

THE DWARF'S CHAMBER



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THE DWARF'S CHAMBER



“Clasped her in his arms.”—p. 151.

Frontispiece.

THE DWARF'S CHAMBER

BY

FERGUS HUME

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"THE MYSTERY OF A HANSON CAB," "THE CRIME OF THE 'LIZA JANE,'" ETC.

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS

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THE DWARF'S CHAMBER

Oh, twice I met with faery folk,
All in the cold moonshine,
With them I skipped beneath the oak,
And quaffed their faery wine.

But I have dreed my weird lang syne,
Because I sinned a deadly sin,
They laid a curse on me and mine,
And gifted me with dwarfish kin.

CHAPTER I

THE FIDDLER

THE railway is responsible for the transmutation of sleepy villages into noisy manufacturing towns; of picturesque inns into gaudy hotels. Wheresoever that iron road runs, hamlets, as vitalized by its touch, begin to throw out lines of suburban villas, to gather into clumps of roaring factories; while the rustic alehouse, of yore the parliament of rural politicians, swells into a bloated, three-storey barrack, all glass, and glitter, and bare discomfort. The portly host doffs his apron for the smart vulgarities of a publican, and trim Phyllis, changing sex and attractiveness, shrinks to a lean, black-coated, white-cravated scarecrow, avaricious of "tips," and servile in demeanour. This may be progress, but it is neither beauty nor comfort; and in

stirring up mediæval sloth to modern activity, laudable though the task may be, the utilitarian spirit of the age is apt to overlook the claims of eye and soul to lovely sights and artistic suggestiveness.

Yet, as on the verge of the maddest whirlpool lie broad still pools wherein collect flotsam and jetsam thrown off from the central gyration, so beyond the radius of railroad and mushroom town lie somnolent parishes untouched by the restless spirit of the nineteenth century. Here may be found the pleasant hamlets of old time, huddled in a confusion of picturesque houses round the square-towered church, grey and solemn. Here the market-place with cross and inn, yonder the dwelling of the Lord of the Manor, showing red roofs and lean chimneys above the park tree-tops. At the end of the crooked street a narrow bridge bestrides a swift stream, and beyond, the dusty high-road, leaving behind its rusticity, runs straightly towards the smoky towns which skirt the maelstrom of modern existence. Such a village is Dalesford.

Artists, pioneers of the great tourist tribe as they are, knew it well, and often had its quaint houses, its ivy-clad church, its gorse-besprinkled common figured on the walls of the Academy. So sleepy, so peaceful, so idle it was, that here, if anywhere, Thomson might have built his pleasant Castle of Indolence. Buried in fertile pasture lands thirty miles from the nearest railway, Dalesford was lamentably lethargic, and heard as in a dream the tumult of the century roaring far away. Notwithstanding its proximity to the high-road, it did not seem to recognize that it was its bounden duty to increase its houses, to multiply its population. Not a single dwelling had been erected there for the last half-century, and its rural population was limited still to three hundred souls (inclusive of the surrounding farms), as in the Middle Ages. No battles had been fought in its vicinity, no great man had sprung from its inhabitants, no industry of lace, or cloth, or straw-

weaving was peculiar to the place. In a word, Dalesford was, to all useful purposes, dead, and no artist in love with its somnolent beauty ever wished it to be alive.

Against the high-road near the bridge stood the "Lelanro Arms," a quaint little hostel dating from the days of the Stewarts, and now presided over by Mistress Sally Ballard. She, a comfortable old spinster, round and rosy as an apple, was dubbed Mistress out of courtesy to her age and respectability. A famous housewife was Mistress Sally, learned in pickling, and baking, and brewing; and her inn was scrupulously clean and eminently comfortable. Here one slept in low-ceilinged rooms, with diamond-paned casements, wherein were set pots of mignonette and balsam; here the sheets smelt of lavender, and the breakfast-table was set forth with freshly-caught trout, rich cream, and the sweetest of home-made bread. Three maid-servants and an ostler formed the staff of this unpretentious hostel, and these Mistress Sally governed with a rod of iron. But she was a kindly creature, and her rule was beneficent.

Hither in the evening came labourer and farmer to taste the ale for which the "Lelanro Arms" was famous. They sat in high-backed settles, with their tankards before them, and discussed such scraps of news as came from the outside world until it struck ten, when Mistress Sally, with many a laugh and jest, bundled them out, so that they might not infringe the respectability of her house by keeping midnight hours. The parish clerk, the verger, the steward from Lelanro Manor, even the parson himself, knew that mellow taproom and the smack of the home-brew. Painters in search of the picturesque stayed at the hostel of Mistress Sally, and sketched its white-washed front, its high red roof, the twisted stack of chimneys, and those rustic casements opening on to the village green. Once a lean and hungry poet came, who abode a week in the best bedroom, and then decamped without paying his bill, save in the following jingle:

Oh, Mistress Sally, ask me not
In kingly gold to pay my shot,
For I have fallen on evil times :
But lest you should be harsh and wild
With one who is the Muses' child,
I pay my debt in lordly rhymes.

Over which sufficiently bad verses Mistress Sally laughed till the tears bestreaked her ruddy cheeks ; and framing the "lordly rhymes," she had them hung up in the bar-parlour. Had the lean poet appeared again, he would no doubt have been permitted to pay a second bill in the like coin.

"I'm sorry for the poor creature and his bits of verse," said Mistress Sally, with a large-hearted geniality.

At the sunset hour she stood under the porch, looking across the green, to where the bridge spanned the stream. Already in twos and threes, with uncouth salutations, the customers of the "Lelanro Arms" were passing within ; and from the windows of the taproom glimmered the flame of the early-lighted lamps. Shrill-voiced children played round the old stone cross, but Mistress Sally, heedless of their noisy pranks, stared at the gables of the distant Manor House as they loomed menacingly against the clear evening sky. She had been a still-room maid in the service of the Lelanros, and, as was natural, took a deep interest in the family. What she was thinking of it is impossible to say, but she pursed up her lips and wrinkled her brow in a manner which, to those who knew her, betokened unpleasant thoughts.

"Better if you were burnt down," murmured the landlady, apostrophizing the distant mansion ; "the fairy curse is on you and yours, though none know it but me. I——"

This somewhat recondite speech, which hinted at family secrets, was interrupted by a merry whistle. Across the bridge stepped a tall stripling with the tune of "Garryowen" on his lips ; and straightly he bore down on Mistress Sally, who had already smoothed her brow to a hospitable smile.



"Across the bridge stepped a tall stripling."

That amiable greeting took a yet more approving twist as she saw before her as handsome a young man as ever had crossed the threshold of her inn. Mistress Sally was no acidulated spinster to scorn the male sex on the sour grape principle, and, in her own heart, she secretly admired a strapping lad with a well-looking face. She had no fault to find on this score with the new-comer.

He was over the middle height, with a well-knit figure, an aristocratic and rather haughty countenance ; but there lurked a twinkle in his dark eyes which did away with the reserve impressed on lip and brow. Well worn as was his dress, a shabby shooting-suit of brown corduroy, Mistress Sally saw that he was, as she expressed it, "every inch a gentleman." And notwithstanding the bundle on a stick over his shoulder, and the fiddle under his arm, she acted on her first impression and addressed him accordingly.

"Good-even, sir," said she, with a curtsy, "it is bed and board you want, I'll be bound."

"You're right there, ma'am," replied the wayfarer, taking his seat on a bench, and placing bundle and fiddle beside him, "but I'll have board before bed, as my hunger is greater than my weariness."

"Would you like a broiled trout, sir, or a chicken nicely roasted? And there's a cold round of beef in the larder fit for a lord."

The stranger flushed a trifle through the tan of his skin, and laughed in a somewhat embarrassed fashion.

"No, thank you, ma'am," he said, with a half sigh, "my purse will not permit of such dainties. A pot of beer and some bread and cheese out here are all I require. After that a bed for the night."

"Are you a poet, sir?" demanded the landlady, astonished at this moderation, and mindful of the rhymes in the bar-parlour.

"Why, no, ma'am," answered the other, with an amused smile. "I have scribbled verses in my time, but I do not

claim to be a rhymer. As you see," he added, touching the violin, "I fiddle for my living."

Mistress Sally looked at his handsome face, considered his gently bred air, and smilingly denied the truth of this remark. What is more, she supplied a reason for his making it.

"I understand, sir," she said, with a broad smile. "You are a young gentleman who is doing this for a wager."

"A charitable supposition, but incorrect. I am really and truly a simple fiddler, tramping my way up to London. Look at my bundle, my clothes, my violin, and——"

"And at your face, sir," replied Mistress Sally, laughing. "It isn't dress makes the gentry. Oh, I've lived with them in my time, sir. But as it pleases you to be merry it is not my place to say anything, though I wish," added she, stepping back into the doorway, "that you would stay your stomach with something more substantial than ale and bread."

The young man laughed as she disappeared, but the laugh gave place to a sad look when he examined his lean purse. Therein were two half-crowns and a piece of gold.

"Fifteen shillings," the owner of this wealth said to himself, "and I am still over a hundred miles from London. Unless I earn more money with my fiddle I am afraid it is many a meal I shall have to go without, and many a night I shall be forced to sleep under the stars. Well, who cares? I am young and healthy, and after all there is something pleasant in this Bohemianism."

He spoke in a refined manner, and his speech and accent betrayed education. That so apparently gently nurtured a young gentleman should be tramping the country had puzzled more heads than Mistress Sally's. In spite of his denials the rustics persisted in attributing his ragged attire and fiddling propensities to eccentricity, and they firmly believed that he had plenty of gold on his person, wherewith to ride in a coach and dress in gay raiment were he so minded.

At every turn this greatness was thrust upon him till he grew weary of insisting upon his poverty and humble birth.

"That old lady is as sceptical as the rest," said he, reclining full length on the bench to rest his weary limbs. "She thinks also that I am a lord in disguise. Well, who knows? It may be so, though I am ignorant of birth and title and wealth. Humph!" he added, catching sight of the sign, "that is a queer picture."

One of the numerous artists who visited the inn had painted the sign, discharging his bill, as had the poet, by means of his art. The scene depicted was a stormy sea, whereon tossed a cockle-shell boat. This held three figures, a lady with outstretched arms standing up in the stern, a dead man lying in the bows, and midway a rower toiling at the oars. In the distance a lurid sunset flamed behind the gaunt towers of a castle. Beneath this mysterious picture was written "The Lelanro Arms" and four lines of verse, which could not be deciphered by the fiddler owing to the gathering darkness. It was an odd picture to swing before a village inn, and required explanation.

His attention was drawn from the sign by the reappearance of the landlady with his supper, to which she had added a small meat-pie. Seeing him colour at the sight of this addition, Mistress Sally hastily disclaimed any wish to offend.

"But sure," said she in a kindly tone, "a lad like you needs good food after a long walk. You must eat well for health's sake, sir."

"Very good, ma'am. But if I can't pay for my appetite?"

"Why, then you can give us a tune on your fiddle. I dearly love a country dance, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Warwick, ma'am. Algernon Warwick," said the stranger, smiling at her simple craft, "and I'll give you a tune with pleasure when I finish my supper."

This he did, greatly to the delight of the taproom toppers and the children on the green. No great hand at holding

her tongue, Mistress Sally had already hinted her impression that the fiddler was a gentleman on the tramp out of sheer love for adventure ; and every one was agog with excitement to hear what tunes this lord in disguise—for some foolishly imagined as much—could draw from the strings. Warwick proved to be a veritable magician of the bow, a strolling Orpheus, and moved their heartstrings by the magic of his melodies. How that fiddle talked, and cried, and laughed, and trilled, only those who were present could tell. Mistress Sally nodded benignly in the porch, and tapped her foot to the air of “Chloe, come kiss me,” or sighed when she heard the sad melody, “Jenny flouted Jessamy.” Then again he played brisk country dances, to which the delighted children footed it merrily ; anon he changed to a minor key, so mournful, that the wine-bibbers within shook their grizzled heads over their cups ; and finished with a wild Hungarian dance which stung slow, bucolic brains to unaccustomed excitement.

“A brave fiddler,” said Mistress Sally, when he laid by bow and instrument, “and, mind ye, a gentleman born, or I’m no true woman.”

CHAPTER II

A FAMILY LEGEND

THE Dalesford folk had a reputation for credulity, and certainly deserved it in this instance. Pleased with the fiddling, and looks, and pleasant manner of Warwick, they were disposed to believe implicitly in any tale he chose to tell them. He, knowing the value of silence, held his peace, and let Mistress Sally say what she would ; and, as the foolish woman was firmly convinced in her own mind of his gentility, she soon promulgated this belief

amongst the rustics. By dawn a fine crop of stories had sprung up round the personality of the tramp, and the gossips told one another that he assuredly must be an eccentric young nobleman in disguise. For the nonce the Golden Age was come again, and the Olympians walked familiarly amongst mortals.

Mistress Sally, whose naturally shrewd wits had been sharpened by contact with town-bred servants, did not go so far as to dub her guest a lord; nevertheless she saw in him a man of birth. That he fiddled round the countryside was no bar to this belief, as she well knew that gentlefolk were eccentric, and, not unnaturally, wearying of their grandeur, condescended at times to mix with the common herd. Hence, hopeful that Warwick would confess his freak before he left the "Lelanro Arms," she gave him a bedroom far beyond his purse, and the next morning set before him as excellent a meal as could be cooked. Warwick, who had descended in the expectation of a repetition of the bread and ale supper, expostulated vainly against this hospitality being thrust upon him.

"I can't pay for these dainties, ma'am," said he, when the landlady pressed him to take a seat at the well-spread table. "I have only fifteen shillings and a fiddle in the world."

"No doubt, sir," replied Mistress Sally, nodding meaningly, "but if you wanted a score of pounds at a pinch, I dare say your friends in London——"

"I have no friends in London—I have no friends in the world. Why will you persist in ascribing to me a greatness which I do not possess? If I eat your goodies and don't pay for them, you'll have me put in the stocks for a vagabond."

"Lord forbid, Mr. Warwick!" said the startled Sally. "Sit down and eat, sir. If you can't pay, it won't ruin me; and, after all, you're too young a lad to go tramping on an empty stomach. Eat well, sir, and pay your bill

with a tune on your fiddle. I've had worse payments in my time," finished she, thinking of the poet's rhymes, which were certainly less congenial to her than the heart-stirring strains of the violin.

"Well, ma'am," said Warwick, taking his seat, "I accept your offer. But never did I expect to meet with such kindness in the world. I might starve in London before any one would give me a crust of bread."

"Dear heart," cried Mistress Sally, patting her breast, "what wicked people! Why not stay here a week, sir, and fiddle to the lads and lasses? They'd give you a trifle for your work, I'll be bound; and the bill at the 'Lelanro Arms' won't drain your purse, I promise you."

"It's very kind of you, dame, but I must push on at once. There is somebody waiting for me in London who may do me a good turn; although," added he sadly, "I am by no means sure of his goodwill."

"Your father, no doubt, sir?"

"I have no father, no mother! I am an orphan," responded the young man, with a sigh; "but there, there!" he added hastily, "let us talk of other things. My story is too common to be worth the telling."

Thus baulked of her curiosity, Mistress Sally swallowed her disappointment as best she could, and proceeded to retail the local news. Of this she was well informed, as the inn was a rural Ear of Dionysius, into which was breathed all the scandal of the neighbourhood.

"Lord Lelanro and Mistress Celia are up in London," said she. "He is the owner of the land hereabouts, and she is his grand-daughter—a fair and kindly young lady."

"Heiress to the estates, no doubt?"

"No!" replied the landlady, pursing up her lips; "the estates go with the title to a distant cousin of the family. With Lord Lelanro the direct line ceases, unless——"

"Unless what, ma'am?" asked Warwick, noting the abrupt pause.

"Never mind, sir. Every family has its skeleton, and it is not for me to show that of the Lelanros. It is a fine house, is it not?" she added, evidently desirous of turning the conversation.

"What I saw of it," answered Algernon, falling in with her humour; "a steep wall rising from the banks of the stream; turrets and gables beyond, encircled by a park. Why is the house defended in that fashion, Mistress Sally? Is the owner misanthropic, or is he merely doubtful of the world's honesty?"

"He is not partial to strangers," muttered the other reluctantly; "at least, not at the Manor. In London my lord keeps open house."

From the way in which she spoke Warwick saw that the subject was distasteful, and wondered what could be the reason of her obvious embarrassment. Evidently there was some secret connected with house or inmates; and being a loyal servant of the family, she was bent on saying as little as possible. Nevertheless, as Warwick had kept his own counsel, he could not very well question her further on her private affairs, therefore went on with his breakfast in silence.

In a few minutes Mistress Sally left the room, and returned speedily with a portrait in a silver frame, which she placed proudly before her guest.

"This is a picture of Miss Celia, sir," replied she, "given to me by herself. Isn't she a beauty, Mr. Warwick?"

"A very charming young lady," answered Warwick, examining the photograph, "but her expression is rather sad."

"Aha!" coughed Mistress Sally awkwardly, "she has reason to look sad. All the Lelanros are sad—after twenty."

"Why after twenty?"

"I'm not the one to tell tales," said Mistress Sally, hastily snatching up the picture. "If my dear pretty

Miss Celia is sad, that has nothing to do with you or me, sir. Let sleeping dogs lie. That is what I always say."

After which significant remark she left the room for a second time, nor did she re-enter it again, and Warwick guessed thereby that she was afraid of saying too much. Indeed, her hints had already roused his curiosity, and he burned to know the meaning of this ambiguous talk. The sadness which came to the Lelanros when they reached the age of twenty years; the steep wall overhanging the swift stream; the remark anent the failure of the direct line with the unspoken reservation; all these things stimulated the desire of the young man to know more of the Manor House, and of the family who dwelt therein. However, his own immediate affairs soon withdrew his attention from such unnecessary matters.

He weighed his lean purse, counted and re-counted the three coins, and sighed to think that he must part with one of them for the discharge of his night's entertainment. Still, with twelve and sixpence he would do very well for the next few days, and he trusted when this was spent to replenish his exchequer by music and song. Having come to this conclusion he pulled out a clay pipe, and loading it with a morsel of tobacco from his scanty store, he proceeded to indulge in the luxury of a smoke. Then he picked up his bundle, tucked the fiddle under his arm, and repaired in search of Mistress Sally, to say good-bye.

She was blocking the porch with her portly form, and turned to greet him with a smile. In the bright sunlight, with her be-ribboned cap, rosy face, and buxom figure, she resembled one of those delightful landladies who enliven the optimistic pages of Fielding and Dickens. And why should she not resemble them? she who was their lineal descendant and worthy representative.

"I must go now, Mistress Sally," said Warwick, tendering his poor coin, "and here is all I can pay for board and

lodging. A miserable return for so capital a bed and supper."

"Put it up, sir," said the good-hearted landlady, waving it away. "Heaven forbid that Sarah Ballard should take from those who need."

And in spite of his half-laughing, half-earnest expostulations, she absolutely refused to take the money. Nay more, she handed him a small parcel of provisions, for his midday meal, with a rubicund smile of goodwill and kindly hospitality.

"You'll be hungry at noon," said she, forcing this into his hand. "And there's a meat-pie and bread and cheese and ale in there. And maybe, sir, you'll find a trifle of tobacco," she added, with a shy smile. "I see you spoil those white teeth of yours by smoking."

Warwick had never before experienced such kindness, and was so deeply moved that he hardly knew how to thank the hostess. However, he managed to stammer out a few words, and shook her heartily by the hand, a salutation hardly relished by the buxom landlady, who would have turned her rosy cheek willingly to the lips of so handsome a traveller.

"If ever I become that which you take me to be," said he earnestly, "you may be sure I shall return to thank you in other ways than mere words."

"Come when you will, and you'll ever be welcome," responded Mistress Sally, and patted him on the back as he stepped out into the sunshine.

The fiddler would have moved away at once, for it was already late in the morning, when, looking up to note the weather tokens of the cloud-dappled sky, he again caught sight of the queerly-pictured sign creaking overhead. Curious to know the meaning of the representation, he asked Mistress Sally to afford him an explanation. Which she did, nothing loth to retain him longer by her side.

"That picture, sir," replied Mistress Sally, with uncooled pride, "was painted by a gentleman who is now great. I have been offered no end of money for it, Mr. Warwick, as his name is signed to it, and that makes it valuable."

"But the meaning of the picture?"

"Read the words, sir, and see what you make of them."

Warwick mounted on the bench, and had no difficulty in deciphering the following quatrain:

To those false lords my crown I gave,
Now they would have my head I ween;
Be Leal Andrew for aye, my knave,
Be leal and row to save your queen.

"Those words describe the picture," said Mistress Sally, when he stepped down, "it is the beginning of the Lelanro family. On the other side of the sign, Mr. Warwick, you will see their arms; a boat on a sea with the motto 'Be Leal and Row.'"

"What is the story, ma'am?" asked Algernon, sitting down on the bench.

