy in which each feels that he and she, while still having much to learn about the other, are on the verge of a complete understanding.

During the journey of between two and three hours, his travelling companion had told him a great deal more about herself than he had chosen to reveal concerning his own life and affairs; he learned, for instance, that she was the young wife of an old man, and that the old man was exceedingly jealous. Further, that she found the life she was compelled to lead "horribly boring," and that a widowed cousin, who lived near London, and from whom she had "expectations," formed a convenient excuse for occasional absences from home.

Concerning three matters of fact, however, she completely withheld her confidence, both then, in those first delicious hours of their acquaintance, and even later, when their friendship—well, why not say friendship? for Carden had felt a very strong liking as well as an

overmastering attraction toward this Undine-like creature—had become much closer. The first and second facts which she kept closely hidden, for reasons which should perhaps have been obvious, were her surname—she confided to him that her Christian name was Pansy—and her husband's profession. The third, about which she might surely have been less reticent, was the name of the town where she lived and from which she appeared to be travelling that day.

The actual incidents of that eventful October journey had become, to a certain extent, blurred in Theodore Carden's memory, but what had followed was still extraordinarily vivid, and to-day, on this holiday morning, standing idly looking out of the window, he allowed his mind a certain retrospective licence.

From whom, so he now asked himself, had first come the suggestion that there should be no parting at Euston between himself and the strange, elemental woman he had found so full of unforced fascination and disarming charm? The answer soon came echoing down the corridors of memory: from himself, of course—but then, and even now the memory brought with it shamefaced triumph, he remembered her quick acquiescence, as free, as unashamed, as joyous as that of a spoilt child acclaiming an unlooked-for treat.

And, after all, what harm had there been in the whole halcyon adventure—what injury had it caused to any human being? Carden put the husband, the fatuous old man who had had the incredible folly to marry a girl thirty-five years younger than himself, out of the court. Pansy, light-hearted, conscienceless Pansy—he always thought of her with a touch of easy tenderness—had run no risk of detection, for, as he had early discovered, she knew no one in London, with the solitary exception of the old cousin who lived in Upper Norwood. As for his own business acquaintances, he might, of course, have been seen by any of them taking about this singularly attractive woman, for the two went constantly to the theatre, and daily to one or other of the great restaurants. But what then? Excepting that she was quieter in manner, far better dressed, and incomparably prettier, Pansy might have been the wife or sister of any one of his own large circle of relations, that great Carden clan who held their heads so high in the business world of the Midlands.

Nay, nay, no risk had been run, and no one had been a penny the worse! Indeed, on looking back, Theodore Carden could tell himself that it had been a perfect, a flawless episode, and perhaps after all it was well that there had been no attempt at a repetition. And yet? And yet the young man, especially during the first few weeks which had followed that sequence of enchanting days, had often felt piqued, even a little surprised,

that the heroine of this amazing experience had not taken advantage of his earnest entreaty that she would give him the chance of meeting her again. He had left it to her to be mysterious; as for himself, he had seen no reason why he should conceal from her either his name or his business address.

Many men, doubtless, would not have been so frank, but Theodore Carden, too wise in feminine love to claim an infallible knowledge of women, never remembered having made a mistake as to the moral social standing of a new feminine acquaintance. During the few days they had been together, everything had gone to prove that Pansy was no masquerader from that under-world whose denizens always filled him a sensation of mingled aversion and pity. He could not doubt—he never had doubted—that what she had chosen to tell him about herself and her private affairs was substantially true. No man, having heard her of it, could fail to understand her instinctive repulsion from the old husband to whom she had sold herself into bondage; and as human, if not perhaps quite as worthy of sympathy, was her restless longing for freedom to lead the pleasant life led by those of her more fortunate contemporaries whose doings were weekly chronicled in the society papers which seemed to form her only reading.

Once only had Carden felt for his entrancing companion the slightest touch of repugnance. He had taken her to a play in which a child played an important part, and she had suddenly so spoken as to make him realise with a shock of surprise that she was the mother of children! Yet the little remark made by her, “I wonder how my little girls are getting on,” had been very natural and even womanly. Then, in answer to a muttered word or two on his part, she had explained that she preferred not to have news of her children when she was absent from home, since it only worried her; even when staying with the old cousin at Upper Norwood, she made a point of being completely free of all possible home troubles. Hearing this gentle, placid explanation of her lack of maternal anxiety, Carden had put up his hand to his face to hide a smile; he had not been mistake; Pansy was indeed the thorough-going little hedonist he had taken her to be. Still, it was difficult, even rather disturbing, to think of her as a mother, and as the mother of daughters.

Yet how deep an impression this unmoral, apparently soulless woman had made on his mind and on his emotional memory! Even now, when he had no desire, and, above all, must not allow himself to have any desire, ever to see her again, Theodore Carden felt almost as keenly as he had done during the period of their brief intimacy a morbid curiosity to know where she lived and had her being.

It was late in the afternoon of the same day. Theodore Carden had just come in from a long walk, and, as he passed through the circular hall round which Watermead was built, he heard the low sound of voices, those of his father and some other man, issuing from the square drawing room always occupied by the father and son on such idle days as these. He stayed his steps, realized that the visitor was Major Lane, and then made up his mind to go up and change, instead of going straight in to his father, as he would have done had the latter been alone.

As he came down again, and crossed the now lighted hall, he met the parlourmaid, an elderly woman who had been in Thomas Carden's service ever since his wife's death.

"I wonder if I can take in the lamps now, Mr. Theodore? It's getting so dark, sir."

There was a troubled sound in her voice, and the young man stopped and looked at her with some surprise. "Of course you can, Jane," he said quickly, "why not? Why haven't you taken them in before?"

"I did go in with them half an hour ago, sir, but the master told me to take them out again. There's firelight, to be sure, and it's only Major Lane in there, but he's been here since three o'clock, and master's not had his tea yet. I suppose they thought they'd wait till you came in."

"Oh! well, if my father prefers to sit in the dark, and to put off tea till he can have my company, you had better wait till I ring, and then bring in the lamps and the tea together." He spoke with his usual light good-nature, and then passed on, and so into the room which was the only apartment in the large old house clearly associated in his mind with the graceful, visionary figure of his young mother.

Thomas Carden and the Head Constable were sitting in the twilight, one on each side of the fireplace, and when the young man came in they both stirred perceptibly and abruptly stopped speaking.

Theodore came forward and stood on the hearth-rug.

"May Jane bring in the lamps, father?"

"Yes, yes, I suppose so."

And the lamps were brought in. Then came the tea-tray, placed by Jane on a large table several paces from the fire. Very deliberately, and asking no questions as to milk or sugar, for well he knew the tastes of his father and of this father's friend, he poured out two cups of tea, and, turning, advanced, a cup balanced in each steady hand.

But halfway across the room he stopped for a moment, arrested by the sound of his father's voice:

"Theo, my boy, I want to ask you something." This mode of address had become of late years a little unusual, and there was something in

Thomas Carden's accents which struck his son as significant, even as rather solemn.

"Yes, father?"

"Did you not tell me this morning that you had never met Garvice?"

The one onlooker, hatchet-faced Major Lane, suddenly leaned a little forward. He was astonished at his old friend's extraordinary and uncalled-for courage, and it was with an effort, with the feeling that he was bracing himself to see something terrible take place, that he looked straight at the tall, fine-looking man who had now advanced into the circle of light thrown by the tall Argand lamps.

But Theodore Carden appeared quite unmoved, nay, more, quite unconcerned by his father's question.

"Yes," he said, "of course I told you so. I suppose I knew the old fellow by sight, but I certainly was never introduced to him. Are there any new developments?" He turned to Major Lane with a certain curiosity, and then quite composedly handed him the cup of tea he held in his right hand.

"Well, yes," answered the other coldly, "there are. We arrested Mrs. Garvice this morning."

"That seems rather a strong step to have taken, unless new evidence has turned up since Saturday," said Theodore thoughtfully.

"Such new evidence has come to hand since Saturday," observed Major Lane significantly.

There was a pause, and again Thomas Carden addressed his son with that strange touch of solemnity, and again Major Lane, with some inward wincing, stared fixedly at the young man now standing, a stalwart, debonair figure, between himself and his old friend.

"Can you assure me—can you assure us both—that you never net Mrs. Garvice?"