"When the Queen of Scots fled from her enemies," said Mistress Sally, with the air of one repeating a lesson, "she came to the banks of a river hard pressed by her false lords. One serving-man had she with her, and urged a ferryman called Andrew, who dwelt on the banks, to put her and her serving-man across to where her friends were gathered. The ferryman, hearing she was the Queen, told her on his knees that he was known as Leal Andrew for his devotion to the House of Stewart, and gladly took her in his boat. Half-way across the stream, the false lords came to the bank and shouted to Leal Andrew that he should give up the fugitive Queen. Her friends on the further side implored him to be no traitor to his lawful sovereign. Leal Andrew rowed hard to save the Queen; but the serving-man, a traitorous knave, tried to upset the ferry-boat so that the Queen might fall into the power of

her enemies. But Leal Andrew killed him and again took to the oars, whereat Mary of Scotland cried, punning on his name, 'Be Leal Andrew still—be leal and row to save your Queen.' She was landed safely and was saved, so the Lelanros took her words for their motto and their name."

"How did they rise from ferrymen to lords?"

"The son of the Queen, James of England, rewarded Leal Andrew for his devotion, and gave to him and his descendants the estates of Dalesford, which they have held ever since."

"I don't quite understand the punning motto," said Warwick, in a perplexed tone.

"The Queen said 'Leal and row,' which was a pun on his name, 'Leal Andrew,' made by altering 'e' into 'o' in the last syllable. The family now spell the name Lelanro as you see it there."

"A very interesting legend," observed Warwick, once more rising to his feet. "I suppose you tell it to every one, Mistress Sally? The Lelanros are a fortunate family."

"Ah!" sighed the landlady, "they have had bad luck to balance the good. If Leal Andrew brought a blessing, his son brought a curse, which still endures."

"What is the curse, ma'am?"

"It's too long a story," said Mistress Sally hastily; "you had better go, sir, for the sun is high, and see, the children are out from school. They'll be asking you for a tune, I'm thinking."

At this hint Warwick again thanked the good-hearted landlady, and took his leave. Half-way across the green he struck up a lively measure, whereat the school-children followed dancing in his wake as he marched along. It was a repetition of the Pied Piper of Hamelin.

CHAPTER III

ADVENTURES ARE TO THE ADVENTUROUS

ON leaving that hospitable inn, it was Warwick's intention to push on towards London; but so stimulated was his curiosity by the landlady's chatter about the Lelanro family, that he determined to look again on that tantalizing wall, which apparently concealed some strange secret. With this intent he retraced his way across the bridge, still drawing onward by his fiddling the dancing children, and strolled over the meadows in the direction of the Manor. Here, anxious to rid himself of his innocent company, he sat down under a tree, and played to their restless feet until they were fairly wearied out. Then he nodded a kind farewell, and leaving them to pick buttercups till the school-bell rang, he betook himself along the banks of the stream.

This rustic river, of no great width, parted two landscapes markedly dissimilar in character. On the further side a forest of oak, and sycamore, and ash, and birch covered a round swelling hill; and at its foot, numerous large rocks thrust themselves from amid the green foliage into the turbid waters. Overshore the stream fretted and whitened round the Titanic stones, but swept smoothly onward, deep and silent, under the shadow of the bank whereon Warwick stood. Thence spread fat meadow lands dotted with ancient trees, and divided by flowering hedges, the rigid intersecting lines of which assimilated the plain to a chess-board. Through this fertility the high-road meandered white and dusty to where the vision was stayed by low-lying hills undulating against the blue June sky. As a finishing touch to the contrast, the peaked roofs of the Manor House showed themselves in the dip of the land, between forest slope and low-lying meadow, linking,

as it were, the mountain with the vale, past savagery with present domesticity, being at once a feudal castle and a modern mansion.

After a careless glance at this scene, which would have longer enchained the eye of an artist, Warwick passed into the path which wound tortuously along the flowery banks. Here the green arcade overhead was vocal with the song of bird and hum of insect, while the murmur of the fretting water added a deeper note. Through the boles of the trees which fringed the meadows in a single line he now and then caught a glimpse of slowly-moving cattle, of scampering foals and playful lambs. From such a pastoral landscape his attention was distracted by the trout leaping after May-flies, and in the green twilight of the woods beyond he saw the brown flash of a squirrel springing from one tree-trunk to another. Across the stream flitted glittering dragon-flies and droning bumble-bees, while aloft swallows whirled hither and thither; and from the arching blue rained down the music of an invisible lark. The peaceful beauty of the whole stole imperceptibly into the heart of the wayfarer, and for the moment he questioned whether it would not be wiser to accept the offer of Mistress Sally and make music for the villagers, than to tempt the blows of Fate in far-off toiling, moiling London.

"Here I could be happy," thought he, leisurely strolling onward. "No care, no trouble, no dread, only rest and comfort, and infinite peace. Merely with a violin and an ambition to be a musician, it is madness to go to London, where I would be but a drop in the ocean. That man of whom my father spoke may not be disposed to help me, and then what should I do?—I, with no friends, no money, with not even a name; a waif, a tramp, a bastard for aught I know. Yet it would be ignoble to rest in my present ignorance of birth and position."

At this stage of his musings the path rounded a curve of the river, and began to slope gently upward. The gables

of the Manor House were now close at hand, and Warwick, mounting the declivity, found himself able to command a fine view of the whole building. Surrounded on three sides by the woods, its mass lay directly on the verge of the stream, which here flowed ominously swift under a Cyclopean wall. From the waters, sullen in their gloom, these grey stones, looking massive enough to resist cannon, rose abruptly for close on twenty feet. Not a loophole, not a window, not even a chink was to be seen in its stern front, and the whole length was draped with dark-green ivy, which accentuated its forbidding appearance. Above this shot the red-tiled roofs, peaked and steep, round turrets, pierced with narrow windows, and lines of machicolated battlements grey with age; the whole jumbled together in picturesque confusion. With the stream moat-like at its foot, and the wild woods on either side, this curious building resembled a feudal castle, such as Doré drew for the tales of Rabelais. Here a robber chief might have dwelt; here a magician might have kept in durance some enchanted princess; yet the building was set in the heart of England, and promised no more extraordinary adventure than the commonplace kind, incident to our prosaic and law-protected existence. Civilization kills the romance of road, and river, and lonely country house.

Much struck with the sight of this wood-encircled castle dominating the swift stream, Warwick looked at it long and earnestly, and finally he sat under a shady oak to make his midday meal. After this he purposed to return to the bridge, and so pursue his way to London along the high-road. Despite the romance of the place, which engendered dreams and set strange melodies floating through his brain, Warwick was too young and healthy to neglect the food provided by Mistress Sally. He finished the meat-pie and the bottle of ale, reserving the bread and cheese for his supper; then throwing himself full length on the soft grass, he smoked luxuriously, and eyed wall and turret and

gable through the blue clouds which rolled from his pipe. Seen through so misty a veil, the mansion became enchanted; and in the glamour of his dreaming brain it was less a common country house than a castle of faery.

"I might be heir to a mansion like that," thought the romantic Warwick. "Every one seems to take me for a gentleman; so why should I not be one? I was born in the humble booth of a fair, it is true; but my father could never discover his place of birth. And how can he expect me to learn it from this?"

The reference was to a slip of paper which he took out of his pocket-book. Thereon was written a name and a date—the name, "Algernon"; the date, "December 24, 1857."

"My father said the secret could be solved by this," murmured the youth; "but though I have pored over it for hours, never have I been able to gain a hint of its meaning. It may be a cryptogram, a rebus, a cipher, a Chinese puzzle, for all I know. But a name and a date are poor material for a man to trace his progenitors."

He replaced the precious paper, which contained his future, in the pocket-book, and leaning his elbow on the grass, he continued to soliloquize aloud:

"My father's friend in London may reveal the truth; but it is hardly likely. If he would not tell my father, he certainly will not tell me. Perhaps he cannot; but at all events I'll see this Ballard as soon as I set foot in London. Ballard," he added, starting up; "why, that is the name of the kind landlady. I wonder if she is any connection of my town friend? What a fool I was not to inquire! However, it's not too late. I'll return for the night to the 'Lelanro Arms,' and question her closely."

This suggestion of the "Lelanro Arms" turned his thoughts towards the family of that name, and to the hints given by Mistress Sally concerning a mystery connected with their mansion. A thousand fancies haunted the

imaginative brain of Warwick as he stared at the menacing wall, and he wondered greatly what mystery could be concealed behind it. Stories occurred to him of great families cursed with secrets engendered by the evil doings of former generations, secrets so terrible that they drove all cheerfulness from the heart, and banished all smiles from the face. No one knew what these secrets might be, yet they tortured the heart of many a proud noble and long-descended squire. From what he had heard and seen, it would appear that the Lelanros concealed some such indefinable horror in house and heart, which blighted the existence of all who bore their name. Mistress Sally hinted as much, and the mighty wall, so out of keeping with the law-protected security of an English home, confirmed the hint.

Dominated by the thought, Warwick no longer beheld in the mansion a castle of faery, but a blood-stained house, groaning under a curse. From the past came forth a power to render it infamous and desolate. No smile was on the lips of its lord ; no stranger was admitted within its gates, and it loomed across the stream deadly and sullen ; accursed, to the inflamed fancy of this lad, as ever was the dwelling of Atreus. Blue was the sky above it, green were the woods around it, and limpid the stream that sparkled under the lichened wall ; yet to Warwick it scowled an abode of evil, a haunted mansion of crime and desolation. In the bright sunshine he shivered at the thought of what tales those hoary walls could tell, were they gifted with speech.

To dispel so gloomy a mood, he hastily seized his violin and improvised a merry air, which was more in keeping with the glory of that summer day. The notes chased one another in airy flight, and thrilled and trilled like a choir of birds. Into the musician's soul Nature poured the suggestion of her fecund beauty, and under flying bow and lithe fingers the strains echoed through the warm air like the melodies of light tripping fairies. It was no passionate

love-song, no melody begotten by the thought of human pain and grief, but an elfish carol, heartless and beautiful as Nature herself. She was the inspirer, and passing from the soul of her interpreter to the instrument, she rendered herself audible in silver cascades of hurrying notes. The voice of the stream, the trill of the lark, sigh of wind, and rustle of leaves were all blent in the magic strain, which rose and fell fitfully with joyous gladness.

In the interval of a brilliant passage, Warwick paused with a look of wonderment on his mobile face, for in the distance sounded a sweet voice mocking the cadences of his instrument. Pure and silvery as the note of a bird, it rippled from over stream, and he became aware that some one was singing in emulation behind the ivy-clad wall. To test the truth of the echo he hastily improvised a sparkling run, and paused. The unseen singer took it up, and executed the whole passage with faultless precision, in clear-sounding notes. He again swept the bow across the strings; and again the human echo mocked his fantasy. Then ensued a delicate duet, in which the notes of the violin trilled across the stream, to be met midway by similar strains. Note for note the hidden voice replied to the violin's melody. Then Warwick paused, and the voice sang alone; he re-executed the melody, and so instrument and singer fluted together like mocking-birds.

"This is an adventure of faery," cried Warwick, when he could no longer provoke a reply. "I would give anything to see this caged bird."

He pictured to himself a delicate maiden prisoned behind those grim stones, and laying down his violin, he descended the green slope to the banks of the river, as though then and there intending to swim across and storm the prison. This fantastic adventure appealed greatly to his fancy, and, parted from all knowledge of the singer by wall and stream, he sat meditating on the flowery marge. Nevertheless, despite his ardent curiosity, he had no intention of swim-

ming stream or of scaling wall, as it was not his business, or right, to thrust himself into the affairs of the Lelanro family. All he decided to do was to return to the inn, and, if possible, to learn from Mistress Sally what bird was caged in that woodland castle. Such was his intent, but Fate took the matter into her own hands, and thrust him forward on a path whence there was no retreat.

Wrapped in his dreams of the hidden singer, he did not note how insecure was the bank on which he reclined. The water had eaten away the under-part, and though Warwick was ignorant of his danger, he was seated on a mere shell of matted grass and earth, beneath which swirled the current. Unexpectedly his seat collapsed, and before he could collect his scattered thoughts he found himself swept into mid-stream, swimming for dear life. Notwithstanding the heat of the day, the water was bitterly cold, and the youth, chilled and numbed by the sudden immersion, was almost helpless in the grip of the current.

Fortunately Warwick was a good swimmer, but encumbered by his clothes, and cramped by the cold wave, he could not regain the shelving bank whence he had fallen. The main strength of the current rushed directly past the wall, and thither, in spite of all his efforts, the youth was borne. Dreading lest his strength should give way, he seized the roots of the ivy which, huge and gnarled, dipped in the stream, and with a powerful effort drew himself upward from the water which threatened to suck him down. Half bewildered by the shock, and the position in which he found himself, he saw that he was fully committed to the adventure; and, as there was no other means by which he could hope to save his life, he clambered with difficulty up the natural ladder formed by the roots and sprays of the ivy. Emerging at the top of the wall from shadow to sunshine, the change was too sudden; and smitten by the fierce beams, he was seized with vertigo.

But a moment he balanced himself on the wall, and saw, as in a dream, the stream on one side, a garden on the other, when, losing senses and hold, he reeled dizzily and fell downward into what seemed to be a gulf of roaring gloom.

CHAPTER IV

IN LILLIPUT

WHEN Warwick came to himself, he was conscious of a dull pain on the top of his head, and of a wet cloth lying across his forehead. Still confused, he did not at once open his eyes, but lay silent and inert, endeavouring to pick up the threads of life where recollection failed him. His soul, lately on an excursion into the unknown, whence it had brought back no report, reunited itself to the body with a sudden shock which thrilled his frame with pain and dread. Then memory awoke, and he recalled his fall into the stream, his scaling of the wall, and finally the utter blank which had whelmed him on the other side of the parapet. Between that and this he could recall nothing. At some indefinite period he had bestridden an ivied wall in the hot sunshine; but he could not even guess at his present situation. So bewildered was his brain, that for the moment he neither opened his eyes nor attempted to comprehend his position.

While thus lying, dead and buried, as it seemed to him, for he had no feeling of contact with the actual world, a sweet voice began piping a song in low tones. It was the same singing he had evoked with his violin; but now shrilled delicately, as though the vocalist were afraid of rousing him from slumber. As in a dream he heard the voice shape itself into song:

Sir James, tae guard his soul fra ill,
Hae plucked the rowan berry,
And walked him, in the moonlicht chill,
Where faery folk dance merry.

Oh, lay ye doon the rowan twig,
An' taste oor wine o' broom,
Or mickle dole, on hairt an' soul,
We'll gie ye for a doom.

Here the ballad abruptly ended, as a deep voice jarred on the silvery sweetness of the strain.

"Pray be silent, Madam Tot," said the voice, "you will wake our patient."

"Not so, doctor," replied the singer lightly, "his soul is not there, but in the kingdom of faery with my kinsfolk."

"We must try and bring it back to his body then," said the doctor. "The lad has been severely shaken by his fall; but as no bones are broken I trust he will soon be all right. You stay beside him, Madam Tot, while I go for some wine."

"Send Blunderbore to me," cried the lady, as the other departed. "I wish him to see after my summer-house, broken by the fall of this giant."

The idea that he was a giant so tickled Warwick, that, notwithstanding his aching head, he could not forbear a quiet laugh, and opened his eyes to see into what odd quarter of the world he had wandered. The sight of the room in which he lay made him doubtful of his sanity, and he began to think that he had been thrust into a doll's house; everything was on so small a scale that he indeed felt as though he were a giant in the land of Lilliput.

He was lying on the floor with his head resting on a tiny sofa, and on looking upward he saw that the ceiling was so low that he could almost touch it by simply stretching up his arm. Tables and chairs on the same miniature scale were scattered about the apartment, and the doors and windows were commensurate to the size of the chamber. The hangings were of green, as also was the carpet, and

everything betrayed daintiness and refinement, as though the room were inhabited by a luxurious doll. It was little wonder that these dwarfish surroundings confused the young man who so unexpectedly found himself amongst them. To lose consciousness in the actual world, and recover sensibility in the land of pigmies, is a rare, almost an inconceivable experience for the average human being.



“ ‘ Am I in Lilliput ? ’ asked he faintly . ”

The doll herself, who was seated on a little chair, started up when she heard his laugh, and hastened lightly towards him. This lady was a dwarf, not more than three feet in height, but so beautifully proportioned that for the moment she did not strike Warwick as anything out of the ordinary. But for her white hair and wrinkled face he would have taken her for a child. She was dressed in a green robe, with a silver belt, and wore a hat of the same hue,

adorned with white feathers. Leaning on an ebony cane, she nodded and smiled at Warwick ; while he could hardly forbear an exclamation of wonder at this perfect reproduction of a human being on a smaller scale. Head, body, hands, feet, all matched one another, and beyond the fact that she was three feet high instead of five or six, there was nothing incongruous or repellent in her looks. Evidently the chamber had been proportioned and furnished in accordance with her stature ; and so strong was the impression created by this congruity, that Warwick looked upon himself, rather than on her, as an abnormal creature, and felt that he had no right to intrude his clumsy bulk into the miniature world presided over by this diminutive beauty.

“Am I in Lilliput?” asked he faintly, with an amazed glance at the green-clad faery.

“You are in my chamber,” replied the dwarf in a sweet, low voice, quite in keeping with her tiny personality. “You fell off the wall on to my summer-house ; but that its thatched roof broke your fall, you would have been killed ; for you tumbled,” added the little lady solemnly, “from an enormous height.”

Warwick laughed, as he quite conceived how infinitely high the wall would appear in the eyes of this little creature ; seeing that he, a full-grown man, found it sufficiently lofty. He looked down at his limbs, which seemed unnaturally large in this chamber, where everything was reduced to suit the physical requirements of its dwarfish inmate, and wondered how he got in at the narrow and low door. Madam Tot, as the doctor had called her, guessed his thoughts, and smiled again. She had a very pretty smile, and revealed a row of pretty teeth as she anticipated his speech by a ready explanation.

“Blunderbore found you, sir, and it was Blunderbore who put you into my room, at my request.”

“Who is Blunderbore?” demanded Warwick, with a vague recollection of some nurse's story.

"He is my guardian here," replied the lady in a dignified tone, "and I call him Blunderbore because he is so tall and strong. But his real name is Simon."

"Is he coming in here? I heard you tell the doctor to send him."

Madam Tot threw up her tiny hands, and shrieked in a horrified manner—

"My dear young man, Simon couldn't get inside that door. He's much over six feet in height. It was as much as we could do to get you in."

"Why didn't you leave me in the garden then?"

"Because I wanted you in here," replied the dwarf in a peremptory tone; "you have surprised a secret, sir, and you shall not leave this place until the will of my brother is known."

"But, Madam Tot," expostulated Warwick, remembering that she had been so addressed, "I——"

"Madam Tot, you rude person," shrieked the lady, stamping a tiny foot, "how dare you call me by that odious name! I am Miss Selina Lelanro."

"And your brother?"

"Is James, Lord Lelanro! You must call me Miss Lelanro! And now, sir, what were you doing on my wall? No evasions, no lies, no fictions," cried she sternly, "or I will order Blunderbore to throw you into the river again."

Thus warned, Warwick was about to attempt an explanation, when the door opened, and a large head framed in red hair and red whiskers filled up the opening. The owner was evidently kneeling in the passage outside, and, unable by reason of his bulk to enter, adopted this mode of learning the commands of his dwarfish mistress. This apparition of a head belonged, as Warwick rightly guessed, to the redoubtable Simon, alias Blunderbore.

"Oh, Blunderbore," said Miss Lelanro, tripping forward, "go and see after the roof of my summer-house at once."

"Yes, Madam Tot——"

"Miss Lelanro, you oaf!"

"Yes, Miss Lelanro," replied the head submissively; "and what about the gentleman? Am I to throw him into the river again?"

"You've been listening, I see, Blunderbore," said the dwarf disdainfully. "No, you are not to touch him. I shall attend to him with Dr. Pryce. But get the Blue Room ready, as he will stay here till Lord Lelanro returns."

By this time Warwick guessed that he had surprised the secret of the Lelanros. Some hereditary taint in the blood produced at intervals a dwarf in the family, similar to the little being who now stood beside him. On account of their deformity, these poor creatures, suffering through no fault of their own, were shut up within the high wall; and the outside world was ignorant of their existence. Warwick recalled the hints of Mistress Sally, and he no longer wondered that a cloud rested on the faces of the Lelanro family. To have such abnormal creatures prisoned in their country house was quite sufficient to weigh on their spirits, and Warwick thought how many dwarfs, born to solitude and disgrace, had inhabited this tiny chamber.

He expected that, alarmed at the secret being known to a stranger, the servants who attended on the dwarf would not let him depart without the sanction of Lord Lelanro; and foresaw that until the owner of the house returned from London, he would be obliged to regard himself as a prisoner. The gigantic Simon, evidently chosen to prevent such invasions of the dwarf's chamber, was quite powerful enough to keep him there by force, and moreover there was the doctor to be reckoned with. Warwick wondered what manner of a man he would prove to be, and mentally considered how his story would be received.

At this moment the head of Blunderbore vanished in a magical manner, and Miss Lelanro tripped back to the side

of her unexpected guest with a resolute look on her elfish face.

"Now, sir," said she, with an imperious tap of her ebony cane, "what is your name?"

"Algernon Warwick."

"What are you, Mr. Warwick?"

"A wandering fiddler!"

"Oh!" cried the lady, "it was you, then, who played this morning!"

"Yes, Miss Lelanro; and it was you who sang?"