Carden looked down at his father with a puzzled expression. "Of course, I can't assure you of anything of the kind," he said, still speaking quite placidly. "I may have met her somewhere or other, but I can't remember having done so; and I think I should have remembered it, both because the name is an uncommon one, and because"—he turned to Major Lane—"Isn't she said to be an extraordinarily pretty woman?"

As the last words were being uttered, an odd thing happened. Thomas Carden suddenly dropped the cup he was holding in his hand; it rang against the brass fender and broke in several pieces, while the spoon went clattering into the fireplace.

"Father!" exclaimed Theodore, and then quickly he added, "Don't trouble to do that," for the old man was stooping over the run and

fumbling with the broken pieces. But Thomas Carden shook his head; it was evident that he was, for the moment, physically incapable of speech.

A great fear came into the son's mind; he turned to Major Lane and muttered in an urgent, agonized whisper, "Is it—can it be a seizure? Hadn't I better go and try to find Dr. Curle?" But the other, with a dubious expression on his face, shook his head. "No, he said; "it's nothing of the kind. Your father's getting older, Carden, as we all are, and I've had to speak to him to-day about a very disagreeable matter." He looked fixedly, probingly, at the young man, but again Theodore showed no sign of having understood. "I think it's thoroughly upset him." The speaker hesitated, and then added: "I daresay he'll tell you about it; in any case, I'd better go now and come back later. If you can spare me half an hour this evening, I should like to have a talk with you."

During the last few moments Major Lane had made up his mind to take a certain course, even to run a certain risk, and that not for the first time that day, for he had already set his own intimate knowledge of the life-long friend whose condition now wrung him with pity against what was, perhaps, his official duty.

Some two hours before, the Head Constable had entered the house, where he had been so constantly and so hospitably entertained, with the firm conviction that Theodore Carden had been the catspaw of a clever, unscrupulous woman; in fact, that there had come a repetition, but a hundred times more serious, of that now half-forgotten entanglement which had so nearly brought Carden to grief some seven or eight years before. Once more he had come prepared to do his best to save his friend's son, so far as might be possible, from the consequences of his folly.

But now? Ah, now, the experienced official had to admit to himself that the incidents of the last ten minutes had completely altered his view of the matter. He realised that in any case Theodore Carden was no fool; for the first time that day the terrible suspicion came into Major Lane's mind that the man before him might, after all, be more closely connected with the Garvice mystery than had seemed possible.

Never, during his long association with crime, had the Head Constable come across as good an actor, as cool a liar, as he now knew this young man of business to be. Well, he would give Carden one more chance to tell the truth; Theodore was devoted to his father, so much was certainly true, and perhaps his father would be able to make him understand the gravity of the case. Major Lane felt bitterly sorry that he had come first to the old man—but, then, he had so completely believed in the "scrape" theory; and now he hardly knew what to believe!

The old man, still sitting by the fire, had caught a few of the muttered words, and before Major Lane could leave the room Thomas Carden had risen from his chair, his face paler, perhaps, than usual, but once more his collected, dignified self. “Stay,” he said firmly; “having gone so far, I think we should now thrash the matter out.”

He walked over to where his son and his friend were standing, and he put his hand on the older man’s arm. “Perhaps I cannot expect you, Lane, to be convinced, as I, of course, have been convinced, by my son’s denials. It is, as I told you this afternoon, either a plot on the part of some one who bears a grudge against us, or else—what I think more likely—there are two men in this great town each bearing the name of Theodore Carden. But I appreciate, I deeply appreciate, the generous kindness which made you come and warn us of this impending calamity; but you need not fear that we shall fail to meet it with a complete answer.”

“Father! Major Lane! What do you mean?” For the first time a feeling of misgiving swept over Theodore Carden’s mind. Without waiting for an answer, he led the way back to the fireplace and, deliberately drawing forward a chair, motioned to Major Lane to sit down likewise.

“Now then,” he said, speaking with considerable authority and decision, “I think I have a right to ask what this is all about. In what way are we, my father and myself, concerned in the Garvice affair? For my part, Major Lane, I can assure you, and that, if you wish it, on oath, that I did not know Mr. Garvice, and, to the best of my belief, I have never seen, still less spoken to, Mrs. Garvice—”

“If that be indeed so,” said the man whom he addressed, and who, for the first time, was beginning to feel himself shaken in his belief, nay, in his absolute knowledge, that the young man was perjuring himself, “can you, and will you, explain these letters?” and he drew out of his pocket a folded sheet of foolscap.

Carden bent forward eagerly; there was no doubt, so the Head Constable admitted to himself, as to his eagerness to be brought face to face with the accusation—and yet, at that moment, a strong misgiving came over Major Lane. Was it right, was it humane, to subject him to this terrible test, and that, too, before his old father? Whatever the young man’s connection might be with the crime which Major Lane believed to have been committed, Caren was certainly ignorant of the existence of these terrible, these damnatory documents, and they constituted so far the only proof that Carden had been lying when he denied any knowledge of Mrs. Garvice. But then, alas! they constituted an irrefutable proof.

With a sudden movement Major Lane withdrew his right hand, that which held the piece of paper: “Stop a moment, Carden; do you really

wish this discussion to take place before your father? I wonder if you remember—" he paused, and then went on firmly—"an interview you and I had many years ago?"

For the first time Theodore Carden's whole manner changed; a look of fear, even of guilt, came over his strong, intelligent face.

"Father," he said imploringly, "I beg you not to listen to Major Lane. He is alluding to a matter which he gave me his word—his word of honour—should never be mentioned to any one, least of all to you"; then, turning with an angry gesture to the Head Constable, "Was that not so?" he asked imperiously.

"Yes, I admit that by making this allusion I have broken my word, but good God! Man, this is not passing scrape that we have to consider now; to-morrow morning all Birmingham will be ringing with your name—with your father's name, Theodore—for by some damnable mischance the papers have got hold of the letters in question. I did my best, but I found I was powerless." He turned and deliberately looked away, as he added in a low, hesitating voice: "And now, once more I ask you whether we had better not delay this painful discussion until you and I are alone?"

"No!" cried Carden, now thoroughly roused, "certainly not! You have chosen to come and tell my father something about me, and I insist that you tell me here, and at once, what it is of which I am accused."

He instinctively looked at his father for support, and received it in full measure, for at once the old man spoke. "Yes, Lane, I think my son is right; there's no use in making any more mystery about the matter. I'm sure that the letters you have brought to show Theodore will puzzle him as much as they have me, and that he will be able to assure you that he has no clue either to their contents or to their writer."

Very slowly, with a feeling of genuine grief and shame for the man who seemed to feel neither sorrow nor shame, Major Lane held out the folded paper, and then again, in very pity, he looked away as his old friend's son eagerly unrolled the piece of foolscap, placing it close under the lampshade in order that he might thoroughly master its contents.

As Theodore Carden completed the trifling action, that of unrolling the piece of paper which was to solve the mystery, he noted, with a curious feeling of relief, that the documents (or were they letters?) regarded by the Head Constable as so damnatory, were but two, the first of some length, the second consisting of a very few lines, both copied in the fair round hand of Major Lane's confidential clerk.

And then, with no premonitory warning, Carden became the victim of a curious physical illusion. Staring down at the long piece of blue paper, he found that he was only able to master the signature, in both cases the

same, with which each letter terminated. Sometimes only one word, one name—that of *Pansy*—stood out clearly, and then again he seemed only to see the other word, the other name—that of *Garvice*. The two names appeared to play hide-and-seek with one another, to leap out alternately and smite his eyes, pressing and printing themselves upon his brain.

At last, while he was still staring silently, obstinately, at the black lines dancing before him, he heard the words, and they seemed to be coming from a long way off, "Theodore! Oh, my boy, what is the matter?" and then Major Lane's voice, full of rather angry concern, "Rouse yourself, Carden, you are frightening your father."

"Am I?" he said dully, "I mustn't do that"; then, handing back the sheet of foolscap to the Head Constable, he said hoarsely, "I can't make them out. Will you read them to me?" And Major Lane, in passionless accents, read aloud the two letters which he already almost knew by heart:

6, Lightwood Place,
January, 28th

You told me to write to you if ever I was in real trouble and thought you could help me. Oh, Theo, darling, I am in great trouble, and life, especially since that happy time—you know when I mean—is more wretched than ever. You used to say I was extraordinarily pretty, I wonder if you would say so now, for I am simply ill—worn out with worry. He—you know who—has found out something; such a little insignificant thing; and since then he makes my life unbearable with his stupid jealousy. It isn't as if he knew about you and me, that would be something real to grumble at, wouldn't it, darling? Sometimes I feel quite tempted to tell him all about it. How he would stare! He is incapable of understanding anything romantic. However, I'm in no mood for laughing now. He's got a woman to watch me, but luckily I've quite got her to be on my side, though of course I haven't told her anything about my private affairs.