"It was I. Your music pleased me very much, but I hardly expected the honour of a visit."

"I assure you it was quite unintentional on my part," urged Warwick, anxious not to offend this dainty lady. "I fell into the river by accident, and was carried away by the current. It swept me under your wall, and to save myself from being sucked under, I gripped the roots of the ivy which overhangs the stream. Had I not done so I should have been drowned. As it was I could not hang there indefinitely, so I clambered up the wall, with no intention of invading your privacy, but only intent on saving myself. The sun beating on my bare head turned me giddy, and I fell into your garden; but I assure you, Miss Lelanro, I might just as easily have tumbled out as in, and so into the stream again."

The dwarf listened gravely to this explanation, with her head cocked on one side like that of a pert sparrow. When he paused she nodded approvingly, and supplied him with the sequel to his adventure.

"I was in my garden, Mr. Warwick, and I saw you fall. It was fortunate I had left my summer-house, else I might have been crushed under its ruins. My cry of alarm brought Blunderbore to my assistance, and seeing that you were stunned he carried you in here by my order. Then I sent for Dr. Pryce, who is now attending to you."

"Am I to consider myself your prisoner, Miss Lelanro?"

"You are to consider yourself my guest," replied the little creature, with great dignity. "I have given orders that a chamber is to be prepared for you. Not one like this," added she, looking round the doll's house with ludicrous complacency, "but a grown-up apartment furnished to suit your size. Dr. Pryce will be here shortly to conduct you there, and in the meantime, Mr. Warwick, I shall take my leave, to see Blunderbore repairing my summer-house."

"I apologize for my misfortune in having crushed it," said Warwick gravely, though secretly amused by the dwarf's self-importance.

"Not at all! not at all!" replied Madam Tot, pausing at the door of her chamber to wave a gracious pardon, "it was not your fault. I exonerate you from all blame, and I shall make your stay at the Manor as pleasant as I possibly can."

When she disappeared, Warwick fell to thinking of the strange situation in which he had been placed by Fate. Certainly, in leaving the inn but a few hours previously, he had not expected to find himself in such straits. Here he was, in the secret portion of the Lelanros' house, in possession of a knowledge which they jealously concealed from the world; and he wondered how the head of the family would deal with one who innocently had unmasked the curse which was their hereditary burden. From these considerations, which were somewhat unsatisfactory, Warwick's thoughts reverted to his violin lying under the oak tree beyond the stream, and he resolved to ask Miss Lelanro to have it brought hither by Blunderbore. It would at least solace his captivity, and moreover, as the dwarf was fond of music, he could hope to entertain her on occasions.

At this point of his reflections Dr. Pryce entered the room. Though not a dwarf, he was considerably under the stature of the average human being, and had no difficulty in penetrating into the chamber. A mild, benign face he

owned, with kindly eyes and a white beard; yet he was so lacking in ordinary comeliness that he resembled some gnome king, the father of the dwarfish faery in green. With slow steps he advanced towards Warwick, and presented a glass of wine.

"Drink this, Mr. Warwick," he said, placing it to the young man's lips, "and then come with me to your room."

"You know my name, doctor."

"Madam Tot has just told me your name and story," replied Pryce, stroking his beard. "Your entry here was purely accidental, yet none the less regrettable on that account. But we will talk of these things later on. Meanwhile, leave the chamber of Miss Lelanro, and come to your own quarters. Your head still aches?"

"Very badly, and I feel rather sick."

"Ay, ay! A sleep will do you good. Bend your head, Mr. Warwick, and your shoulders also. Remember," added the doctor, smiling, as he assisted the young man to leave the room, "you are in the kingdom of Lilliput."

Whether it was a recurrence of his former vertigo, or that Pryce had put an opiate in the wine, Warwick did not clearly know; but at the door of the chamber his senses again left him, and his last recollection was of being picked up like a child by the gigantic Blunderbore.

CHAPTER V

THE NEW GULLIVER

WISEACRES, who are merely simpletons in disguise, are fond of declaring that romance is a thing of the past; although by so foolish an assertion they unwittingly nullify their claim to wisdom. Unable, by reason of their

shallow understandings, to take in other than external evidence, they deem romance to appertain exclusively to courts of kings and picarooning expeditions; to require doublets, and swords, and masks; to necessitate haunted chamber, lonely castle, and picturesque inn; as though romance, which may be termed the miracle of circumstance, were not independent of wardrobe, scene, and conjunction of planets. Romance is as much with us to-day as ever it was with our forefathers; but less apparent to the eye, less insistent in thrusting itself athwart the current of daily life, it conceals itself under the mask of the commonplace. To him who seeks shall it be given.

In the present instance Algernon Warwick, by no means heroic in circumstance or requirement, found himself placed, almost against his will, in as romantic a situation as was ever conceived by poet or novelist. To say that a handsome youth, apparently a disguised noble, took shelter in a village inn, penetrated through a wild forest, and scaled the walls of a feudal castle to rescue an enchanted princess, is to treat the subject in the romance vein. To relate that a fiddling tramp slept in a wayside hotel, trespassed on private property, and feloniously gained admission into a country house, where he saw an undersized lady, is to tell the same story in plain words. Yet the one description is fitted for a faery tale, while the other, similar in all respects, smacks of everyday life. In this way, when a story is related in plain prose, does your wiseacre refuse to credit it with the elements of romance. Nevertheless, romance it may be called.

Warwick considered his adventure by the light of an imaginative brain, and far from scorning it as commonplace and prosaic, he adorned it with all the hues of fantasy. Miss Lelanro was not an undersized lady, but a dwarf who doubtless had elfish blood in her veins; the country house was an enchanted castle, Dr. Pryce a fair representative of a kindly magician, and Blunderbore a giant, dull and

spiteful. In such wise can the alchemy of a youthful and poetic imagination transmute the prosaic into the romantic.

Yet he had some excuse for so poetizing, for the strangeness of his surroundings lifted his life out of the ordinary commonplace of existence. The dwarfish lady was full of fancies concerning the reason of her tiny stature; and although Dr. Pryce, hardened man of science as he was, professed to explain the matter on physiological grounds, Warwick infinitely preferred the fantastic legend related by Madam Tot.

"You must know," said she, several days after his unexpected arrival, "that one of my ancestors, Sir James Lelanro, went to visit the old ferry-house of his father, Leal Andrew. The hut was ruined and the boat gone, so, unable to cross the river or to retrace his steps, Sir James wrapped himself in his mantle and lay down on the bare ground to sleep till morning. By chance he had gathered a twig of the rowan tree, which protects mortals from faery power, and also gives them faery vision. With the rowan twig in his hand, Sir James woke at midnight when the moon was full, and he saw the little people arrayed in green, holding their revels. They danced and sang, and drank their wine o' broom from goblets of gold fashioned by the gnomes. Not knowing that Sir James by the magic of the rowan twig could espy their solemnity, they paid no attention to his presence, but skipped merrily in the moonshine. Remembering the story of the Musgraves, one of whom thieved a crystal cup from the faeries, since called the Luck of Edenhall, which brought fortune to the family, Sir James thought he would steal a goblet also, so as to ensure a fair future to his race. With this idea he stretched out his hand and picked up a faery cup lying on the grass. Then the little people knew that he saw them, and with furious gestures demanded back their golden goblet. Sir James refused to restore it, and as they were unable

to harm him because of the rowan twig, the chief faery pronounced a doom on him and his.

“‘You have stolen our cup,’ said the faery, ‘and for that we will steal a child from every generation of your family. It will be taken to faeryland, and we will leave in its place a changeling who will work woe to you and yours.’

“With this speech the faeries vanished and Sir James fell asleep. He awoke to find himself on the wet grass, amid the ruins of Leal Andrew’s hut, with the golden goblet firmly clutched in his right hand, and so took his departure from the spot. Since then,” said Madam Tot solemnly, “the little people have stolen a child from every generation of the Lelanros, and left in place of it a changeling. I am no Lelanro, Mr. Warwick, though I call myself one, for the real mortal is in faeryland, and I am the changeling.”

“You are then a faery,” said Warwick, smiling at the belief of the little creature.

“A faery without the power of one,” gravely replied the dwarf in all good faith. “I am of faery stature, I wear the livery of the little people, but my power is taken from me, and I shall work no spells till I return at the end of my mortal life to faeryland.”

“And what of the goblet which caused all this trouble? Does it still exist?”

“No. A grandson of Sir James Lelanro sold it to supply the necessities of Charles Stewart when he was in need of money. No one knows where the faery cup now is,” she added, “but the changeling remains. Every generation of Lelanros has had one of the little people placed in the cradle.”

Hardly had Madam Tot ceased speaking when, feather-headed and in consequence as a child, she ran off in chase of a white butterfly, and left Warwick in the company of Pryce. They were in the garden under the shadow of the

great wall, and at the conclusion of the legend the young man turned towards the doctor with a smile.

"So much for the ideal," said he inquiringly; "now for the real. What is the reason of this dwarfish strain in the Lelanro family?"

"I am afraid science cannot answer that question," replied Pryce, shaking his head; "it is one of the mysteries of Nature. The Lelanros are usually tall and well-formed; but every now and then a dwarf is born."

"To every generation?"

"No. Sometimes a generation is free, and all the children attain ordinary stature. But the strain is sure to come out again, even after the lapse of years. There is physical as well as mental heredity, you know, Mr. Warwick."

"I believe so," replied Warwick mechanically, for his thoughts were elsewhere. "I suppose these Lelanro dwarfs never marry."

"Assuredly not," said Dr. Pryce emphatically. "Who would marry an abnormal creature like that? It would be cruel and unwise. When a dwarf is born to the family it is placed here, and its life is made as pleasant as possible. That little being is far happier here than she would be were she allowed to be seen by all, and mocked at for her deformity."

"But she is not deformed."

"Not in the usual sense of the word," assented the doctor thoughtfully; "but her stature is against Nature. Were she fully grown she might be as hideous as Caliban, and yet be able to mix with her fellow-creatures. As it is, the very beauty of her diminutive person would attract attention and curiosity; and as the Lelanros are a proud family, they naturally do not care to have one of their members so regarded by the world."

"Nobody knows of the existence of Madam Tot?"

"No one, save myself, Simon, and Mrs. Vard, the female

attendant. Our little friend is kindly treated, and, as you see, she has every comfort. Do you not think yourself that she is better here than exposed to the jeers of the world?"

"I must say that I do. She seems a childish being."

"She is shrewd in some things, Mr. Warwick; but having no experience of life she is still in the stage of childhood, although close on sixty years of age."

"Sixty years of age," sighed Warwick sympathetically; "a long time to pass in captivity."

"I beg of you not to use that word, sir," said the doctor reprovingly, "it is not captivity to her; and you must not put such ideas into her head. Though, perhaps," added the doctor, divining the reason of the sigh, "you object to your detention here."

"Not at all, doctor. I am willing to remain till Lord Lelanro arrives."

"He is coming here next week, Mr. Warwick, and he will then see you on the subject of your unfortunate intrusion here. I hope you do not blame me for detaining you, sir, as, all things being taken into consideration, I could act in no other way."

"I am not at all angry with you," said Warwick, taking the hand of the elder man, "and I have no objection to pass a few weeks in the company of so accomplished a scholar. But neither you nor Lord Lelanro need mistrust me, as my lips are sealed by honour on all points regarding this place. I will breathe no word of it to a soul."

"I quite believe you, Mr. Warwick. From the moment you came I saw that you were a gentleman."

"I'm afraid you saw wrong, doctor," replied the young man, flushing. "I am not a born gentleman."

"Of that I know nothing, Mr. Warwick; but you certainly give me a strong impression that your birth is not so lowly as you would imply."

"Some day I shall tell you my story, doctor, and then you can judge for yourself."

With this promise the other was obliged to be content, although he could hardly contain his very natural curiosity concerning this attractive young stranger. Several times he had hinted at the advisability of Warwick making a confidant of him; but with constant good-humour the youth declined to reveal his past life.

“If necessary I shall relate my history to Lord Lelanro,” said he decisively, “and it is very probable that, as I have unwittingly become possessed of his secret, I shall place myself unreservedly in his hands. But till then, Dr. Pryce, I prefer to keep my own counsel.”

There was so much quiet determination in this reply, that Pryce could not but admire the good sense of the young man. Notwithstanding Warwick's assertion of his humble birth, the doctor could not believe that one so refined in looks and manner could come of other than gentle blood. Moreover, in their frequent conversations, Warwick showed himself to be a well-educated man; and in a moment of negligence let slip the information that he had been at a prominent public school. As wandering fiddlers do not as a rule attend such high scholastic establishments, the good doctor settled in his own mind that Warwick was a youth of good family who had run away from home, and feared to tell his tale lest he might be reclaimed by his parents. Yet as he confessed to twenty-two years of age, and was therefore beyond tutelage, this was hardly a satisfactory explanation. Nevertheless, in default of a better it was accepted silently by Dr. Pryce.

Warwick found his life at the Manor fairly pleasant. The domain of the dwarfs was shut off from the rest of the house, and beyond the barrier so placed he was not permitted to go. The high wall along the river completely excluded strangers on that side, and heavy doors, stoutly barred, kept out prying servants from the interior of the mansion. Madam Tot, as she was usually called, had a suite of tiny apartments furnished commensurate to her

size ; but the rest of the wing appertaining to the enclosed dwelling was arranged for the accommodation of grown-up people. To Warwick was assigned a comfortable chamber, and he passed most of his time in the study of Dr. Pryce, or in the garden, with Madam Tot for company.

That garden amused and delighted Warwick. It was three acres in extent, and sloped gently from the house to the huge wall which overhung the river. Everything that art could do, was done to make it a pleasant domain ; but all was on a dwarfish scale, in keeping with the tiny stature of the manikin. There were stunted trees of no great size, many low shrubs, and wide spaces of lawn, interspersed with brilliant flower-beds. Statues of white marble, fashioned like tiny dolls, stood on low pedestals. A miniature Venus smiled beside a shallow pool, a dwarfish Bacchus grasped an infinitesimal bunch of grapes, a pigmy Apollo bent a childish bow, and Hebe, less in stature than Madam Tot herself, proffered a doll's cup from her pedestal. The efforts of the designer of this miniature paradise had been directed towards a complete reduction of everything to a size in keeping with the tiny personality of the dwarf. Flowers, shrubs, trees, statues, summer-house, all were ideally small, and the high walls surrounding this pigmy paradise looked inconceivably high in comparison with the domain they enclosed. So rare a spectacle afforded Warwick no little pleasure.

"Decidedly, I am in the kingdom of Lilliput," said he, on the first glimpse of this garden ; "it is not given to every one to be a Gulliver of the nineteenth century. Swift's fantasy has come true in my case."

CHAPTER VI

MADAM TOT AND HER FRIENDS

WHEN Warwick learned from Dr. Pryce that Lord Lelanro, informed of his unexpected discovery of the family secret, was coming over from Paris for the express purpose of an interview, he received the news with much satisfaction. Pleasant and novel as was his position, he scarcely relished the idea of an indefinite captivity; and, habituated by custom to constant wandering, to seeing fresh faces and new neighbourhoods, he chafed at the narrow limits of his present dwelling. He trusted that an explanation, and a promise of secrecy to Lord Lelanro, would secure his freedom; and then he could resume his journey to London. In the meantime, being somewhat of a philosopher, he made the best of his anomalous position, and by so doing he gained the goodwill of those into whose company he had been thrown by Fate. In such adaptability lies the true secret of happiness.

The dwarfish lady in particular had taken a violent liking to Warwick; and, in confidence, informed him that he was the handsomest man of her acquaintance. As this was limited to three elderly men, none of whom were remarkable for good looks, the compliment was rather pointless; for Warwick was more attractive than Simon the guardian, Dr. Pryce the medical attendant, or Lord Lelanro, who was even older than his unfortunate sister. These three with Mrs. Vard, a prim antiquated dame who acted as personal attendant and nurse, formed the little world of Madam Tot. In all her sixty years she had seen no other faces, save those of two people who, having died, had been replaced by Simon and Pryce. It is then scarcely to be wondered at that the handsome looks of an engaging

youth like Warwick awakened the femininity of the little creature.

Moreover, her visitor possessed accomplishments which ravished the soul of Madam Tot. He played the violin, which had been sought for and restored to its owner by the redoubtable Blunderbore; he told the most delightful stories, and he could set the poetry—which the dwarf was constantly writing—to beautiful music. Nature, which had denied the ordinary physical advantages of humanity to this being, had gifted her with the soul of a poet, and she had a wonderful facility for stringing verses on such trivial events as varied the monotony of her existence. Sometimes Warwick would suggest a theme, such as “The Faeries,” or “The Stream,” and accompany her on his violin, while Madam Tot would improvise verses thereon, and, excited by music and inspiration, deliver them with the dramatic fury of a diminutive Rachel. But she required many fatiguing compliments at the conclusion of these displays, for she had a childish vanity sufficient to fit out a dozen full-grown human beings.

She took it into her whimsical brain one morning that Warwick had not seen all the glories of her dwelling, and so sought him in Dr. Pryce's library for the purpose of showing him round the house. The young man, who had become very friendly with the old one, was discussing the laws of heredity in relation to the Lelanro dwarfs, a subject on which Pryce was enthusiastic, and being in the full tide of argument, he was unwilling to humour the whim of the little creature. Madam Tot saw this hesitation, and, a common occurrence with her, became fractious.

“What, Mr. Warwick!” she cried, with the shrill voice she affected when angered. “Am I to be disobeyed in my own house, by my own servants—by my own guest?”

“My dear Madam Tot, I——”

“Not that name, I beg, sir. I am Miss Lelanro at present.”

This hinted that Warwick was out of favour, for only when she stood on her dignity did the little lady insist on her rightful appellation. She paused before them, tapping her ebony crutch on the oaken floor like an enraged faery godmother ; and Dr. Pryce, who was fearful of the effect of such uncontrolled passions on her delicate frame, nodded to Warwick that he should accept the invitation ; a hint which he reluctantly accepted.

"Mr. Warwick will go with you, Miss Lelanro," said Pryce in a soothing tone ; "we can finish our argument another time."

"You shall finish it, sir, when I so choose," replied the angered faery. "I wonder you are not afraid to offend me. Remember, I am a changeling, and if I would, could punish you very severely. There are certain friends of mine," finished she significantly, "who do what I ask them. It is as well, doctor, not to offend the good neighbours."

Pryce did not dare to smile at this fantastic speech, but, to soothe her injured dignity, he asked pardon, which was granted after some sulking. Then the doctor returned to his books, and Madam Tot, with great dignity, sailed out of the room, with Warwick after her, like a mighty three-decker in the wake of a tug-boat. He could not forbear a quiet smile at their contrast of bulk and stature.

Delighted at gaining her ends, for she was very human in many ways, the little creature chatted pleasantly, and made herself thoroughly agreeable, a thing which she did not always choose to do. Her moods were various, and succeeded one another with inconsequent rapidity. Sometimes she would be a smiling angel, at others, sulk and pout like a naughty child ; and not unfrequently she gave way to causeless passions of tears. This whimsical nature was condoned by those around as part of her affliction ; and every care was taken to let her have her own way when possible. This constant fostering of her failings frequently

brought out the worst of her traits. So provoking could she be, that Warwick oftentimes wondered if after all she might not be kin to Robin Goodfellow, for she was as tricky, as wayward, as inconsequent as Oberon's henchman. Yet withal the human side of her character, which she now displayed, was so engaging that the young man could not but pet her, as he would an irresponsible child. Poor Madam Tot, so fanciful, so changeable, so lovable.

"Dr. Pryce is a good creature," said she in a patronizing tone when they left the library, "but rather odd—rather odd. He holds views of which I by no means approve. You might not think it, Mr. Warwick, but he disbelieves in ghosts, faeries, witches, and goblins. Quite a sceptic, my dear, quite."

"Has he been here long, Madam Tot?"

"Twenty years, more or less. I had Dr. Gulder for a medical attendant before him. But Gulder died, and Pryce came. I wasn't sorry, my dear, for Gulder was a dreadful ogre. Oh, yes, I have reason to believe," said the little woman mysteriously, "that Gulder was descended from the giant who figures in the tale of Hop-o'-my-Thumb. H'm! yes. An ogre, Mr. Warwick."

By this time they had arrived at an ordinary-sized door, terminating a narrow passage, and Madam Tot pointed upward to the handle.

"Open it, please. I cannot reach so high. You are now about to see my ancestors. Not the grown-up ones, but the little people such as I am. My portrait has lately been added to the collection. Pryce, who is no mean artist, has reproduced my delicate looks in a masterly manner."

It was the strangest picture gallery which Warwick had ever beheld. Of no great extent or height, nevertheless large enough for him to walk thereunder at ease, it was roofed with glass, and on either side were five portraits, life-size, of the Lelanro dwarfs. The whole ten representa-

tions resembled Madam Tot in a marked degree; and it seemed as though Nature, in transmitting delicate body and diminutive stature, had also impressed on each succeeding generation the features of the former. In trunk hose, in farthingales, in wigs and hoops, powder and patches, brocaded coats, and red-heeled shoes, the dwarfs, male and female, were habited in the costumes of their various epochs, and all smiled weird and uncanny-looking out of their several frames. Yet not one was deformed, not one was ungraceful; instead of a gallery of dwarfs it might have been a series of the delicate beings feigned to haunt stream, and wood, and hill.