Will you meet me one day this week, to-morrow if you can, at No. 15, Calthorpe Street? Four o'clock is the safest time for me. Between the two small shops you will see a swing door with "Madame Paula, Milliner," on it; push it open and go straight upstairs. On the first landing you will see a door with "Gone out, enquire upstairs," on it. Push up the door knob (don't try to turn it) and walk in. The room will be empty, but you will see a door leading to a back room; push *up* the knob and there—there you will find your poor little Pansy, fainting with joy at seeing her big strong Theo again.

Send me a postcard saying "Mrs. Garvice can be fitted on (day you select)." If posted before eleven, it will reach me in time. Of course, I'm

> running a risk in meeting you *here*, so near my home, but I *must* see you, for I have a great favour to ask you, Theo, and I dare not propose going away even for one day.
>
> Pansy Garvice.

Major Lane paused a moment, then went on:

> Theo, I wrote to you ten days ago, but have had no answer. I am dreadfully worried; I know you are in Birmingham, for I saw your fame in a paper before I wrote to you. I have gone through such terrible days waiting for the postcard I asked you to send me. Write, if only to say you won't want to hear again of your poor miserable
>
> Pansy Garvice.

"I suppose you will now admit that you know who wrote these letters?" asked Major Lane sternly.

"Yes—at least I suppose they were written by Mrs. Garvice." Carden spoke with a touch of impatience. The question seemed to him to be, on the part of his father's old friend, a piece of useless cruelty.

"And can you suggest to whom they were written, if not to yourself?"

"No, of course not; I do not doubt that they were written to me," and this time his face was ravaged with a horror and despair to which the other two men had, as yet, no clue. "And yet," Carden added, a touch of surprise in his voice, "I never saw these letters—they never reached me."

"But, of course, you received others?" Major Lane spoke with a certain eagerness; then, as the young man seemed to hesitate, he added hastily: "Nay, nay, say nothing that might incriminate yourself."

"But, indeed—indeed I have never received a letter from her—that is perhaps why I did not know the handwriting."

"Theodore!" cried his father sharply, "think what you are saying! What you've been shown are only copies—surely you understood that? What Lane has just shown you are copies of letters which purport to have been addressed to you, but which were intercepted on their way to the post—is that not so?" and he turned to the Head Constable.

"Yes," said Major Lane; then he added, very deliberately: "The originals of these two letters, which were bought for a large sum from Mrs. Garvice's companion, evidently the woman referred to in the first letter, are now in the hands of the news editor of the *Birmingham Dispatch*. I was shown them as a great favour"—a grim smile distorted, for a moment, the Head Constable's narrow jaw. "I did my best—for your father's sake, Carden—to frighten these people into giving them up; I even

tried to persuade them to hold them over, but it was no good. I was told that no Birmingham paper had ever had such a—'scoop,' I believe, was the word used. You and your father are so well known in this city"—and again Theodore Carden marvelled at the cruelty of the man.

Thomas Carden broke in with a touch of impatience: "But nothing else has been found, my boy! Lane should tell you that the whole theory of your having known Mrs. Garvice rests on these two letters—which never reached you."

Father and son seemed suddenly to have changed places. The old man spoke in a strong, self-confident tone, but the other, his grey face supported on his hands, was staring fixedly into the fire.

"Yes," said Major Lane, more kindly, "I ought perhaps to tell you, Carden, that within an hour of my being shown these letters I had Mrs. Garvice's house one more searched, and nothing was found connecting you with the woman, excepting, I am sorry to say, this"; —and he held out an envelope on which was written in Theodore Carden's clear handwriting the young man's name and business address. "Now I should like you to tell me, if you don't mind doing so, where, when, and how this name and address came to be written?"

"Yes, I will certainly tell you." Carden spoke collectedly; he was beginning to realise the practical outcome of the conversation. "I wrote that address about the middle of last October, in London, at Mansell's Hotel in Pall Mall East."

"The poor fellow's going to make a clean breast of it at last"; so thought Major Lane with a strange feeling of relief, for on the flap of the envelope, which he had carefully turned down, was stamped "Mansell's Hotel."