Madam Tot ran her cane along the pictures, and rattled off the names and histories of her ancestors with great delight. It was noticeable that she termed none of them dwarfs, but characterized them by the suave term of "little people."

"Andrew Lelanro, the son of Sir James who stole the goblet. He was the first of the little people, and here is his sister Margaret, who was quite a beauty. Malcolm, on the left, was a Jacobite, and would have fought for the exiled House of Stewart had he been tall enough. Of course you know," said Madam Tot, breaking off, "that we have always been famous for our devotion to that unfortunate family."

"Yes. I have heard how your ancestor obtained his estates and name," replied Warwick gravely.

"Be Leal and Row," said Madam Tot, with great satisfaction. "Lelanro! I am proud of belonging to so loyal, to so great a house."

Warwick looked sympathetically at the little woman, and wondered if she felt the indignity of her dwarfish stature, which was the penalty of her greatness; but he was soon corrected on that point. Apparently such an idea had never entered her mind, and she regarded her unique personality as an honour rather than as a misfortune.

The ineffable pride with which she talked of this dwarf and the other would have been amusing, had it not been, to Warwick's mind, so pitiful. It reminded him of the fable of the fox who lost his tail, for Madam Tot, not being as tall and bulky as the rest of the human race, affected to despise such as overgrown monsters, and lauded her own delicacy and diminutiveness. In the most conscientious manner she repeated the history of each portrait, and finally came to her own, before which she smirked and smiled with overweening pride.

"You see I am painted in my favourite green colour," said she, simpering; "it is the livery of the good neighbours. You must notice, Mr. Warwick, that I stand in the centre of a faery ring on a mushroom-spotted sward, in allusion to my kinship with faery powers. By the way, there is a Ring of Elves in the garden, Mr. Warwick," she added, following her last thought with noticeable flightiness. "Come and let us seek it. Often have I seen them dance there in the cold moonshine."

It was characteristic of the dwarf that she rarely followed a train of thought for many moments, but let her actions be guided by the last idea which entered her capricious mind. The suggestion of the faery ring delineated in the picture withdrew her thoughts from further leading Warwick through the house; therefore, in pursuance of her last whim, he found himself in the garden. Here he looked down from his five feet odd on a miniature forest of shrubs and low bushes, amid which moved the little lady, chattering shrilly as was her custom when excited.

"Yonder," said she, pointing with her staff, "is the ring of the good neighbours. Pryce—a sceptic, my dear—says it is but a discoloration of the grass; but I know better. He has no rowan-tree twig by which to see things as they are; but I, akin to the people of peace, have a clearer vision, and I can see that here my kinsfolk hold their solemnities."



" Skipped round it in emulation of the faeries."

With this speech, made in all good faith, she showed Warwick a circular patch at the side of the lawn ; and skipped round it in emulation of the faeries till she was out of breath.

"I am old now, my dear," she said pathetically, "and cannot dance as I used to. But a little time and the little people will carry me back to faeryland, where I shall see a great deal of company. I should like to take you with me, Mr. Warwick."

"What, Madam Tot, would you lead me captive thither like a second True Thomas ?"

But the dwarf's attention was already distracted by the sight of the gardener, who advanced towards them, towering over Warwick as much as the youth did over Madam Tot. Simon was a good-natured, stupid sort of creature, greatly given to grumbling, as, despite the high wage he received, he did not care about being penned up in the Manor House. His mistress saluted him with much vivacity, complimented him on his restoration of her summer-house, and then related his history to Warwick, with as much impertinence as though he were not present.

"Simon is a good creature," she said, digging at the legs of the huge man with her cane, "but very stupid, very dull, like all giants. My brother saw him at a fair, where he earned his living in a caravan, and thinking he was tall enough to protect me, hired him as a guardian to my domain. I call him Blunderbore because he is so great an oaf. Here he gets good food, a good bed, he has a kind mistress, and his beer, yet he wants to go out into the wide world."

"There's ne'er a lass here," growled the giant sulkily.

"There, you see," snapped Madam Tot, prodding him with fresh vigour, "this Polyphemus is in love ; he wants a wife. Indeed, no, Blunderbore. I'm not going to let you marry, and people my garden with mountains of flesh ; noisy children who would crush my flowers. Get along

with you. If you want to talk to some one, there's Mrs. Vard."

Blunderbore growled out something to the effect that Mrs. Vard was an old hag, then moved away to attend to his work ; while Madam Tot, seizing her last idea, was all on the alert to see Mrs. Vard, and, followed by Warwick, she skipped up the path like a restless doll. At the door of the house they were met by the nurse, a motherly old creature, with a kind, withered face, and white hair. Immediately the dwarf rambled into a history of this last of the beings who populated her world.

"My nurse, Mrs. Vard, is eighty years of age, Mr. Warwick. She was with me when I was born, and has been by my side ever since. I am only sixty, quite a child beside her. I'm afraid she'll die soon," cried the dwarf, bursting into tears, "and then I shall be all alone."

"Don't cry, my dear little one," said Mrs. Vard, picking her up as she would a child, "I'll last a long time yet."

"Till I go back to faeryland, then," sobbed Madam Tot, who always spoke of her death in this ambiguous fashion, "but not before—not before. Who would put me to bed, and sing me songs, and tell me stories, but you, Moggy Vard? I want no one but you. I am extremely attached to you, dear. Send that person away."

This allusion was to Warwick, who, thus ungratefully dismissed, returned to the library, and left the dwarf to recover her smiles in the arms of the faithful Moggy.

CHAPTER VII

A STRANGE STORY

IT was with a certain feeling of uneasiness that Warwick looked forward to the arrival of Lord Lelanro, for he was well aware that his presence at the Manor House laid

him open to disagreeable suspicion and weighty reproof. Though it was true that the immediate cause of his intrusion was accidental, yet it was difficult to explain how he had come to be in the vicinity of wall and stream, without confessing to an undignified curiosity. The path by the river led to no destination, and was far from the high-road, so Warwick could not account for his presence in the Lelanro lands on the pretext that he was pursuing his journey to London. If, therefore, as he expected, although on no reasonable grounds, Lord Lelanro proved to be a severe man, he would be likely to read this trespasser a sharp lecture, such as his pride could ill brook.

Fortunately Warwick was now fairly intimate with the good doctor, and, as this latter was likely to know the idiosyncrasies of his master, the young man resolved to consult him as to the best course to adopt. Hitherto he had not made a confidant of Pryce, owing to a certain amount of inherent reserve; but in this instance he broke through his natural distaste for talking of himself to a stranger, and related as much of his past as he thought fit; reserving the pith of the matter for the ear of Lelanro.

As usual, Pryce was in his study, an apartment of no very great extent, lined on all four sides with well-bound books. The roof was domed, and divided by narrow windows of stained glass, so that the daylight filtering through created a dim twilight, fitted for the monastic quiet of the place. An oriel window, emblazoned with family escutcheons, overlooked the domain of Madam Tot; and where the bookshelves ceased, the walls were draped with antique tapestry, woven with the loves of gods and goddesses. This apartment was luxuriously furnished, yet the tints of draperies and carpets and cushions were so subdued, and the atmosphere was so tenebrous, that the tone of the whole was such as to chill a stranger at the outset. A magician's cave, an anchorite's cell could not have inspired a greater spirit of discomfort.

To Warwick the study was not without a quiet charm of its own, for his imagination found food for dreams and fancies in the sober brown atmosphere. And oftentimes when disposed to reflection, he would ensconce himself in the oriel depths with a tome of ancient learning at his elbow. But again a revulsion of feeling, a longing for wet wind and breezy down, and the memory of warm sunlight asleep on purple uplands, would send him out into the garden, there to fret at the narrow confines of his prison house. Then he would betake himself to his violin, and express this nostalgia of the wilds in capricious strains, passionate with longing and impatient desire. The passing of these fits of Nature-worship always sent him back to books and dreams.

"I hear," said he, laying down his violin on the oriel seat, "that Miss Lelanro expects her brother to-morrow."

"He will be here at noon," replied Dr. Pryce, raising his eyes; "and, I have no doubt, he will at once listen to your explanation."

"Is he a severe man, doctor?"

"He looks so, Mr. Warwick, but at heart he is exceedingly kind. I had not been here else."

"You are a *protégé* of his?"

"Ay, lad," responded the student with a sad smile; "born to a life of strife and temptation, with a nature that could ill withstand such things, I was fast being sucked into the vortex of destruction when Lelanro stretched out his hand and drew me to this safe refuge."

"It was good of him to do so. You have been here many years?"

"Over twenty, sir. When Dr. Gulder died it was necessary that another medical attendant should be obtained for the unfortunate little creature, and I was chosen. Here I have been since, and here I hope to die."

"Do you not find it dull?"

"Ah, youth! youth! youth!" sighed Pryce, shaking his

grey head, "how well I know what you feel. To your two-and-twenty years, Mr. Warwick, this quiet seems dull, this house appears a prison. I never thought so myself. The iron of the world had entered deeply into my heart before I sought refuge here, and I was willing to give up riches, ambition, love, friends, everything for the sake of peace. Some day you will feel as I."

"I trust not," replied Warwick, with a flush. "Movement and freedom are to me the breath of life. I like this quiet on occasions, but there are other times when I long for my former wandering life; to tramp across limitless moors, to listen to the waves breaking on rocky shores, to sleep in the moonlight to the lullaby of the nightingale. That is life—here existence is akin to death."

"You have travelled much?"

"For the last few years, yes," answered the youth carelessly; "and as poverty has made me acquainted with the rough side of the world, I have profited by its teaching."

"You are indeed older than your years, Warwick. I have met with no lad at once so judicious and thoughtful."

"Yet I was neither, to plant myself on the hither side of the stream, and meddle with matters which concerned me not."

"The natural curiosity of youth," responded Pryce composedly; "tell my lord the truth, and I do not think you will find him over severe."

"He is old, is he not?"

"Ay! He bears the weight of eighty years. A wise and renowned gentleman, sir, one who has lived in cities and courts; who has borne his part in the councils of kings and in the wars of the nations. Such a one, Mr. Warwick, is not likely to judge hastily of your youthful folly."

"I hope not," said Warwick, slightly reddening; "and when he hears my story I trust he will find even more excuse. You know," added he after a reflective pause, "that I came advisedly to Dalesford."

"Indeed. It is an out-of-the-way village, certainly."

"I seek in London a man called Ballard," resumed Warwick, paying no attention to the remark, "and as I have reason to believe he comes from this hamlet, I thought it advisable to see the place for myself on my way to town. By taking a slight detour I managed to strike it, and, to my surprise, I slept at an inn kept by a landlady of the same name."

"That will be Mistress Sally. Did you remark on the coincidence?" said the doctor, a trifle embarrassed.

"No. To tell you the truth, I did not think of it until I had left the inn, and was fiddling under the Manor wall. I intended to have returned and questioned Mistress Sally, but that Fate interposed and placed me within these walls."

"Would it be an impertinence on my part to ask your reason for seeking Ballard?"

Warwick hesitated, and drummed fretfully on the table with his fingers, an anxious look clouding his brow. At length he made up his mind to answer in the affirmative.

"I seek him as one who knows my birth and——"

"And parentage," finished Pryce, seeing him hesitate again.

"No. I am aware of my parentage. There is no need to mention that now. When I tell all to Lord Lelanro I will include you as a listener. My father did not know whence he sprang, but he believed firmly that this man Ballard was possessed of such knowledge. Therefore I wish to find him, and if possible to learn the truth."

"You have no clue to your birth?"

"Only this."

Warwick placed before the student the paper inscribed with his name and the date of his father's birth.

"You see, doctor, that bears the name 'Algernon' and the date '24 December, 1857.' The name is that of my father, and the date presumably that of his birth—though.

indeed, I have my doubts as to the latter being correct. Herein, said my father before he died, is concealed the mystery of our race and station."

"A name, a date," said Pryce, examining this scanty clue. "I can make nothing of it. Wherever did your father obtain it?"

"I cannot tell you that, for I don't know."

"H'm! It is a slight guide for so great a matter. You have tried to unravel it?"

"Hundreds of times; but always without success."

"You should give it to Madam Tot," said Pryce, smiling, "she is passionately devoted to charades, and riddles, and cryptograms. She, if any one, will discover the solution of this. To my mind the junction of letters, and figures, hints at a cryptogram; that is," added the student pedantically, "a secret writing wherein the letters are purposely thrown into confusion in order to conceal a secret."

"I have thought so myself," replied Warwick, restoring the paper to his pocket-book; "but it cannot be so, for, as you can see for yourself, there is no confusion. Date and name are both intelligible enough, I think."

"Very true, Mr. Warwick," answered Pryce, drawing his brows together. "Nevertheless in anagrams, for instance, a readable and intelligent sentence can be composed by transposing the letters of a name. In this case it is not impossible that, by placing the letters of the name Algernon in a certain order, another name may be evolved—possibly that of the family to which you belong. However, I am no adept in such literary mysteries. Madam Tot is more likely to unriddle the puzzle than I."

"Good! I shall put Madam Tot's capabilities to the test. Nature often puts great wits in little heads. And now, Dr. Pryce," added Warwick hurriedly, "I have told you so much of my story as suffices for the present. In return let me hear of the Lelanro family, and especially of the head of the house, so that I may know how I stand.

You say that Lord Lelanro is eighty years of age, and that he is lenient in his judgments. What more?"

"He has a grand-daughter."

"So said Mistress Sally, who showed me her portrait. A very charming young lady, with rather a sad expression."

"Ah!" sighed Pryce, shaking his head. "Can you wonder that she is sad, knowing what we know of Madam Tot?"

"Frankly speaking, I do wonder. There is nothing repulsive about the dwarfish lady that should make her relations shudder. And to speak frankly, doctor," continued Warwick decisively, "I see no need to shut up the little creature as though she were a monstrosity."

"The Lelanros do not like to own that they have such a freak in their family. They are very proud, Mr. Warwick."

"And very cruel! I think it is foolish to be sad on account of the pigmy, and to imprison her."

"Every one has his own way of looking at things," responded the doctor dryly, "and the Lelanros think these monstrous births a great infliction. Each member of the family is told of the secret when he or she reaches the age of twenty, and as Miss Celia was informed of it this year, naturally she thinks a great deal about the matter."

"And looks sad on that account. Strange that a sensible human being should be so foolish."

"You do not seem to feel any repulsion at the sight of a dwarf."

"No. Why should I?" answered Warwick frankly. "Madam Tot is beautifully formed, and is a most engaging little creature. Moreover, I have seen—— But there," he added abruptly, "you will hear my principal reason later on. What more of the Lelanro family? Mistress Sally tells me that when the present lord dies his estates and title go to a distant relative."

"True enough, Mr. Warwick. The direct line ends with my patron. He had a son, a fine young man, who was

killed in the hunting field many years ago. His widow afterwards gave birth to a posthumous child—to Miss Celia, and died also. Lord Lelanro was much affected at the death of his heir, and he was greatly grieved when the child proved to be a girl, knowing thereby that the title would pass to his distant relation.”

“Why did he not marry again?”

“Ah, that I can't tell you!” answered Pryce dubiously; “but no doubt he has a reason for continuing a widower.”

“Had he no other children but the son who died?”

The doctor looked oddly at Warwick as he asked this question, and did not answer for some few moments. When he did so it was in an evasive manner, which was in direct contrast to his ordinarily straightforward speech.

“There may have been others, Mr. Warwick; but if so they died.”

“H'm! I wonder if there were any dwarfs?” muttered the young man to himself.

Pryce rose from his chair with a frown, and swung off sharply towards the window. Seeing that he was unwilling to speak further on the subject, Warwick forbore to make any comment on this silence; but nevertheless he reflected that here was another secret connected with this strange family. An odd idea had entered his brain, to which he hardly dared to give credence, yet there it stayed, and there it ripened to fruition many weeks later. The germ was planted that day in the study, when Pryce so awkwardly evaded a plain answer to a plain question.

“Mr. Warwick,” said the doctor, coming towards him with the violin, “now that we have had our talk, play me a tune on this. If all other means fail to propitiate my lord, fiddle yourself into his good graces, for he is as fond of music as is his poor little sister yonder.”

Warwick mechanically placed the instrument under his chin, and grasped the bow as he moved towards the open window. A breath of scented air, borne over the wall

from the distant country, floated into the room, and carried with it that imperative longing for fragrant meadows and dimpling streams which seized him at times. Filled with this nostalgia of the woods, he drew the bow across the strings, and forthwith there leaped out a silvery strain telling of his rustic desires. The flutter of butterflies, the piping of birds at dawn, the dew-sprinkled meads, blent themselves in that pure melody. Carried away by the music rippling from the violin, Warwick closed his eyes, and let his soul float in pursuit of homely dreams; the clink of the milk-pails, the blithe song of the home-coming peasant, swaths lying yellow in the hot harvest sun; again he felt the odour of mown hay in his nostrils, he heard the drowsy hum of the mill-wheel, and listened to the gurgle of the water amid the rustling reeds. Ah! it was a peaceful and beautiful dream transmuted into sound.

A rapid patter of little feet, and Madam Tot, attracted from afar by the music, trotted into the room. In silence she looked up at the musician with a serious face, and in his turn he opened his eyes, to find the little creature at his knee. To please her he tuned a merry country dance fit for blowsy wench and stalwart haymaker; but such rusticity did not please the ethereal soul of the changeling. With a frown she lifted a tiny hand.

“No yokel dance for me,” she cried impulsively. “I want neither rustic strain nor harvest revelry. Think of the little people in the moonshine, who whirl in wavering circles round and round. The owls hoot, the wind rustles the leaves, and the faeries clad in green hold high solemnity. Play for the elves; no rustic round for the peaceful neighbours.”

Wherewith Warwick drew from his instrument a strain so fantastically beautiful that she uttered a cry of surprise, and as the wild music waxed louder and more elfish under the sweeping bow, she picked up her green skirts and footed it merrily. With bound and whirl she spun in

the sunlight, and still the strains echoed through the room.

"My dear," cried she, sinking exhausted to the floor, "you must play in the moonshine. Were I queen of the elves you should be my music-maker."

CHAPTER VIII

THE HEAD OF THE FAMILY

RATHER to his surprise Warwick was not at once accorded an interview by Lord Lelanro, as he had anticipated. On the contrary a whole day elapsed before they came together; and during that time the old gentleman questioned both his sister and Pryce as to the personality and behaviour of the stranger. From each he received an enthusiastic report, which prepossessed him in Warwick's favour; and therefore he maintained a different attitude during the interview, to that which he would have assumed had the young man been uncouth and uncultured. In place of regretting this unexpected arrival, Lelanro, who had a use for the youth, rather congratulated himself on the trick of Fate.

Moreover, the descriptions severally given by Madam Tot and the doctor interested him in no small degree; for he found it difficult to reconcile the statement that Warwick was a gentleman, and a public school boy, with the damning fact that he tramped the country as an itinerant musician. On the instant this ex-ambassador espied a mystery; and it was therefore with no little curiosity that he repaired after dinner to the study of Dr. Pryce for the purpose of conversing with his guest. In reality Warwick regarded himself as a prisoner, which opinion would have considerably surprised the courteous old lord had he known of it; for notwithstanding the abrupt entrance and lowly pro-

fession of the youth, the mere fact that two such excellent judges as Madam Tot and Pryce considered him to be of gentle birth, predisposed Lelanro to regard him in the light of a guest.

Warwick, still in his poor clothes—for, with the exception of clean linen, he had been unable to procure other garments—arose from his seat as Lord Lelanro approached. He beheld a slender and stately old gentleman, carefully arrayed in evening dress, and from his air of command he instinctively guessed the identity of the new-comer. Notwithstanding the sore burden of eighty years, Lelanro's form was not bent, nor was the fire in his blue eyes dimmed to any appreciable extent. Although his crown was bald, yet there was a goodly circle of white locks round his head; he wore a moustache jauntily pointed on the upper lip, an imperial on the chin; both of these were snow-white, and in conjunction with his clear skin, seamed with myriad wrinkles, fine as though drawn by a needle, gave him an air of great distinction. Once Warwick remembered to have seen a portrait of Charles Stewart, and here he beheld the semblance of him in the flesh; nor, to complete the likeness, was wanting the melancholy look that characterized those of that royal and unfortunate House. Scandal hinted at a strain of Stewart blood in the veins of the Lelanros, and certainly the appearance of the present holder of the title went far to confirm the assertion.

Ever courteous, and now the more so as his guest was poor and unknown, Lord Lelanro bowed in recognition of Warwick's respectful greeting, and motioned him to resume his seat. A few moments previously Dr. Pryce had left the study, so that the two were absolutely alone, and being seated by the table on which stood a shaded lamp, Lelanro took advantage of the opportunity to read the face of his guest. With a turn of his hand he so placed the shade that while he remained in shadow the countenance of the young man was in the glare. Thus prepared to note if the facial ex-

pression confirmed what the lips uttered, Lelanro proceeded to open the conversation. Hitherto respect had sealed the lips of his younger companion.



“Arose from his seat as Lord Lelanro approached.”

“Dr. Pryce informs me that your name is Algernon Warwick,” said the elder gentleman in a mellow voice.