It was in a considerate, almost kindly tone, that the Head Constable next spoke. "And now, Carden, I beg you, for your own sake, to tell me the truth. Perhaps I ought to inform you, before you say anything, that, according to our theory, Mrs. Garvice was certainly assisted in procuring the drug with which, I firmly believe, she slowly poisoned her husband. As yet we have no clue as to the person who helped her, but we have ascertained that for the last two months, in fact from about the date of the first letter addressed to you, a man did purchase minute quantities of this drug at Birmingham, at Wolverhampton, and at Walsall. Now, mind you, I do not, I never have, suspected you of having any hand in that, but I fear you'll have to face the ordeal of being confronted with the various chemists, of whom two declare most positively that they can identify the man who brought them the prescription which obtained him the drug in question."

While Major Lane was speaking, Theodore Carden had to a certain extent regained his self-possession; here, at least, he stood on firm ground. "Of course, I am prepared to face anything of the kind that may be necessary." He added almost inaudibly; "I have brought it on myself." Then he turned, his whole voice altering and softening: "Father, perhaps you would not mind my asking Major Lane to go into the library with me? I should prefer to see him alone."

II

"And the wild regrets, and the bloody sweats,
None knew so well as I:
For he who lives more lives than one
More deaths than one must die."[2]

And then the days dragged on, a week of days, each containing full measure of bitter humiliation; full measure also of feverish suspense and anxiety, for Theodore Carden did not find it quite so easy as he had thought it would be to clear himself of this serious and yet preposterous accusation of complicity in the murder. But Major Lane was surprised at the courage and composure with which the young man faced the ordeal of confrontation with the various men, any one of whom, through a simple nervous lapse of memory, might compel his presence, if not in the dock, then as a witness at the coming murder trial.

But at last that ordeal was over, for, as a matter of fact, none of those brought face to face with him in the sordid proximity of such scenes singled out Theodore Carden as resembling the mysterious individual who had almost certainly provided Mrs. Garvice with the means wherewith to poison her husband. So it was that suspicion became gradually directed to quite another quarter; that is, towards an accountant in Garvice's employment, who had been socially welcomed at his house. But of this man no trace had as yet been found.

It was after the need for active defence had passed away that the hours began to drag heavily with Theodore Carden; and yet, at the end of each long day, the unhappy man would have given much in order to recall the daylight hours.

The moment twilight fell Carden was haunted, physically and mentally possessed, by the presence of the woman he had known at once so little and so well, that is, of her he now knew to be Pansy Garvice.

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[2] From Oscar Wilde's long poem "The Ballad of Reading Gaol" (1897).

Especially terrible were the solitary evenings of those days when his father had been away, performing the task of breaking so much of the truth as could be told to the girl to whom his son had been engaged.

As each afternoon drew in, Carden found himself compelled to remain more or less concealed in the rooms which overlooked the garden of Watermead. For, with the approach of night, the suburban road in front of the fine old house was filled by an ever coming and going crowd of bat-like men and women, eager to gaze with morbid curiosity at the dwelling of the man who had undoubtedly been, if not Mrs. Garvice's accomplice—that, to the annoyance of the sensation-mongers, seemed decidedly open to question—then, her favoured lover.

But to these shameful and grotesque happenings Theodore Carden gave scarce a thought, for it was when he found himself alone in the drawing room or library that his solitude would become stealthily invaded by an invisible and impalpable wraith. So disorganized had become his nerves, so pitiable the state of his body and mind, that constantly he seemed conscious of a faint, sweet odour, that of wood violets, a scent closely associated in his thoughts with Pansy Garvice, with the woman whom he now knew to be a murderess. He came at last to long for a tangible delusion, for the sight of a bodily shape which he could tell himself was certainly not there. But no such relief was vouchsafed him; and yet once, when sitting in the drawing-room, trying to read a book, he had felt a rounded cheek laid suddenly to his; a curl of silken, scented hair had touched his neck…

Terrifying as was the peopled solitude of his evenings, Carden dreaded their close, for at night, during the whole of each long night, the woman from whom he now felt so awful a repulsion held him prisoner. From the fleeting doze of utter exhaustion he would be awakened by feeling the pressure of Pansy's soft, slender arms about his neck; they would wind themselves round his shuddering body, enclosing him slowly, inexorably, till he felt as if he must surely die under their gyves-like pressure. Again—and this, perhaps, was what he learned to dread in an especial degree—he would be suddenly roused by Pansy's liquid, laughing voice, whispering things of horror in his ear; it was then, and then only, that he found courage to speak, courage to assure her, and to assure himself, that he was in no sense her accomplice, that he had had naught to do with old Garvice's death; but then there would come answer, in the eager tones he remembered so well, and the awful words found unwilling echo in his heart: "Yes, yes, indeed you helped!"

And now the last day, or rather the last night, had come, for the next morning Theodore Carden was to leave Birmingham, he hoped for ever, for New Zealand.

The few people he had been compelled to see had been strangely kind; quiet and gentle, as folk, no doubt, feel bound to be when in the presence of one condemned. As for Major Lane, he was stretching—no one knew it better than Caden himself—a great point in allowing the young man to leave England before the Garvice trial.

During those last days, even during those last hours, Theodore deliberately prevented himself from allowing his mind to dwell on his father. He did not know how much the latter had been told, and he had no wish to know. A wall of silence had arisen between the two who had always been so much, nay, in a sense, everything to one another. Each feared to give way to any emotion, and yet the son knew only too well, and was ashamed of the knowledge, with what relief he would part from his father. There had been a moment when Major Lane had intimated his belief that the two would go away and make a new life together, but Theodore Carden had put aside the idea with rough decision. Perhaps when he was far away, on the other side of the world, the former relations of close love and sympathy, if not of confidence, might be re-established between his father and himself, but this, he felt sure, would never be while they remained face to face.

And now he was lying wide awake in the darkness, in the pretty, peaceful room which had once been his nursery, and where he had spent his happy holidays as a schoolboy. His brain remained abnormally active, but physically he was oppressed by a great weariness; to-night, for the first time, Carden felt the loathsome wraith which haunted him, if not less near, then less malicious, less watchful than usual, above all, less eager to assert her power … Yet, even so, he lay very still, fearing to move lest he should once more feel about his body the clinging, enveloping touch he dreaded with so great a dread.

And then, quite suddenly, there came a strange lightening of his heart. A space of time seemed to have sped by, and Carden, by some mysterious mental process, knew that he was still near home, and not, as would have been natural, in New Zealand. Nay, more, he realized that the unfamiliar place in which he now found himself was Winson Green Gaol, a place which, as a child, he had been taught to think of with fear, fear mingled with a certain sense of mystery and excitement. Theodore had not thought of the old local prison for years, but now he knew that he and his father were together there, in a small cell lighted by one candle. The wall of

silence, raised on both sides by shame and pain, had broken down, but, alas! too late; for again in some curious inexplicable way, the young man was aware that he was to be hanged early in the morning of which the dawn was even now breaking.

Now, strange to say, this knowledge caused him, personally, but little uneasiness, but on his father's account he felt infinitely distressed, and he found himself bending his whole mind to comfort and sustain the old man. Thus, he heard a voice, which he knew to be his own, saying in an argumentative tone, "I assure you, father, that an extraordinary amount of nonsense is talked about nowadays concerning—well, the death penalty. Is it possible that you do not realise that I am escaping a much worse fate—that of having to live on? I wish, dear dad, that I could persuade you of the truth of this."

"If only," muttered the old man in response, "if only, my boy, I could bear it for you"; and Carden saw that his father's face was seared with an awful look of terror and agony.

"But, indeed, father, you do not understand. Believe me, I am not afraid—it will not be so bad, after all. So do not—pray, pray, father, do not be so distressed."

And then with a great start Theodore Carden awoke—awoke to see the small, spare figure of that same dear father, clothed in the long, old-fashioned linen night-shirt of another day, standing by his bed-side.

The old man held a candle in his hand, and was gazing down at his only child with an expression of unutterable woe and grief. "I will try—I am trying, my boy, not to be unreasonably distressed," he said.