“Yes, my lord.”

“And you entered my house by accident.”

"My lord, it was accidental in one way, but not in another," said Warwick, determined to conceal nothing. "But that my foolish curiosity drew me to view the wall on the river's brink, I had not fallen in; and but for such immersion, which in itself was an accident, I had not scaled the wall, and so surprised your secret."

"I am glad to see that you speak frankly," replied Lelanro, favourably impressed by this candid admission. "And may I ask what first roused your curiosity about my house?"

"The wall itself, my lord. I was coming to Dalesford along the high-road, and weary with tramping on the hard stones, I took advantage of a bend in the highway to walk across the fields. By so doing I shortened my journey, and soothed my sore feet. In taking this short cut I passed by your house, and I was much astonished at the massive wall which fronted the river."

"You speak excellently, sir," said the old lord approvingly, "and I note you recognize the value of our English tongue. Proceed."

"I stayed for the night at the 'Lelanro Arms,' my lord, and there I heard some talk of your lordship's family."

"Indeed! Mistress Sally lets her tongue run freely, then."

"By no means, my lord," replied Warwick, distressed at the idea of inculcating the friendly landlady; "she said nothing."

"But looked a great deal."

"My lord, though young in years, experience has taught me how to read faces. I do not say that she looked in any pointed fashion; but I noted her embarrassment when I mentioned the wall, and so my curiosity was revived concerning the purpose for which it was built."

Lelanro looked vexed, and eyed the young man keenly, for although these frank confessions disarmed his anger, he was nevertheless ill pleased at the perspicuity of the youth.

"I am glad all men are not so gifted," said he after a pause, "else words would be of no value to hide thought, for oftentimes face reveals what tongue would hide. But do you not think, Mr. Warwick, that your curiosity was unwarrantable?"

"As to that I can only throw myself on your lordship's mercy," replied the youth, with flushed cheek.

For a moment or so Lelanro made no reply. He was pleased with the candour of the young man, and also with his ingenuous manner; therefore, though ruffled at what he could not but regard as a meddlesome curiosity, he forgave the fault for the honesty of the speech.

"You are but a lad, I see," he remarked gently, "and though I have the right to be angry with the liberty you have taken, yet, as you admit your folly and court blame, I will not be hard on you. Let us say no more about it, Mr. Warwick."

"And your lordship will not impute blame to Mistress Sally."

"No, no! She is sufficiently discreet, though, indeed, she knows nothing but what may be constructed out of gossip and imagination. I see plainly that your gifts are beyond your years, and from what you have told me it would need a remarkably self-controlled person to baffle those thought-reading eyes of yours. Well, sir, your curiosity being thus roused, you took a second look at the wall."

"Yes, my lord; and I was punished by falling into the river. I must confess, however, that while playing on my violin, I heard Miss Lelanro singing beyond the wall."

"Which further roused your curiosity," responded Lelanro dryly, "and you resolved to scale the wall, and release the enchanted prisoner ensconced behind it."

"I really don't know what I should have done," said Warwick honestly, though his cheek burned; "but Fate took the matter out of my hands, and I had either to climb the wall or let myself be drowned."

“And as self-preservation is the first law of nature you took the former alternative. Well, Mr. Warwick, you have told your story honestly, and that condones your fault in my eyes. I am a reader of character also, of much more experience than you, and had you told a falsehood, not all your conversational powers would have saved you from my anger. I dare say, with your perspicuity, you guessed why I altered that lamp-shade.”

“To see my face, was it not?”

“Right, sir! You are certainly no fool,” replied Lelanro, with grim approval. “Well, sir, now that I know the truth, what am I to do with you?”

The other made no reply, but hung his head in some confusion, while the old lord revolved in his own mind the circumstances of the case.

“You have surprised a secret which our race would fain hide,” he continued, rising and pacing the room. “Many rumours are rife in the country and in town concerning the monster kept in the Lelanro Manor House. You see for yourself 'tis only a poor little dwarf, who is kindly treated and well looked after. So far as humanity goes the whole world might know the truth; but in accordance with the traditions of our family I do not choose to let it be known. You have become wiser than your fellows, and I am puzzled to know what course to pursue. I cannot keep you prisoner, and yet, if you go, who knows what you may say?”

“Your lordship need have no fear,” retorted Warwick haughtily. “I promise you that no word shall pass my lips. Young as I am, my lord, you can confide in my honour as profoundly as in your own.”

The old nobleman stopped short and eyed the lad before him with some astonishment. He was not ill-pleased at the haughty outburst, and contrasting it with the former deference and humility of the young man, he was convinced that both his sister and the doctor were right

in their surmise. The youth had good blood in his veins.

"We will settle the question later on," said he after a pause; "first, I would know more about you, Mr. Warwick. May I ask who you are?"

"A wandering fiddler, my lord."

"But your name, sir?"

"My Christian name, Algernon, was borne by my father," replied the youth, "the other was taken by me from the place of my birth. I was born, my lord, in the town of Warwick."

"Strange," muttered Lelanro, caressing his chin, "you speak, look, and act like a gentleman, yet your statement——"

"Proclaims that I am not one! Very true, my lord! I put forward no claim to gentle birth, yet as my father was ignorant whence he sprang, I may come of a good stock for all I know."

"Who was your father?"

"My lord," said Warwick, with great confusion, "you have a right to my confidence, since you have forgiven my folly so kindly, and I shall tell you that which hitherto I have revealed to no man. My father—my father——"

"Go on, lad," said Lelanro kindly, seeing the shamed look in the lad's face, "who was your father?"

Warwick bit his lip, and stammered out the words with an effort.

"He was a dwarf, my lord."

Astonished at so unexpected a reply, Lelanro turned pale, and sank into his former seat with an ejaculation, which even his self-control could not prevent. Soon his brow grew dark, and he frowned ominously at the young man.

"You are mocking me, sir."

"No, my lord; I swear it is the truth," responded Warwick, with great emotion. "My father was a dwarf scarce

higher than your poor sister, who exhibited himself at fairs for his livelihood. He married one who called herself the Fair Circassian, who made her living by showing her beauty to the crowd. I am the offspring of the pair," gasped Warwick, with a painful contraction of the throat. "I was—I was born in a booth."

"But your speech, your behaviour. These do not suit with such humble birth."

"My lord, I was educated at a public school for over ten years. My father was a great believer in the possibility that he came of good stock, and so, desiring to give me every advantage, he spent what money he possessed in aiding me to achieve a position in the world. I was taken away while young and placed at the school. I did not know the truth till two years ago, when I finished my education. Then the money was spent, my father and mother were dead, and I was thrown penniless on the world. To support myself I took up the profession of a strolling fiddler."

Lelanro rested his chin on his hand and looked straight at Warwick. He saw perfectly well that the lad spoke truly, and was overcome with shame at having to make so humiliating a confession. Signing him to stand up, he looked at him long and earnestly, and found it difficult to believe that so well-grown and graceful a lad could own a dwarf for a father. A trifle beyond the ordinary stature, he was slender and well-made; and in looks and demeanour he showed himself to be one with gentle blood in his veins.

"A strange confession," said Lelanro slowly; "be seated, Mr. Warwick, and relate your story."

CHAPTER IX

THE TALE OF A NAMELESS MAN

BEFORE Warwick could comply with the request of his host, Dr. Pryce quietly entered the room, but seeing the pair in deep conversation, he hesitated to come forward lest he should prove to be the inconvenient third. Noting his doubtful attitude, Lelanro addressed himself with marked courtesy to his young companion.

"I trust, Mr. Warwick, you will have no objection to the presence of Dr. Pryce," said he deliberately; "he is completely in my confidence, and anything you may say is as safe with him as with me."

"Not only have I no objection, my lord, but a promise made by me to Dr. Pryce some days ago entitles him to hear all I have to tell."

Thus authorized, Pryce bowed, and seated himself at Warwick's elbow; when, without further preamble, the young man proceeded to narrate the story of his early years.

"As I said before, my lord," began Warwick, directing his conversation more particularly to Lelanro, "my father was a dwarf, and exhibited himself at fairs and merry-makings, under the management of a man who called himself Autolycus. That appellation, as you may guess, was taken from a drama of Shakespeare's, and was doubtless chosen on account of its applicability to the profession of him who assumed it. Autolycus, he called himself, and so he was known throughout the Midlands, where he usually travelled with his show. This was a collection of freaks, such as are to be found at every fair; and the booth wherein these unfortunates were exhibited was a miserable though ingenious structure, which could be taken to pieces and put together at will. With this Autolycus travelled

from fair to fair, and made, if not a fortune, at least a comfortable competency. He was a stout, asthmatic man, who constantly wore a dirty white overcoat, and a cravat of crimson worsted. But in spite of his rough exterior he had a kindly heart, and it is to him that I owe my education."

"He paid for it, I suppose, Mr. Warwick?"

"No, my lord; but seeing that I was a lad of intelligence, he suggested to my father that I should be sent to a public school, which accordingly was done. But this is anticipating," said Warwick hastily, "as I have not told you of my father's marriage.

"The show of Autolyceus," resumed Warwick, after a pause, "consisted of a fat woman, a thin man, my father Algernon the dwarf, the Fair Circassian who afterwards became my mother, and a double-headed nightingale. These, with a woolly horse and a mermaid, proved sufficiently attractive to the gaping rustics, and drew many a hardly-earned penny from their pockets. You smile, my lord, at my recital of so queer a company, but notwithstanding their physical defects, they were a kindly folk, and amongst them I spent a happy infancy and childhood."

"Your pardon, Mr. Warwick," observed Lelanro gently. "I did indeed smile, but it was at the idea of a lad of your parts beginning existence amid such humble surroundings."

"But for my education I might have partaken also of their lot," replied Warwick, with a deprecating smile. "I had no claim to a higher position, save in the imagination of my poor father, who always cherished the dream that he came of a noble house."

Lelanro and Pryce exchanged glances, and the former opened his mouth as if to question the young man; but altering his mind, he made no remark, and signed to him to continue his tale. Ignorant of this by-play, Warwick, whose eyes were fixed on the ground, resumed his speech in a low tone.

“My father was a dwarf, similar in all respects to Miss Lelanro. Of the same stature, he was, like her, beautifully formed, and very handsome in appearance. His intelligence was remarkably acute, and as Autolycus, who was somewhat dull-witted, consulted him frequently on business, the dwarf Algernon became a person of great importance in the little community. He received an excellent salary, both by reason of his attraction as a freak and his capability as an adviser to the manager. Being of an economical nature, though, indeed, there was nothing upon which one so cut off from humanity could spend money, he saved his salary, and in the course of fifteen or twenty years he became fairly rich for his position.”

“How, then, does it happen that his son is poor?”

“The accumulation of those years was spent on my education, Lord Lelanro; and furthermore, my mother, who was fond of dress, squandered a great deal of the hoard in decking herself out in silks and satins and jewellery. She was, as I have before stated, the Fair Circassian, a singularly handsome woman, proud of her beauty, and vain in dressing herself out to the best advantage.”

“Now that we see the son,” said Pryce softly, “I can well understand that the mother was beautiful.”

Warwick flushed at the compliment, and, without reply, he resumed his story.

“Originally the daughter of a well-to-do farmer, she had wearied early of a dull existence in a Midland county, and had joined the show of Autolycus to exhibit her beauty, of which she was inordinately vain. Algernon, the dwarf, fell in love with her, and she, knowing him to be rich for his position, married him, but did not long enjoy the fortune for which she had sacrificed herself by wedding with an abnormal creature. Within two years I was born in the town of Warwick, and there, shortly after my birth, my mother died of puerperal fever. She was buried there, and I was given my father's name and that of the town wherein

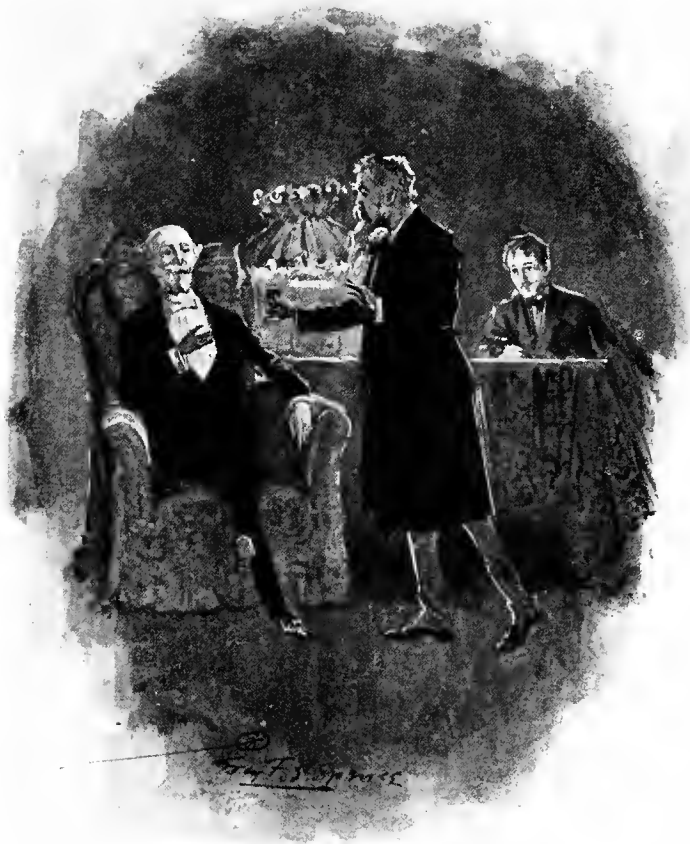
I first saw light. Hence you see, my lord, I am called Algernon Warwick."

"I understand ; but what of your early childhood?"

"Autolycus had hoped that I would turn out to be a dwarf, and add to the attractions of his show ; but by some freak of Nature, as strange as that which begot my manikin of a father, I grew tall and strong-limbed, and took after my mother rather than after my sire. He said often that I greatly resembled her."

As Warwick made this remark with a sigh, Lelanro requested him to bend nearer the lamp, and, when he did so, examined his face long and earnestly. Warwick was rather embarrassed by this scrutiny, and was relieved when the old lord waved him back to his former position. It was not till many weeks afterwards that he learned the reason for this apparently irrelevant action.

"My childhood was passed amongst the freaks," he continued hastily, "and there I learned to play the violin, and to all appearance I was doomed to lead no other life than that of a minstrel to the show. But Autolycus was, as I have said, a shrewd and kindly creature, and seeing that I was quick and intelligent, he suggested to my father that I should be given a chance of improving my condition by being educated at a public school. Algernon, the dwarf, eagerly grasped at the idea, and by the aid of a gentleman of Reading, who had been attracted by his clever brain, he succeeded in placing me at the Bedford Grammar School. In the town of Bunyan I spent ten years of my life without seeing my father. No one knew that I was the son of a dwarf, and even at the age of ten years I had sufficient discretion to keep silence on that point. Indeed, as the years passed I almost forgot the strange circumstances of my early life, and looked upon them as the fantasy of a dream. Only when I was summoned to the death-bed of my father, at the age of twenty, did I recognize that the dream was a sad reality."



"Returned with a glass of wine."

"Your father died two years ago, then," said Lelanro thoughtfully, "for, if I do not forget, you told me you were now twenty-two years of age."

"Yes, my lord. Two years since I was called to Canterbury, and there I found my father on the point of death. He informed me that all the money he had saved had gone in my education, and that I would have to shift for myself in the world. Still believing in his gentle birth, he advised me to seek out the man whom he recollected as his earliest friend, and ask him if he knew anything of the matter. I promised to do this, and when my father died I set out to find Ballard."

"To find whom?" cried Lelanro, starting from his seat.

"Ballard, my lord. The friend of whom my father spoke."

Lelanro sank back in his chair with so pale a face that Pryce hastily left the room, and returned with a glass of wine. This somewhat revived the old gentleman, and he recovered his speech and self-control, pleading in excuse for the loss of the same, the recurrence of a memory in connection with the name. This clumsy excuse did not satisfy Warwick, and he looked steadily at Lelanro as though to read his thoughts. But the face, inscrutable as a mask from long experience, baffled him, and he was forced to give up the attempt. Lelanro smiled faintly as he noticed the youth's desire.

"You cannot read my countenance, Mr. Warwick, for all your cunning," said he grimly. "A long life as an ambassador has taught me to control my feelings and expression in the presence of the acutest diplomatists of Europe. I am not Mistress Sally, to be read like a book."

"I beg your pardon, my lord," said Warwick, with some confusion. "I had no right to be so bold; but an idea crossed my——"

"Never mind your idea, sir!" said Lelanro sharply. "Go on with your story."

"There is no more to tell, my lord. I went to London and sought Ballard at the address given by my father; but he had gone abroad, and was not expected to return for many months. As I had no friend in the world save Autolycus, and no means of earning bread except by my fiddle, I returned to Canterbury, and there followed the show for close on two years, playing in front of the booth."

"With your education, sir, that was wrong."

"What could I do, my lord? I am well educated, it is true; but I have not a friend in the world, and without help I could not procure a situation."

"Your school-fellows—your masters at Bedford——"

"My lord, I did not wish to apply to them for charity," replied Warwick proudly. "I should have been forced to tell them my story, and your lordship may guess how painful that would have been to me. No, my lord. I earned my bread honestly by my fiddling; and a month ago, thinking Ballard had probably returned, I left Autolycus at Salisbury, and took my way to London. Three weeks later I came to Dalesford, and your lordship knows the rest of my story."

"It is a strange story—a very remarkable tale," said Lelanro, who was again on his feet, pacing the study. "And you have no means whereby to discover whence your father came?"

"Only this paper with the name Algernon and the date of his birth. I may add that, from what I know of my own age, the date is wrong by a decade."

"Give it to me, sir."

It seemed to Warwick that, while his host examined the paper, Dr. Pryce watched him somewhat anxiously, and appeared to be relieved when it was returned without comment.

"What do you think of the story, doctor?" asked Lelanro abruptly.

"I agree with your lordship that it is a remarkable tale," answered Pryce diplomatically.

"It may prove to be still more remarkable, for all we know," muttered Lelanro thoughtfully.

He resumed his walk, while Warwick, wondering what would be the termination of this strange interview, waited mutely to be addressed. Twice or thrice Lelanro paused beside him, and then walked to the other end of the room, considering, as was evident from his thoughtful expression, what would be the wisest course to take under the circumstances.

"You are well educated, you say, Mr. Warwick?" he demanded abruptly.

"I think I may say so, my lord," replied the youth modestly.

"What is your opinion, Pryce?"

"He is excellently educated, my lord, as I have had the opportunity of observing within the last three weeks. A good classical scholar, well read in English, conversant with the French tongue and literature, and fairly good in mathematics."

"He writes a good hand, Pryce?"

"Clear and legible, my lord."

"Humph! Well, Mr. Warwick," he added, turning to the expectant youth, "you say you have no friend in the world."

"Not one—save Autolyceus."

"And I presume you are not averse to earning a decent wage."

"I should be thankful to do so, my lord."

"Well, Mr. Warwick, I have taken a great fancy to you," said Lelanro genially; "you have told a straightforward and direct story, and you seem to be a lad of good moral principles. Now I require a secretary; would you be willing to undertake the duties?"

"If they are not beyond me, my lord, I should be

honoured," replied Warwick, hardly crediting his good fortune.

"Oh, a lad of your parts will find them easy, Mr. Warwick. I shall treat you as one of the family, and introduce you to my grand-daughter, Miss Lelanro. You must see about clothes and such-like things. To-morrow I shall speak of your wages and duties; and, of course, Mr. Warwick, from this moment you are free to go where you will. I need not request your silence on a certain subject."

"I shall not open my mouth on it, my lord."

"Good! I see that I can rely on your discretion. But do not neglect my poor sister, Mr. Warwick. She has few pleasures, poor little soul, and your music is a great delight to her. Now, good-night, sir! To-morrow we will speak further of these matters. Good-night again. I am delighted at having made your acquaintance."

With this kindly speech Lelanro shook Warwick heartily by the hand, and forthwith left the apartment. Overcome by the thought of his good fortune, Warwick looked after his retiring benefactor with humid eyes, and at length turned towards Dr. Pryce, who was watching him keenly.

"Doctor," he said in a trembling voice, "you do not know what such kindness means to a vagabond like me. I hope I may in some measure repay such uncalled-for generosity."

"I am sure you will, my dear lad," replied Pryce, patting him kindly on the shoulder. "From what I have seen of you, no one better deserves good fortune. It lies in your own hands to make or mar. See that you make a good use of it."

"I trust I shall," exclaimed Warwick fervently. "But why is Lord Lelanro so kind to a stranger?"

Dr. Pryce looked oddly at him, and replied with great conviction, qualified by a certain reserve:

"My dear Mr. Warwick, as I said before, Lord Lelanro

is one who never acts without a reason. Depend upon it, he has an excellent motive for making you his secretary, and in treating you as one of the family. Now, go and sleep on your good luck."

CHAPTER X

CELIA

OBSERVANT of the unaccountable results of circumstance, of the capricious mutations of existence, the Greeks, with a certain grim irony, symbolized such whimsies by the figure of a woman poised on a twirling wheel. To the variability of the sex they ascribed the apparently aimless selection of particular human beings, to be raised or abased independent of merit or justice; by the ever-revolving wheel they indicated the constant change which renders life an eternal succession of unforeseen surprises. Nay, further to accentuate the hopelessness of finding a reason for such fluctuation, they blinded the eyes of the woman with a bandage. Here we have the ironic Trinity of Caprice; unreliable temperament, helpless blindness, unstable position; and these, irresponsible, shifty, whimsical, rule the world of mankind.

By such speculations did Warwick seek to account for the extraordinary change in his fortunes; for in no logical way could he come to any reasonable conclusion. He had arrived at Dalesford a fiddling tramp, nameless, friendless, penniless; through the indulgence of an unwarrantable curiosity, he had narrowly escaped death by drowning; and he had intruded himself where he was not wanted. All these things pointed to punishment and disgrace; yet, in direct opposition to their promise, they brought him an honourable position, a decent wage, and several firm friends. It was little wonder, then, that he should abandon as hopeless the

solution of so hard a riddle, and place such untoward results to the credit of the irresponsible Greek deity aforementioned.

Notwithstanding that Pryce assured him that Lord Lelanro had a sufficient reason for acting so kindly, Warwick marvelled greatly at the favour which was shown to him. Permitted to leave the special portion of the house inhabited by the dwarf and her attendants, he was installed in a comfortable suite of apartments near those of his host. In a few days a tailor arrived from London, who provided him with all necessaries in the way of garments; and for the first time for two years Warwick found himself clothed in accordance with his rather fastidious requirements. He dined and spent the evening regularly with Lelanro, he constantly accompanied the old gentleman in his walks, and when he was minded to ride, found a horse placed at his disposal. In every way he was treated with the greatest delicacy and consideration; so that daily his wonder grew as to what could be the reason of this inexplicable kindness. Had he been a young gentleman of great estate he could not have fared better, or have received more courtesy from the gentry, more respect from the servants. But for the actuality of his surroundings he would have deemed it a dream.

Then again, he soon perceived that his duties were merely nominal; for with the exception of replying to Lelanro's correspondents, a duty which scarcely occupied two hours, he had the rest of the day to himself. With such leisure on his hands he either walked and conversed with his patron, played the violin to Madam Tot, or rode with Celia Lelanro.

Ah! she was indeed a goddess, worthy of the adoration of two-and-twenty; from the first moment that he made his bow to her, Warwick surrendered himself a willing captive to the glance of her blue eyes, to the fascination of her smile. But two years younger than himself, she



"Rode with Celia Lelanro."



was infinitely his elder in knowledge of the heart by virtue of her sex, and treated him in a sisterly manner, which perplexed the lad in no small degree. Notwithstanding his good looks and numberless opportunities, Warwick, by reason of his romantic temperament, knew but little of the other sex. His ardent nature dowered woman with the attributes of a goddess; and when he found no one who came up to so high an ideal, he withdrew himself from contact with the actual being and worshipped an abstract creature composite of perfections. In Celia Lelanro he found this dream woman, incarnate in as pretty a mask of flesh as ever was worn by one of Eve's daughters.

In contrast to Warwick's swart complexion and dark hair, she was blue-eyed, with locks of a russet-brown. In no degree had the faery curse fallen on Celia Lelanro, for she was as tall for a woman as he was for a man. Her oval face, and skin of mixed red and white, seemed to the amorous lad the perfection of beauty; and though he could have wished that her smiles were more frequent, and her eyes more alight with merriment, yet he could recall no woman of high or low degree who so strongly moved his heart-strings. The quaint delicacy of the name "Celia" suited her well; and Warwick, snared by her charms, bewitched her looks as earnestly and prodigally as ever Orlando did the sweet smiles of Rosalind in the Forest of Arden. Having regard to quantity rather than quality, Celia was as celebrated in verse as ever was Lalage, or Beatrice, or even the belauded lady of Petrarch.

In the principal library of the Manor House, which was distinct from that occupied by Dr. Pryce, Celia discovered a copy of verses incautiously left on the table by the love-sick swain. With many a pretty blush and pouting laugh, the goddess read the effusion composed in her honour, and highly approved of the mediocre verse; perhaps because she was the subject of the song.

It was while she was reading the verses for the second

time that Lord Lelanro entered the room. Seeing her smiles, he stepped softly behind her, and caught a glimpse of the poem.

"What have we here, child? Some amatory nonsense?" said he genially, "and in the handwriting of Mr. Warwick."

"Oh, grandpapa," replied Celia in some confusion, "it is merely a copy of verses I found on your table. They are addressed 'To Celia.' I think," added Miss Lelanro, laughing, "that your new secretary is a poet."

"And a musician—and a lover, if these rhymes speak from the heart. You must not encourage him in such folly, child."

Celia was too astonished to reply immediately. She knew her grandfather to be one of the proudest of men, and that he should jest on so distasteful a subject surprised her not a little. And, indeed, she was slightly angered at the presumption that she would condescend to encourage a penniless dependent in such folly.

"I assure you, sir, that I never gave the matter a thought," she answered, with curling lip. "I regard Mr. Warwick as I do the other servants."

"You speak harshly, Celia," returned her grandfather in a vexed tone. "Mr. Warwick has good blood in his veins, and with his talents he may rise to great things."

"I hope he may; but as to his good blood I am not so certain. By his own confession he is a wandering musician."

"By his own confession he does not know who he is, child. I wish I could find out, for I assure you I am deeply interested in his welfare."

With some emotion he walked to the window, and looked out on the park, which rolled a sea of green almost to the verge of the terrace. The sky, delicately blue, was dappled with summer clouds, and in the distance the square grey tower of Dalesford Church bulked above the undulating line of the trees. The sight of so fair a heritage suggested

to Lelanro's mind the bitter thought that it must pass soon from his direct line into the hands of an unloved relative.

"Unless! unless!" he muttered anxiously.

"Unless what, grandpapa?" asked Celia, rather astonished at this unusual perturbation. "What are you talking of?"

"Nothing, child, nothing! I was thinking of matters pertaining to the welfare of our family. By the way, Celia," he added, smoothing the frown from his brow, "I received a letter from Edgar Winyard, who asks if he may come down here for a few weeks. What do you say?"

"What can I say?" said Miss Lelanro, arching her brows. "It is for you to decide."

"In this instance I should prefer your opinion, child. You cannot be ignorant of Edgar's reason for wishing to pay this visit."

"I do not pretend to be ignorant, grandpapa. But as I have rejected him twice, I think he should have more dignity than to persist in paying his addresses."

"Yet he is young and handsome, Celia."

"He is a bore," retorted the angry young lady, "in spite of his good birth and kinship with the Lelanros; he is a clodhopper who only cares for dogs and horses. Tony Lumpkin and Bob Acres in one. Mr. Warwick is worth a dozen of such as he."

"Yet Mr. Warwick is my dependent," said her grandfather, with faint sarcasm.

"But a gentleman for all that!"

"You denied that a few minutes ago, Celia. But let us not talk of my secretary; it is your cousin with whom we have to do. I shall invite him to the Manor."

"He'll persecute me, then," replied Celia crossly. "Surely you do not wish me to marry him."

"I leave that to yourself," replied Lelanro delicately; "but remember that at my death Edgar becomes Lord Lelanro, and enters into possession of our estates. You

cannot but be aware of the advantage of listening to his suit."

"I wouldn't marry him if he were King of England," retorted Miss Lelanro decisively. "Ask him if you will; but don't expect me to encourage him. Heir to our estates, indeed! Oh, dear, I wish I had been born a boy!"

"It would have been better, certainly," replied the old lord, thinking of his dead son; "with your poor father died the chance of keeping the title and estates in the direct line. Now they must go to Edgar, unworthy though he be—unless——"

"Unless what, grandpapa? That is the second time you have used the word."

"Never mind, child! Leave me for a time, and ask Mr. Warwick to come here."

Celia, with great disdain, was about to refuse this commission, when Warwick unexpectedly entered the room. Thereupon she swept out of the apartment, and in passing flashed on him so indignant a glance that, struck to the heart, he turned pale. At their last meeting she had been particularly kind, and, not having offended her in the interval, he was greatly perplexed and pained by this sudden change of front. Accustomed, however, to bridle his feelings, he merely bowed as she passed through the door, and advanced gravely to where Lelanro was seated at his desk.

"I was just wishing to see you, Mr. Warwick," said the old gentleman kindly, "to tell you that my kinsman and heir, Mr. Edgar Winyard, is coming to stay with us next week. I hope you and he will be friends."

Warwick bowed without speaking, and marvelled again that Lelanro should show such consideration for one who was but a dependent on his charity. He had little time for reflection, however, as the next remark made by his patron turned his thoughts in another direction.

"We have often talked of your early life within the last few weeks, Mr. Warwick," said Lord Lelanro reflectively, "and I have several times been on the point of asking you if you know the address of Autolycus?"

"I can learn easily, my lord. He makes Canterbury his headquarters, and a letter addressed there will find him. Does your lordship wish to see him?"

"I do; for reasons which I need not communicate to you at present. Will you, therefore, be kind enough to ask him to call here, and grant me a personal interview?"

"Certainly, my lord," replied Warwick, wondering at the oddity of the request. "Shall I write at once?"

"If you please, Mr. Warwick. And I should take it as a favour if you would post the letter yourself in the Dalesford office. I have a reason for not wishing it to pass through the hands of the servants."

"I will attend to it at once," answered the secretary, and forthwith left the room, with a puzzled look on his face. Lelanro gazed after him in silence, and not until the door was closed did he speak.

"If it be as I think," said he aloud, "alas for Edgar Winyard and his hopes!"

CHAPTER XI

ALEHOUSE GOSSIP

IT was with some depression of spirits that Warwick set about writing to Autolycus, as the request of Lord Lelanro had suggested an unpleasant train of thought. The young man laboured under the disadvantage of a too vivid imagination, and, notwithstanding that he had evidence to the contrary, he began to fancy that his patron suspected him of imposture. Else why should he desire to

see Autolycus, with whom he had nothing in common, and why should Celia, who heretofore had smiled on him, now wrinkle her brow with disdain? On these grounds Warwick thought that the days of fatness were at an end.

Nevertheless, he was satisfied that Autolycus would substantiate his apparently impossible story on all points, and he had no hesitation in requesting the showman's presence at the Manor House. Provided that the interview proved satisfactory—and Warwick had no fears on that score—he would be once more restored to favour. The silly fellow never for a moment reflected that Lelanro was as kindly as ever, for the single frown of Celia had caused him to look on all else with a jaundiced vision. But then he was a lover, and as such was hardly responsible.

That Warwick, who did not lack sense, should surrender himself so entirely to Celia within the short space of three weeks, may seem strange to those who believe that love is a comfortable feeling born of lengthy companionship. But such sober folk are wrong in their estimate, which reduces love to a mere domestic liking. Were it so, Romeo had never loved Juliet; Antony had never been thrall to Cleopatra; Paris had left Sparta unaccompanied by Helen; for love, the true love, grows, like Jonah's gourd, in a single night, and of such complexion was the passion of Warwick for the disdainful Celia. A single glance of her eyes had laid him low at her feet, and there he struggled a helpless captive to her charms.

Love o'erleaps all obstacles, regards as nothing the barriers of caste, the landmarks of wealth; so Warwick, under the influence of the divinity, already cherished a mad hope that some day he might marry his angel. He was not yet satisfied that she returned his devotion; he was aware of his unsatisfactory position, of his lack of worldly gear, and the precarious nature of his employment; yet, with the vivid imagination of two-and-twenty, already he saw himself her husband. He had by this time reached the stage

of calling Celia "Her," as though she were the only woman in the world.

Now he was informed by Lelanro that a kinsman was coming on the scene. Doubtless, some handsome London spark, who would win the heart of Celia, and not regard him, poor dependent as he was, even as a rival. Bitterly did Warwick blame himself that he had not sought out Ballard and learned what he could of his birth and position. Should he prove to be heir to a great name or to a wealthy estate, he might hope to oppose equal worldly advantages to this interloping Edgar. Then the rivalry between them would be more equable, and it would rest with the best man to win the prize of Celia's hand.

When, therefore, Warwick posted the letter to Autolycus, he repaired to the "Lelanro Arms" with the intention of questioning Mistress Sally concerning her namesake in London. She might be some connection, and, if so, she would know probably if he had returned from abroad. Nay, more; if she were kin to Ballard of London it was not unreasonable to suppose that she might know somewhat of his secrets, and thus afford Warwick the information he needed. All this, however, was vague, and Warwick halted before the hospitable inn without any clear plan of action in his head.

In the porch stood Mistress Sally, as fair and fat as ever, with cherry-coloured ribbons to her cap and a broad smile of welcome on her rosy face. Already the news had reached Dalesford that my lord's new secretary was none other than the handsome fiddler, and Mistress Sally curtsied to the ground to show her reverence for Warwick's newly-acquired gentility.

"I am pleased to see you again, sir," said she, ushering him into a bright little parlour; "will you not try the ale you liked so at your last visit?"

"Surely, dame," answered Warwick, taking a seat. "It was for a chat and a tankard of that very ale that I came

hither. I have not forgotten your kindness, Mistress Sally."

"La, now!" cried the gratified landlady; "dear heart, ye were as welcome to bit and sup as the flowers in May! Bide ye here, Master Warwick, and I'll bring ye a pot of the best."

She bustled out of the room, swelling visibly with pride at being so honoured; and Warwick, left to himself, leaned out of the casement, looking across the village green at the quaint stone cross. It was but two months since he had last beheld it; yet within those eight weeks what changes had taken place in his fortunes! Then he had been a penniless tramp with no prospects, now he had an assured position and a chance of gaining name and fortune, and it may be, should matters continue thus prosperous, a charming and high-born wife.

From the window he turned to the mantelshelf, drawn thither by that silver-framed portrait which had excited his curiosity on a former occasion. There she smiled, sweet and fair, a very angel in a white dress, and with a rapid glance at the door to see that it was closed, Warwick hastily pressed the portrait to his lips. As he could not kiss the original there was at least some pleasure in caressing the counterfeit. He had just time to replace the picture in its former position when buxom Mistress Sally re-entered with ale and victuals.

"A bite of bread and cheese, sir," said she, setting down the tray; "'tis a long walk to the Great House, and you a growing lad."

"Don't you think it is time I stopped growing at two-and-twenty, ma'am? Sit down, Mistress Sally, and while I eat, you talk. I remember we so divided the labour at our last meeting."

"Ay, Mr. Warwick," nodded the landlady, taking a chair and placing two plump hands on her knees. "I mind me of that. And now you've met your friends in

London. Oh, I knew it was your jest, sir, to pass as a fiddler."

Warwick laughed, and did not undeceive her. She evidently thought that he had become acquainted with Lord Lelanro in London, and as he did not wish her to know of his sojourn in the dwarf's chamber, he held his peace advisedly. Nothing loth, the garrulous landlady rattled on.

"I'm real glad, sir, that you gave over that foolishness. A handsome young gentleman like you has no need to tramp through rain and mud. But I saw you were of the gentry the moment I set eyes on your bonny face. Oh, yes, Mr. Warwick," added she, complacently smoothing her apron, "I have not lived in the Great House for nought, sir."

"Now I live there myself, Mistress Sally. It is odd that it should be so. Lord Lelanro is a kind friend to me, and so is—Miss Celia."

"A sweet young lady, is she not, Mr. Warwick? They do say she is to wed with Mr. Winyard."

"Wed—wed with whom?" stammered Warwick, turning pale.

"Dear heart, the turn you gave me then," replied Mistress Sally, laying a fat hand on her comfortable bosom. "Why, with Mr. Edgar, to be sure, sir. He is her cousin, and heir to my lord; so the marriage will bring the two lines together. Why, la, sir, you are as pale as a gooseberry. Just sip the ale, there's a dear man."

This news, which confirmed Warwick's worst anticipations, moved him not a little, and it was with some difficulty that he recovered his self-control. But he knew that Mistress Sally was inquisitive and a gossip, so, anxious to give her no opportunity of making mischief, he hastily took a deep draught of ale and covered his dismay by a forced laugh.

"It will be an excellent match, Mistress Sally," said he, with the colour returning to his cheeks, "and, no doubt,

will take place soon. Mr. Winyard comes to the Manor next week."

"Why, there now," smiled the landlady, delighted at the piece of news, "if we won't have a wedding before the year grows older! Though, indeed, sir," she added, changing her tone, "I had rather the groom was yourself than Mr. Edgar."

"You do not like him, then?" said Warwick, his heart beating violently at hearing his dearest thoughts put into words.

"Why, no, sir," replied Mistress Sally reluctantly. "It isn't for me to speak against the family; but Mr. Edgar is not a pleasant gentleman, and the Lelanros have quite enough trouble without adding more to it."

Instinctively Warwick knew that she referred to the faery curse and to the dwarfs; but mindful of his promise to Lelanro, he showed no signs of such knowledge. Nevertheless, he could not help wondering how Mistress Sally had heard of the secret, and artfully strove to draw her out on the subject.

"What trouble have the Lelanros, Mistress Sally?"

The landlady turned away her face and replied in an altered voice—

"As you live in the Great House, Mr. Warwick, you must be as wise as I."

"Indeed, I am not, dame."

"Then it is not for me to speak, sir. A still tongue makes many friends, as the good parson told us only last Sunday."

Seeing that she was obstinately determined on silence, Warwick tried another method to extract information. He put into words a thought which had haunted his brain ever since that momentous interview with Lelanro.

"I suppose, Mistress Sally, it is certain that Mr. Winyard will inherit the estates?"

"Of course, sir! Why should he not?" asked the landlady, with some confusion.

"Lord Lelanro has no other offspring, I suppose?" questioned Warwick, keeping his eye on her embarrassed face.

"His son, the Honourable Louis Lelanro, was killed in the hunting-field, sir, and left Miss Celia. There was no boy of that marriage."

"Was Louis Lelanro the only son?"

"Dear heart!" cried Mistress Sally, rising from her seat with affected surprise, "every one knows that he was the only son."

This was an evasive reply capable of being read in two ways. Warwick noted the ambiguity, but, fearful of letting his own knowledge of the Lelanro secret escape him, he did not further question the landlady. With a laugh he changed the conversation, and brought up the topic about which he had called.

"Your name is Ballard, is it not?" he asked abruptly.

"Sarah Ballard, sir, spinster, and landlady of the 'Lelanro Arms.'"

"Have you a relative in London?"

To Warwick's surprise the face of the woman went grey, and gasping for breath she was forced to resume her seat.

"Yes, sir," she said at length, looking inquisitively at Warwick. "I had a brother, Walter Ballard; but he is dead."

"Dead?" echoed Warwick, who saw with dismay his cloud-built castles tumbling about his ears.

"Yes, sir. He died six months ago, in Italy, of the cholera."

Here was a blow. The only man who could tell him anything was gone, and now it seemed hopeless to think that he would be able to learn the secret of his birth. From these dismal thoughts he was recalled by the voice of the landlady.

"How did you know I had a brother in London, sir?" asked Mistress Sally sharply.

"Oh, I heard it at the Manor," replied Warwick after a pause. He did not think it wise to trust this garrulous old lady with his secret.

"Ah!" sighed Mistress Sally, with great relief. "Maybe. I thought you might have heard——"

"Heard what, dame?"

"Nothing, sir. Nothing. My poor brother is dead and gone! What ill he did is buried with him." With that she left the room, and Warwick, struck by her strange speech, finished his ale thoughtfully. Evidently she did not wish to talk about her brother, and from the expression of her face when his name was mentioned, apparently she retained no pleasant recollections of him. Indeed, it seemed as though Mistress Sally also had her secret, and was as jealous of its preservation as were the Lelanros of their own.

Utterly bewildered by the attitude of the ordinarily genial landlady, Warwick left the room to take his leave. In the distance he caught a glimpse of Mistress Sally with an observant eye, but when he glanced in her direction, she disappeared. With affected carelessness he slipped out of the inn across the green, and again noted the cherry-coloured ribbons at the window.

"She avoids me; she watches me," he thought, walking briskly homeward. "On what fresh mystery have I stumbled? I shall tell all to Pryce and ask his counsel."

CHAPTER XII

CONSULTING THE WISE WOMAN

BAFFLED by the reticence of Mistress Sally, and dismayed by the intelligence of her brother's death, Warwick returned to the Manor in no pleasant frame of

mind. Ballard, so far as he knew, was the only person who could enlighten him as to the birth of his father; and now that his decease had put an end to obtaining information in that quarter, Warwick saw nothing for it but to take up a quiescent attitude. Yet the idea of remaining under a cloud all his life was so repellent to his active brain that he made a final effort to arrive at the truth.

With this idea he repaired to the dwarf's chamber the morning after his futile visit to the inn, and endeavoured to ingratiate himself with Madam Tot, in the hope that she would assist him to unravel the riddle of name and date. Therein, according to his father, was concealed the name of the family whence he sprang, and Warwick hoped that the dwarf's ingenuity might be exercised to some purpose. She alone could aid him at this juncture.

Rather to his surprise Madam Tot received him with cold dignity, and declared plainly that he had neglected her of late. Her grand-niece Celia was in the garden also—for Madam Tot had left her room to sun herself, as was her custom—and to Celia did the little lady address her observations, though the gist of them was directed at Warwick.

"You see, my love," said the malicious little creature, "I am of no consequence now. A certain person can dispense with the company of one who nursed him back to health and strength."