Theodore Carden sat up in bed. Since this awful thing had come on him he had never, even for an instant, forgotten self, but now he saw that his sufferings were small compared with those he had brought on the man into whose face he was gazing with red-rimmed, sunken eyes. For a moment the wild thought came to him that he might try to explain, to justify himself, to prove to his father that in this matter he had but done as other so, and that the punishment was intolerably heavier than the crime; but then, looking up and meeting Thomas Carden's perplexed, questioning eyes, he felt a great rush of shame and horror, not only of himself, but of all those who look at life as he himself had always looked at it; for the first time, he understood the mysterious necessity, as well as the beauty, of abnegation, of renunciation.

"Father," he said, "listen. I will not go away alone; I was mad to think of such a thing. We will go together, you and I—Lane has told me that

such has been your wish—and then perhaps some day we will come back together."

After this, for the first time for many nights, Theodore Carden fell into a dreamless sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

ACCORDING TO MEREDITH

The so-called "Woman Question" and public debates about women's role in marriage and in the public sphere simmered throughout Lowndes' career. The first decade of the twentieth century saw particularly heated debate, as women pushed for suffrage, equitable education and employment opportunities, divorce rights, and legitimacy in the professional spheres—all of which threatened the Victorian association of women with the domestic realm and men with the public. Caught between Victorian ideals and modern political mores, wives of this era found themselves expected to "be able at once to clean a grate, to cook a dinner, and to discuss Ibsen," as Mr. Dering suggests in the story below—and to do it with a smile.

Writer George Meredith was a strong voice against traditional marriage throughout these debates, finding the legal confines and social strictures against divorce to be stifling for both men and women. "I disapprove strongly of the present system," he wrote: "It is unbearable."[1] *To great controversy, he proposed, instead, a system whereby couples would be married for a period of ten years, after which each party would be free to dissolve the union. It is this idea to which Lowndes responds here, describing the possible psychological fallout of such an arrangement. What begins as a gentle love story erupts into violence by the story's end in this intimate portrait of the personal consequences of the larger marriage debate.*

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"Certainly, however, one day these present conditions of marriage will be changed. Marriage will be allowed for a certain period, say ten years."
—Mr. George Meredith in the Daily Mail *of September 24th, 1904.*

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[1] "George Meredith's Views on Marriage." *Los Angeles Herald* 43(13): November 1904, p. 2.

"Give you some heads? My dear fellow, there need be no question of heads! This is to be a model will. You need simply put down, in as few words as are legally permissible—I know nothing of such things—that I leave all of which I die possessed to my wife."

Philip Dering threw his head back, and gave the man to whom he was speaking, and opposite to whom he was standing, a confident smiling glance. Then he turned and walked quickly over to the narrow, old-fashioned, balconied window which, commanding the wide wind-blown expanse of Abingdon Street, exactly faced the great cavity formed by the arch of the Victoria Tower.

To the right lay the riverside garden, a bright patch of delicate spring colouring and green verdure, bounded by the slow-moving grey waters of the Thames; and Dering's eager eyes travelled on till he saw, detaching itself against an April afternoon horizon, the irregular mass of building formed by Lambeth Palace and the Lollards' Tower.

"I say," he exclaimed, rather suddenly, "this is better than Bedford Park, eh? I suppose a floor in one of these houses would cost us a tremendous lot; even beyond our means, Wingfield?" and again a happy smile came over the tense, clear-cut face, still full of youthful glow and enthusiasm.

"You wish everything to go to Louise? All right, I'll make a note of that."

The speaker, a round-faced, slightly bald, shrewd-looking lawyer, took no notice of the, to him, absurd question concerning the rent of floors in Abingdon Street. Still, he looked indulgently at his friend, as he added:

"But wait a bit,—I promise that yours shall be a model will,—only you seem to have forgotten, my dear fellow, that you may out-live your wife. Now, should you have the misfortune to lose Louise, to whom would you wish to devise this fifteen thousand pounds? It's possible, too, though not very probable, I admit, that you may both die at the same time—both be killed in a railway accident for instance."

"Such good fortune may befall us—" Dering spoke quite simply, and accepted the other's short laugh with great good-humour. "Oh! you know what I mean; I always have thought husbands and wives—who care, I mean—ought to die on the same day. That they don't do so is one of the many strange mysteries which complicate life. But I say, Wingfield—"

The speaker had turned away from the window. He had again taken up his stand opposite the other's broad writing table, and not even the cheap, ill-made clothes could hide the graceful lines of the tall, active figure, not even the turned-down collar and orange silk tie could destroy the young man's look of rather subtle distinction.