"I assure you, Madam Tot," began Warwick; but could proceed no further, for he was at once rebuked for his familiarity.

"I am Miss Lelanro, Mr. Warwick; I beg of you to recollect that on all occasions."

"I am afraid you are out of favour," said Celia, stifling a laugh. "What have you been doing to so offend my great-aunt, Mr. Warwick?"

"He has been doing nothing, Celia," interposed Madam Tot, standing on tip-toe to add to her dignity. "I say

nothing about Mr. Warwick or his behaviour. Oh dear, no! I speak of a certain person who knows I am devoted to music, yet will not bring his violin when asked."

"I have my violin with me now," said Warwick, with a comically penitent expression of countenance.

"If a certain person will play on that violin," continued the dwarf, still ignoring her guest, "I may be induced to overlook his rudeness. Otherwise," she added with a frown, "I shall instruct my kinsfolk, the people of peace, to pinch him black and blue, and run pins into the tender parts of his body."

"Cruel, cruel aunt," laughed Celia, when Warwick ran off to get his violin, so as to avert so terrible a doom. "Why would you hurt the poor young man?"

"H'm, my dear! It is necessary to teach him his place. I am afraid your grandfather spoils him. Remember, love, he is one of the common people."

"Why, aunt, you said yourself he was a gentleman," replied Celia, with a sudden blush.

"Of course, my love! His bearing is not plebeian. Still, we know nothing of him or his."

"He doesn't know himself," sighed Miss Lelanro rather regretfully. "I wish he did."

Evidently she had quite forgotten the late conversation with her grandfather; or perhaps she wished to make amends for her late disdainful behaviour. To speak the truth, Celia was beginning to find that thoughts of Warwick were oftener in her mind than they had any right to be. In vain she took herself to task for such folly, and reminded herself of the difference between a young lady of rank and an unknown foundling. Love, already firmly established in the citadel of her heart, was not to be driven out by such feeble means; and with secret dismay Celia felt that in the end she would be forced to surrender to this rapidly-increasing passion. It was at present a struggle between Love and Pride, in which the latter was now in the

ascendant ; but Celia, with some qualms, admitted to herself that possibly the final victory would rest with the former.

When Warwick returned he found his charming mistress reclining on the grass before the summer-house. Therein sat Madam Tot, like a little jade god, in her green dress, looking stiff and rigid, with bent brows and pursed-up lips. Not a glance did she vouchsafe to the offending



“ Like a snowdrop amid the surrounding green.”

Warwick ; but at his approach she observed haughtily to Celia that a certain person could play if he were so minded.

“ Otherwise,” said she crossly, “ a certain person had better take his departure. I want no giants here—no man-mountains and silly monsters.”

Evidently the spirit of perversity was instigating Madam Tot to evil on this particular morning, so Warwick, as the David to her Saul, endeavoured to charm it away with music. Leaning against the trunk of an elm—for his weight would have crushed the fragile summer-house—he drew the bow across the strings, and improvised as his fancy directed. Celia, under the shade of her parasol, reclined on the grass, looking, with pensive face and white dress, like a snowdrop amid the surrounding green. She was an accomplished musician herself, and had heard many famous violinists, yet for delicacy of execution and power of the melodic faculty, she was inclined to award the palm of pre-eminence to this unknown fiddler. The inclination of her heart may have had something to do with this generous recognition of unknown talent.

With his swarthy face and dark eyes, Warwick was singularly Italian in appearance; but Celia likened him in her own mind to the second Charles, albeit his features were less harsh than those of the Merry Monarch. But he had the Stewart melancholy impressed on his face, and the Stewart grace inherent in his every action. A singularly poetic figure he looked, dreaming over his violin in the bright sunshine. Celia confessed to herself that he was the most charming young man she had yet seen; and then frowned at so weak a confession, even though it was but a mental one.

All she knew of the youth whose looks and deferential gallantry so strangely stirred her heart, was that he had penetrated by accident into the seclusion of her dwarfish great-aunt's domain, and that her grandfather, fearful lest the secret might become common property, had kept him under his eye by making him his secretary. She was ignorant that Warwick's father was a dwarf who had been on show in a booth, and quite believed that he was the son of some gentleman, and had run away from school or college in an excess of high spirits. Such a belief tended rather to

elevate his character in her eyes, for Celia dearly loved a bold and independent spirit, such as this secretary seemed to possess. Moreover, he excelled all the well-born young gentlemen she had met in appearance, in talent, and in dignity. No wonder, then, in taking so romantic and girlish a view of his personality, she prepared a fertile ground for the upspringing of the flower of love.

And all this time the music rippled and ebbed on the still air with changeful melody and fitful brilliancy. Madam Tot, her displeasure somewhat abated, now relaxed the rigidity of her features, and with a tiny cheek on tiny hand sat looking at the sweeping bow. Celia, her eyes on the daisied sward, mused and dreamed herself into a dangerous frame of mind. Unexpectedly there broke forth from the violin a strain of such tenderness and pathetic grace that she involuntarily looked up to see what had inspired the musician. It was herself; for Warwick's dark eyes, filled with passion, gazed on her fair face. With a sudden flush she turned away her head, and at the same moment, fearful lest he should have betrayed his secret, the musician laid down his instrument.

The situation would have been embarrassing to them both but that Madam Tot did away with the feeling by clapping her tiny hands. She addressed Warwick directly, and no longer spoke of him as "a certain person," whereby he knew that the capricious faery had taken him again into favour.

"Charming, charming!" cried the little creature, emerging from her summer-house like a green butterfly from its chrysalis. "You have certainly been trained in the court band of Oberon. Some night, when the moon is full, we will go—you and I—to the faery ring, and there you must play for the skipping of the elves."

"May I come too, aunt?" asked Celia, rousing herself from day-dreams; "I should dearly love to see the good neighbours."

"My dear, you are not of us," replied Madam Tot gravely, "and therefore you cannot see our solemnities."

"Not even if I plucked a rowan twig like Sir James?"

"Oh, yes; but the elves might be vexed at your on-looking. Only those who have faery blood in their veins can be present. I have reason to think that Mr. Warwick is of our kin," continued Madam Tot loftily. "His father was certainly a changeling like myself."

This chance shot was so near the mark, in one sense, that Warwick uttered an ejaculation of surprise.

"How do you know that, Madam Tot?"

"Oh, I know many things," said the dwarf wisely. "There are few matters I cannot solve if I put my mind to them."

"I wish, then, that you would put your mind to this," said Warwick, handing her the paper which contained the riddle. "If you could only solve this enigma I should learn my position in the world."

Madam Tot glanced at the paper with a look of preternatural wisdom, then uttered a shrill scream expressive of astonishment. Sliding down on to the grass she devoured the paper with her eyes, glancing sharply the while at Warwick, who took no care to conceal his astonishment at the effect thus produced. Celia also exhibited some natural curiosity.

"What is the matter, aunt?" said she, leaning forward to get a glimpse of the paper; "can you guess the riddle?"

"I tell no secrets of faeryland," retorted Madam Tot, putting the paper into her pocket. "When the full moon is on the faery ring I may reveal my knowledge."

"Then you know what the name and date mean?" exclaimed Warwick, a wild thought crossing his mind.

"I have an idea," replied the dwarf mysteriously; "but the riddle must be unravelled carefully. Leave it to me, Mr. Warwick. I shall tell you all about yourself at the full moon."

Not another word could they get out of her on the subject, for with one of her whims she was determined to surround the matter with faery influence. Warwick, informed by Pryce of her skill in deciphering cryptograms, assumed that she found this special one sufficiently easy to solve at the first glance. The information it conveyed seemed to astonish her considerably; but what it was she refused to reveal until the moon was at its full. Vexed as he was at her whimsicality, Warwick was forced to let her take her own way, as she alone could read the riddle. Nevertheless he could hardly contain his curiosity, and vainly remonstrated with Madam Tot on the irrational postponement of the explanation.

"I wish to know its meaning at once," he said rather angrily.

"You shall know it at the full moon," retorted the dwarf. "I am not going to break with the traditions of faeryland to please a poor mortal like you, even though you have faery blood in your veins."

"Has he indeed, aunt?" asked Celia, humouring her quaint relative, with an indulgent smile.

"H'm!" said the little creature mysteriously. "I know what I know, my love. We will talk of other things, if you please. When does the Winyard ogre arrive?"

"Next week, aunt," answered Celia, by no means delighted at the turn thus given to the conversation. "I hope you will be pleased to see him."

"Indeed no, Celia! A horrid, bold, swearing creature, who laughs at my delicate figure. To think that he should inherit the Lelanro estates!" sighed Madam Tot, with an angry rap of her cane. "Oh, if only my poor faery nephew had lived!"

"You mean my father," suggested Celia, holding out her hand for Warwick's assistance to enable her to rise.

"No, I did not, child! He was a mortal like yourself, not a changeling like me and my faery nephew. Ah, that

changeling returned to faeryland in a few years," added Madam Tot sadly, "and left me to drag on a weary existence here. Summoned on particular business by Oberon, no doubt."

Warwick's heart beat violently as she made this speech, and the vague fancy which had been in his brain of late now began to assume a definite shape. Emotion prevented his immediate speech, and he was glad when Celia asked the question he wished to have put himself.

"I thought my father was an only child, aunt!"

Madam Tot looked at Celia with her sharp little eyes, and shook her head to intimate that she would say nothing more. Celia pressed the question, whereupon she became querulous.

"I am tired; I am tired. Carry me into my house," she said crossly, and this Celia was obliged to do. Taking the little creature in her arms, she walked up the garden, with a kind nod to Warwick.

He leaned against the tree-trunk almost overwhelmed by the flood of light which had broken on the darkness of his understanding.

"A faery nephew," he muttered, picking up his violin. "Without doubt Celia's father had a brother, and that brother was a dwarf. A dwarf," he repeated after a pause. "Ah, now I feel that I am on firm ground. I will see what Dr. Pryce can tell me on the subject."

Though not in the way he expected, the young man had learned from the dwarf news of vital importance to his future.

CHAPTER XIII

DR. PRYCE IS MYSTERIOUS

NOT until the evening did Warwick find an opportunity of conversing with the doctor, for on the plea of requiring his assistance to arrange some papers, Lord Lelanro kept him by his side for the greater part of the afternoon. It seemed to the youth as though his patron desired to acquaint himself with every turn of his character, to test his knowledge in every way, and to note his bearing on all occasions. With inquisitive persistence he questioned the young man of his early life, of his school training, of his ideas regarding the duties of landowners, and, in fact, he ended by nearly exhausting Warwick's patience as well as his knowledge. Nevertheless, his gratitude for constant favours enabled him to bear amiably the trying senility of the old lord, and when dismissed finally, he received many handsome compliments on his good-humour and education.

"I am glad to see that you have a respect for your elders, Mr. Warwick," said Lelanro, with great satisfaction. "Believe me, you will lose nothing by submitting blindly to my guidance. You have not yet heard from Autolycus?" he asked abruptly.

"No, my lord. I expect a letter to-morrow."

"Inform me of its contents without delay, Mr. Warwick. I am anxious to see this protector of your youth on the earliest possible occasion."

"May I ask, my lord, if it is because you doubt my honesty that you seek an interview with Autolycus?"

"Not at all, not at all, Mr. Warwick. That my reasons for speaking with Autolycus are connected with you I do not deny. But you quite misapprehend my opinion of your character if you think for a moment that I do not implicitly

believe all that you have told me. I should think," added Lelanro, with some reproach, "that my efforts to make your stay pleasant would have interpreted my opinion correctly."

"I beg your pardon, my lord," replied Warwick hurriedly. "I have no right to ask questions, as you no doubt are acting for the best. But the poor are ever suspicious."

Lelanro patted the youth's flushed cheek with two wrinkled fingers, and laughed kindly.

"In a few weeks you will understand my motives for acting thus," said he gently; "believe me, I have your welfare at heart. Now you can go, Mr. Warwick, but pray do not forget to inform me about Autolycus when you hear."

Thus dismissed, Warwick bowed and, not without an effort, left the room. He felt that he was surrounded by mysteries which concerned him closely, and dearly he would have liked to question his patron. But the attitude of Lelanro indicated a certain reserve; so Warwick, bridling his curiosity for the moment, sought the society of Madam Tot, and fiddled away his thoughts till dinner-time.

During the meal Lelanro discussed politics, and strove to interest Warwick in the intricacies of statecraft. The attempt was idle, as, Celia being near him, the amorous young man had more ear for her musical laugh and frivolous talk than for all the wisdom of eld. When love is in the heart, ambition is out of the mind.

After dinner Warwick, tearing himself away from the too pleasant society of Celia, hastened to the study of Dr. Pryce. On the threshold a new surprise awaited him, for hardly had he reached the door when it opened suddenly, and the buxom form of Mistress Sally appeared. She was as surprised to see him as he was to set eyes on her at so late an hour, in so unexpected a position.

"Dear heart," said Mistress Sally, patting her ample bosom with a fat hand, "how you startled me, sir! I have

just been to see good Dr. Pryce to ask him about my health, which, Mr. Warwick," concluded the rosy-cheeked landlady, with an affected sigh, "is none of the best, I do assure you, sir."

Warwick laughed at the palpable untruth, but nevertheless, having no reasonable excuse to express his disbelief, he said a few kind words, and entered the study. Mistress Sally saw the door close, and gazed on it for a few moments with a bewildered expression.

"If it should be so," muttered the landlady to herself, "I shall believe Walter Ballard to have been more fool than knave."

After which enigmatic sentence, she proceeded to the housekeeper's room for an hour's gossip before returning to her snug inn. As was afterwards observed by the housekeeper, Mistress Sally was singularly distraught during their cosy conversation.

Meanwhile Warwick was seated near the desk, talking to Dr. Pryce, and trying to elicit from that astute individual the reason for Mistress Sally's unexpected visit. The attempt proved a failure, for Pryce was disinclined to make a confidant of his visitor, and so carefully avoided giving the least information that Warwick naturally felt a trifle hurt.

"I do not know why you should withhold your confidence, doctor," said he, biting his lip. "You may be sure that I have a sufficient reason for asking these questions."

"I may have a sufficient reason for declining an answer, for all you know," replied Pryce dryly. "But if you inform me of your motive, I may be less reticent. Now, I'll be bound, Mr. Warwick," continued the doctor, bending forward, "that of late you have been building castles in the air."

"I do not deny it," said the young man, reddening. "I am naturally of an observant disposition, and from certain

hints and from noting the actions of those around me I am inclined to believe——”

“That you have some claim to belong to the Lelanro family.”

“Why, yes, doctor,” replied Warwick, surprised at this correct interpretation of his thoughts. “I cannot deny that my mind has been busy with such a possibility.”

“On what grounds do you base this assumption?” questioned Pryce calmly.

“I hardly know how to answer that question. I have really only a vague belief without much foundation. You know my story, Pryce?”

“Yes. And a very interesting story it is! Well?”

“As I mentioned, it was not without design that I came to the village of Dalesford. Ballard,” said Warwick, with some emphasis, “is not a common name.”

“Well, no,” replied Pryce dubiously, “and yet you can hardly say it is uncommon. You refer to the man in London?”

“Partly, and to Mistress Sally also. I have discovered that he was her brother.”

“Was her brother, Warwick?”

“Yes. He is now dead.”

Pryce expressed no surprise at this intelligence, so that Warwick was more convinced than ever that Mistress Sally had come on other than medical business to the Manor. After a pause said the doctor:

“Well, sir! Ballard of London is now dead, and I presume you have given up all thought of discovering your real name and that of your father.”

“Why, no, Pryce! On the contrary, I have now a reasonable expectation of learning the truth.”

“Indeed! I should be glad to know the grounds on which you base these expectations,” said Pryce dryly.

He settled himself comfortably in his chair, and looked anxiously at Warwick. The young man hesitated for a few

moments, then with a sudden resolution laid bare his mind with youthful impetuosity.

"Though, indeed," said he, with some petulance, "I do not rightly see why I should confide in you, seeing that you hold aloof, and treat me with suspicion."

"My dear lad, I do not treat you with suspicion," cried Pryce, holding out his hand. "And I have a reason for holding aloof! You will learn what it is soon enough. Meanwhile, let me hear your story."

"You already know most of it," replied Warwick frankly; "as I told you, my father recommended me to seek out this Ballard in London as one likely to aid me in the search for my family. Before I set off for London for the second time, Autolycus told me that he had reason to believe that Ballard came from Dalesford, and advised me to turn aside and see if he was there."

"What reason had he to believe that?"

"Indeed, I cannot say, Pryce! Unless it was that, in one of his peregrinations, he stayed at the 'Lelanro Arms,' which as you know is kept by Miss Ballard. The name might suggest a connection. Well, sir," continued Warwick, warming with his theme, "I questioned Mistress Sally and learned but little, yet I discovered that this Ballard of London—Walter Ballard—was her brother."

"What has that to do with the Lelanros?"

"In my opinion it has a great deal to do with the Lelanros," retorted Warwick, with some heat. "Only to-day Madam Tot, while talking her elfish nonsense, mentioned incidentally that it was a pity her faery nephew had not lived."

"What faery nephew?"

"You know well enough, Pryce, though it pleases you to assume ignorance. I refer to the brother of the late Louis Lelanro, the father of Miss Celia."

"I don't quite follow your argument," said Pryce dryly. "However, I will concede, for the sake of further discus-

sion, that there was a faery nephew, by which, I suppose, Madam Tot means a dwarf like herself. What then ?”

“What then ! Can't you see the connection ?”

“No ; I am very stupid.”

“Indeed you are no such thing, Pryce. It is sheer obstinacy on your part. However, I shall explain my belief. A dwarf was born to Lelanro, and unwilling to incarcerate another inmate in the secret chamber, he took means to rid himself of the unfortunate manikin. I believe that this Ballard was given the dwarf to get rid of. Ballard took the poor creature away, and, I verily believe, sold him to Autolyceus, who——”

“I see,” interrupted Pryce quietly, “you think that your father, the dwarf, was the son of Lord Lelanro, and that you are the cousin of Miss Celia and the heir to the title and estates ? I congratulate you on your imagination, Mr. Warwick.”

“Do you find the idea so very ridiculous ?” demanded Warwick angrily. “I confess I do not. That a noble family like the Lelanros should have dwarfish children is, to say the least of it, remarkable. These dwarfs are not monstrosities, but are perfectly and gracefully formed—tiny men and women. My father, Algernon, was the same. He was as handsome a dwarf as Madam Tot. The man who is supposed to know my history comes from this village ; he was, I believe, a confidential servant of the Lelanros ; and further, Madam Tot inadvertently admits that a dwarf was born to her brother. Now, Dr. Pryce, all these facts make me believe that I am sprung from none other than the Lelanros. And what is more, I believe Lord Lelanro knows it.”

“Oh, you think so !” replied Pryce sarcastically.

“I do. Else why should he treat me with such unexampled kindness after hearing my story ? I showed him the paper bearing the date of my father's birth, and if Madam Tot is to be believed, he must have known that he

had a dwarf child born that year. Again, he wishes to see Autolykus ; for what reason if not to question him concerning his purchase of the child from Ballard ? With these facts—and they are facts—to go on, can you wonder at my belief that I am really a Lelanro ? ”

Pryce rose from his seat with an embarrassed smile and took a turn up and down the room. When he stopped, it was before Warwick, at whom he looked with some interest.

“ You are a very clever young man, Mr. Warwick, and show an observant and logical instinct far beyond your years. You should have been a detective, for you have formed a very feasible case out of—nothing.”

“ Nothing ! ” repeated Warwick, springing to his feet. “ If out of nothing, where is the faery nephew born to Lord Lelanro and referred to by Madam Tot ? ”

“ I shall show you,” answered Pryce, going to his desk. “ That a dwarf was born to Lelanro, I admit. But as to where he is, I can dispose of your doubts in that direction without much trouble.”

So saying, he took a key from the desk and motioned to Warwick to follow him. Incapable of extorting the truth from this obstinate old man, the youth obeyed in silence, and soon they found themselves in a long, dark passage, at the farther end of which was a door. This Pryce unlocked, and they issued immediately into a quadrangle of no very great extent, looking spectral in the chill moonlight. Here and there on the greensward rose tiny headstones, glimmering whitely in the cold shine, and Warwick had no need to be informed by Pryce's next remark as to where he was.

“ This, Mr. Warwick,” said the doctor gravely, “ is the burial-ground of the Lelanro dwarfs. From the first of those unhappy beings, born in the reign of Charles Stewart, down to Luke, the dwarfish brother of the present lord, they are all here laid to rest. After my lord's brother, however, another dwarf was buried here. You shall see his grave.”

He led the way to the end of the quadrangle and stopped before a small swell of earth, at the head of which sparkled a white marble stone. In the bright moonlight Warwick could plainly decipher the inscription, and fell on his knees the better to discern it.

"You see," said Pryce quietly, "that it is erected to the memory of Albert Lelanro, born in 1847 and died in 1848. Here, Mr. Warwick, lies the dwarfish son of my lord, through whom you would connect yourself with the Lelanro family."

Warwick covered his face with his hands. The downfall of his hopes was complete.

CHAPTER XIV

THE HEIR

SOME days after that enlightening visit to the dwarfs' cemetery, Warwick entered the library of Lord Lelanro, to find his patron in close conversation with a stranger. This gentleman, young and prepossessing in appearance, he rightly guessed to be Mr. Winyard, the kinsman and heir of the old nobleman. Conversant with the fact that he was also a suitor for the hand of Celia, it was difficult for Warwick to rid his mind of a certain unfounded prejudice, and to rightly judge the new-comer. No man, however broad-minded he may be, is sufficiently generous to look impartially on his rival's mental qualifications and physical advantages. Warwick was only human after all, and, naturally enough, he was not ready to admit in Winyard's bearing and speech any superiority to his own.

Strictly speaking, the advantage lay with himself, for he possessed an aristocracy of looks which was absent in

his rival. Well-born though Winyard assuredly was, yet there must have been some plebeian strain in his family, for in appearance and conversation and thought a certain coarseness was apparent, which could not fail to be repellent to one so fastidious as Lelanro. Winyard seemed aware of the barrier between them, for he was ill at ease in the presence of his kinsman, although, by assuming a bluff, frank air, he tried to hide his obvious nervousness. Warwick, who was preternaturally sharp in divining character, had little difficulty in arriving at the conclusion that of all men Edgar Winyard would be the type most obnoxious to his patron.

Outwardly the man was sufficiently well-looking. His figure, though bulky, was good, and not burdened with superfluous flesh; his head, well set on his broad shoulders, was covered with crisp yellow hair, and he owned a pair of apparently frank blue eyes, rather belied by the sullen expression of a thin-lipped mouth. Yet as this latter defect was hidden under a drooping moustache of a straw colour, many people, misled by unabashed eyes and bluff manners, assumed Winyard to be a rough, genial creature, a trifle unpolished, but honest to the core. Those who held this opinion invariably changed it on further acquaintance.

That he was what is known as a "horsey man" could be guessed from his attire, which, though sufficiently subdued for good breeding, betrayed, in an indefinable way, the tastes of him who elected to wear it. Moreover, he had a way of straddling his legs when standing, which reminded Warwick of a groom, and he could not help thinking that the heir to the Lelanro title would have been more at home in a stable-yard than in a library. At the first sight, perhaps unjustly, he disliked the man; for the poles were not further asunder than were the idiosyncrasies of this individual and himself. Time and a closer acquaintance only confirmed the first impression.

"Come in, come in, Mr. Warwick," said Lelanro, with an air of relief. "Do you wish to see me?"

"My lord, this letter from Autolycus," replied Warwick, placing it in the hand of his patron.

Lelanro seized it eagerly, but, with instinctive courtesy, introduced the young men to one another before looking at it, although he was most anxious to lose no time in making himself master of the contents.

"Edgar, this is my new secretary, Mr. Warwick," said he, laying his hand on the youth's shoulder, "and this, Mr. Warwick, is my kinsman, Mr. Winyard, who will give us the pleasure of his company for a week or so. You will excuse me if I leave you to improve your acquaintance, as I wish to read this letter."

So saying he withdrew to the window of the library, where the light fell strongest, and adjusting his pince-nez, carefully scanned the letter. Left to their own devices, the rivals looked at one another, and by their stiff bearing intimated that the introduction was a pleasure to neither. Warwick quietly bowed, and waited for the visitor to speak, which he did almost immediately in a most offensive manner.

"So you are my cousin's new secretary," said he, looking Warwick up and down as though he were a horse. "He is always picking up some new *protégé*. In nine cases out of ten his swans turn out geese."

"I trust I may prove the tenth, Mr. Winyard," replied Warwick, chafing at this speech. "I would indeed be ungrateful did I not repay Lord Lelanro's kindness by all the means at my command."

"Can you ride?"

"I think so! Lord Lelanro has kindly placed a horse at my disposal."

"The deuce he has!" retorted Winyard, and turned insolently away with a muttered remark about a beggar on horseback. Warwick caught the drift though not the exact

words, and clenched his hands to prevent himself speaking. For the moment he was sorely inclined to retort sharply, but fortunately Lord Lelanro called him to his side before he lost all command of his feelings.

"I see by this letter that Autolycus is coming here next week," said Lelanro, who looked pleased. "I am obliged to him for his promptitude."

"Who is Autolycus?" asked Edgar, with a yawn.

"A person whom I desire to see on business," answered Lelanro, annoyed at his kinsman's want of tact. "I think you will find Celia in the garden, Edgar."

"Thanks. I'll see if she'll come out riding with me. I suppose your secretary has to attend to his duties."

"Mr. Warwick will stay with me, Edgar. I have a few words to say to him touching this letter."

Warwick bowed and retreated to a distant corner of the library, where he did his best to control his anger at the insolent tone of Winyard. Marking his discomposure, and easily recognizing the cause, Lelanro tapped his cousin on the shoulder as he was stepping out on to the terrace.

"I hope you will be friends with Warwick," said he politely, "he is a young gentleman of great promise and no mean intellectual acquirements."

"I don't care for making friends of servants, Lord Lelanro."

"Mr. Warwick is not a servant," retorted the old lord loftily; "he is as well-born as you or I."

"That may be," replied Edgar, nettled by the reproof, "but he seems far too independent for his position."

"I do not think so," said Lelanro dryly, "and I am the best judge of such things. I would advise you to be friendly with him, Edgar. It may be to your advantage in the future."

Winyard walked slowly along the terrace with these significant words ringing in his ears. He could not understand their meaning, as, confident of his heirship to the

Lelanro estates, he saw no reason why the friendship of a penniless dependent should be advantageous to him. Yet there was a meaning in his cousin's speech, which rather disquieted him, and he sought in vain for the reason which could have induced their utterance. At what conclusion he would have arrived is impossible to say, but for the moment his cogitations were put an end to by the glimpse he caught of his cousin. She was walking across the lawn, clad in a white dress suited to the heat of the day, and smiled under a pink sunshade which imparted a rosy hue to her delicate complexion.

"How do you do, Edgar?" said she, holding out her hand. "I am glad to see you, cousin. You are looking well."

"I'm as well as a man can be who has lost some thousands of late," replied the young man moodily. "I thought I'd come down here to retrench a bit."

"Oh!" said Miss Lelanro, raising her eyebrows, "then you did not come to see me?"

"You know I'd go to the end of the world to see you, Celia."

"I am sure of that, Edgar—if a horse-race did not detain you. How do you think my grandfather is looking?"

"Oh, he's in capital health. I believe he'll live for ever."

"I hope and trust he will," retorted Celia, with a flash of her bright eyes. "You seem to grudge him a long life."

Edgar did indeed grudge him a long life, as he was anxious to enjoy the title, and finger the revenues of the estates as speedily as possible. But brutal as he was, shame made him protest against the construction placed on his speech by his quick-witted cousin.

"Indeed I do not," he protested good-humouredly. "I hope he'll live to the age of Methuselah. By the way, who is this young cub whom he calls his secretary?"

"Mr. Warwick is not a young cub, Edgar, but a very

charming young gentleman. He has been my grandfather's secretary for over a month, and we all like him very much."

"Yourself among the number, I suppose," muttered Edgar jealously.

"Of course! Why should I not?"

"He's too good-looking for a secretary."

"I don't think so. I can't bear ugly people—or cross people," added Celia, with a swift glance at the scowl on her cousin's face. "Come, Edgar, do not let us quarrel on the first day of your arrival."

"I have no wish to quarrel, Celia. You know that your slightest wish is law to me."

"Indeed! Then it is my wish that you behave in a friendly fashion to Mr. Warwick."

"Why should I? He is an insolent young beggar."

"I am sorry to hear it. And his insolence consists in what?"

"Oh, it's not what he says," fumed Edgar, "the fellow is civil enough, but he looks in such a high-and-mighty manner that there is no bearing him. One glance is enough for me. I shall never like him."

"Well, then, I like him."

"I see that," said Edgar sharply, "and that is one of my reasons for objecting to his presence in the house."

"I think we had better leave the subject alone," said Celia, with great dignity, "the more so as we are not likely to agree upon it. Let us converse on other matters. Madam Tot, for instance! Have you seen her?"

"No! Nor do I want to; the frightful little monster!"

Clearly Winyard was in too bad a temper to measure his words, so Celia, who had experienced his rough humour on former occasions, was in no mood to put up with a repetition. She therefore withdrew herself from his society.

"You will be better by yourself, Edgar," said she, turning her back on the discomfited young man, "and

though you despise Mr. Warwick as a servant, you could do worse than take a lesson in breeding from him."

With profuse apologies Edgar tried to detain her, but Celia, who was not easily moved when she had once made up her mind, refused to remain longer in his company, and walked haughtily away.

"Confound the fellow!" growled Winyard, looking after the retreating form, "he seems to have bewitched them all. First Lelanro, now Celia, and I dare say that little horror of a dwarf is as mad over him as the rest."

He was of two minds to seek out Warwick, and fasten a quarrel on him, but as he had reasons, not unconnected with a loan of money, for keeping on good terms with Lelanro, he decided not to raise the old gentleman's anger by annoying his *protégé*. Disgusted at the caution he was forced to observe, Edgar strolled round to the stables and passed the afternoon in the congenial society of the grooms.

CHAPTER XV

BOTTOM AND TITANIA

FULL justice has not been done to the character of Madam Tot, who, elfish creature as she was, possessed a larger share of shrewdness than usually falls to the lot of a full-sized human being. She was quick in seeing the good and bad points of those with whom she came into contact; and, considering her very limited experience of the world, she was an excellent judge of human nature. To Warwick she took instinctively, as the kindly disposition and romantic inclinations of the youth were quite in harmony with her own character; and, moreover, his mastery of the violin was a powerful factor in securing her regard. He was always ready to amuse her, and

humour her whims, so that the little creature soon became fondly attached to one possessed of so many qualifications for winning her regard.

Towards Winyard, on the other hand, Madam Tot conducted herself with the utmost haughtiness, and was more frank than pleasant in her speeches. The mere idea that he was to succeed her brother, and become master of the Manor House, threw her into fits of anger which incapacitated her for days. The little woman was highly neurotic, and trifles, which would have hardly disturbed a strong-nerved person, roused her to frenzy. Winyard, who was as earthy a creature as could be met with, offended her greatly by his want of tact and his coarse jokes on her infirmities. Consequently she requested her brother not to let him visit her portion of the house when staying at the Manor; and Winyard had not set eyes on the manikin for over three years.

It was therefore with some surprise that Celia, who knew her great-aunt's aversion to the young man, was requested by Madam Tot to bring Winyard to see her that afternoon.

"He will only make you ill," expostulated Celia gently.

"Oh, no! oh, dear, dear, no," replied Madam Tot, with shrill disdain; "not now, my love. Once upon a time such would have been the case, no doubt, but now I can afford to laugh at his rudeness."

"How so, more than on former occasions?"

"Celia, you are asking me to betray the secrets of the good people," said the dwarf in a tone of reproof. "Not until the moon is full am I permitted to reveal that which I know. Then, my love, you will see Edgar—the coarse creature—tumbled down from his high estate. Oh, yes; I know what I know. The peaceful neighbours are not to be insulted with impunity, child."

Out of all this jargon Celia could extract no sense, and as Madam Tot declined to be more explicit, she was forced

to depart in search of Edgar in a very puzzled frame of mind. Why Madam Tot should desire to see one whom she professed to dislike it was difficult to say; but in making the request she evidently had some purpose which was inimical to Winyard. The dwarf had a great deal of maliciousness in her character, and when provoked by any one, as in the present instance, she would make herself uncommonly disagreeable. Celia foresaw that Edgar would have a bad quarter of an hour should he accept the invitation.

Winyard expressed himself quite ready to do so, but made so many contemptuous remarks concerning the unfortunate little being, that Celia, who was strongly attached to her great-aunt, remonstrated with him on his painful candour.

"You must remember, Edgar," said she reprovingly, "that you, of all men, have the least right to sneer at her infirmities."

"Why so, my fair cousin?"

"Because you are of our blood, and when you marry may have children likewise afflicted."

"If I did I'd kill them," said Edgar, in strong disgust. "All those little reptiles should be drowned, like kittens, at their birth. They are not human beings."

"I hope, Edgar, when you succeed my grandfather, you will reconsider your brutal determination," said Celia angrily. "You know that for generations our family has produced dwarfs, and as you, being of our blood, will not be exempt from the burden, it is only right and just that you should bear it as our forefathers have done. If you take the title and estates, you have a right to take the trouble also; or else," added Celia significantly, "do not marry, and so end the race."

"I shall only marry one woman—yourself."

"In that case I am afraid you will die a bachelor," retorted Celia disdainfully. "I would not marry you for all the world."

"But you would that cub of a secretary," said Edgar imprudently.

"Be silent, sir! How dare you connect my name with his?" cried Celia indignantly. "I am not likely to marry Mr. Warwick, or any one else, that I know of. Why do you vent your spleen on him? He does no harm to you."

"Yes, he does. He has supplanted me in my uncle's good graces. However, I do not care. When I come to my own I'll kick him out of the house."

"He's quite strong enough to kick you," replied Celia coolly; "and I would remind you, Edgar, of the proverb anent cup and lip."

"What do you mean, Celia? Your grandfather hinted some nonsense of that sort, now you do so. I demand an explanation."

"I have none to give you," said Miss Lelanro coldly, "save that life is uncertain and you may die before entering into your kingdom."

"Oh, if that is all, I am prepared to take the risk," scoffed Edgar, greatly relieved. "I am quite satisfied, cousin. Neither you, nor your grandfather, nor your precious secretary can rob me of title and estates. The law is stronger than your wishes."

"I greatly regret that it should be so," said Celia, who found Edgar peculiarly exasperating this afternoon; "but here we are in Madam Tot's garden, so I beg of you to bridle your tongue and give her the deference to which she is accustomed."

"Bah! Infernal nonsense," growled Edgar, following his cousin towards the summer-house. "Deference to a little monster like that!"

Discarding for a time her favourite green colour, Madam Tot was arrayed in a long garment of bright yellow, and wore on her white hair a pointed hat, such as is affected by the Welsh peasantry. In this odd attire, leaning her withered hands on an ebony cane, with her black eyes

sparkling maliciously, she looked like some tiny witch full of venom and spite. The cackle of malignant laughter with which she greeted Edgar, startled even the strong nerves of that sceptic, and he could not but own to himself that, despite her size, Madam Tot would be better to have as a friend than a foe. But he forgot this wise conclusion in a few minutes, and proceeded to torment the dwarf as a boy does a monkey.

"Good-day, Bottom the Weaver," said the dwarf, holding out her tiny hand, "you can kiss the fingers of Titania the Queen."

With unaccustomed good-humour Edgar threw himself down on the grass, and as her little hand rested on his broad brown palm, he kissed it gallantly, thereby winning an approving smile from Madam Tot, who was a great stickler for ceremonial.

"There is some chivalry about you, after all, cousin," she said, with stately grace. "I am glad to see you. Celia, be seated on that bench."

That young lady did as she was bid, while Edgar reclined at her feet, and Madam Tot, bringing out a doll's chair from the summer-house, seated herself before the pair. So tiny was she, so odd and elfish in looks and ways, that Edgar, earthy as he was, felt a shiver down his back at the idea that this uncanny creature was of his flesh and blood. If he married it was more than likely that at least one of his children would resemble this yellow and spiteful faery. No wonder he shuddered at the bare idea of such a possibility.

"And where is my dear Mr. Warwick, Celia?" asked the dwarf, leaning her chin on the top of her cane.

"He's in the library with grandpapa, aunt. They are going through the Lelanro pedigree."

"What's that for?" growled Edgar crossly. "Your secretary fellow has nothing to do with our pedigree."

"H'm!" said Madam Tot, flashing a malicious glance on

the puffy red face before her. "I see you do not like my Mr. Warwick, Bottom the Weaver."

"I think he's an insolent cub," retorted Winyard, with insulting calmness.

"Oh, Celia doesn't think so, my dear."

"Why should I?" said Celia, blushing at the remark.



"Kissed it gallantly."

"In all things I find Mr. Warwick a courteous gentleman. Why Edgar speaks of him so ungraciously I cannot conceive."

"Then you have no eyes, my love," retorted Madam Tot, pointing her cane at Edgar. "This gentleman is jealous of your appreciation of our friend's good qualities."

"Jealous of a servant; not I!" replied Edgar, enraged at this thrust. "Celia can admire a dozen such for all I care."

"Oh, indeed!" snapped Madam Tot vivaciously. "Then you and Celia are not minded to marry?"

"I am not," said Celia calmly. "Edgar knows well that my decision was taken on that point long before I saw Mr. Warwick."

"Why do you bring him in?" said Winyard savagely.

"Because you seem to have got it into your head that I have fallen in love with Mr. Warwick, and so altered my determination to marry you, which," added Celia, looking steadily at her cousin, "is by no means the case."

The dwarf, pleased at Edgar's discomfited look, laughed with shrill enjoyment, which roused the black spirit in his breast, and caused him to turn fiercely on the little creature.

"Be quiet, you monkey!" he said sharply.

"Monkey!" repeated Madam Tot, angered by the epithet, "how dare you call me monkey, you coarse giant—you grovelling Caliban! I'll have you pinched black and blue—I'll ride you with nightmare! I'll blight you with spells."

She was on her feet by this time, waving her cane in impotent fury; her little face convulsed with passion. Before Celia could intervene to appease the wrath raised by Edgar's indiscreet speech, she suddenly calmed down, and cold malice usurped the place of hot rage. Of the two moods Edgar preferred the latter.

"He! he!" she tittered maliciously, "you sneer at my spells, no doubt! But I can punish you in another way. Warwick is a cub, is he—a poor foundling—a paid servant—and you are my lord and master—the future Lord Lelanro? Edgar Winyard," she said, pointing her staff towards him, "you shall go down, and he shall rise up.

Honour and happiness await him. Ruin and dishonour attend on your steps. Take your last look at Lelanro Manor, sir, for never will you see it again. I put a spell on you, creature! Without heart, or good breeding, or kindness, you have insulted your kinswoman. She curses you! Within a month you will be in the dust—there you will stay till a suicide's grave receives your dishonoured clay."

Edgar shrank from the glittering eyes and hurried speech of the dwarf; but before he could summon up sufficient courage to reply, she darted into the summer-house and closed the door. No words or entreaties of Celia could draw her forth, and Edgar was unwillingly compelled to retire with the unenviable feeling that he had behaved in a singularly ill-bred fashion.

"I advised you to behave yourself," said Celia as they left the garden, "and speaking candidly, I think you have acted in a most abominable manner."

"She provoked me."

"You shouldn't let yourself be provoked," retorted Celia sharply; "a poor little creature like that can do you no harm."

"I'm not so sure of that," muttered Edgar uneasily. "What the deuce does she mean by her hints?"

Celia vouchsafed no reply to this speech, but having conducted Edgar out of the dwarf's domain, she left him to his own devices. Indignant with his conduct, she disliked the idea of remaining in his company, and so Edgar found himself alone. As is usual with such natures, he blamed every one but himself.

"It is Warwick's doing," he thought angrily, biting his nails. "There is some mystery about that intruder which is inimical to myself. I don't like Madam Tot's hints, the horrible little witch!"

It will be noted that, much as Winyard affected to despise his dwarfish kinswoman, he was in reality afraid

of her malice, and inclined to gift her with a power of harming him which, so far as he knew, she did not possess. His conscience made a coward of him.

CHAPTER XVI

LOVE'S YOUNG DREAM

AT the age of twenty, Celia Lelanro should certainly have known better than to fall in love with her grandfather's dependent within the space of a few weeks. That Warwick should be in the same plight was scarcely to be wondered at, even though he had the advantage of her in age by two years. In affairs of the heart women are always older than men, and Celia, by all the traditions of her sex, should have kept her feelings more under control. In place of such restraint she let her passion have its way, and finally found herself hopelessly devoted to the young man. Only when it was too late did she recognize that her future happiness depended on a life-companionship with Warwick.

The presence of Edgar Winyard, in place of retarding, hastened the catastrophe, for the contrast between the two aspirants to her favour was greatly to the advantage of the secretary. If Winyard had the better birth, Warwick owned the cleverer brain; and though the first was well dowered with wealth, the last possessed the advantage of a handsomer face and figure. Moreover, while Edgar was brusque and careless in his manner, the secretary was severely polite, and always conducted himself with grave dignity. No doubt, from daily association with Lord Lelanro, Warwick unconsciously imitated his stately reserve; but it was certain that, as the days passed by, Celia saw in him an increasing likeness to her grandfather.

If appearance went for anything, Warwick was much more the aristocrat than his more fortunately placed rival.

Trained by her grandfather, Celia admired his school of old-fashioned politeness, and seeing it reproduced in Warwick, softened by a certain youthful vivacity, she could not help comparing him to the disadvantage of the free-and-easy Edgar. That young man was loud and assertive in demeanour, swaggered about the place in an offensively bumptious manner, and frankly regarded the female sex as indisputably inferior to his noble self. Celia had never liked him over-much; but now that his lack of chivalry was accentuated by the neighbourhood of the courteous Warwick, she grew positively to hate him.

Being in this frame of mind, it appeared probable that she would affect the society of Warwick and frown on the efforts of his rival to win her smiles. In place of doing so she acted in a directly opposite manner, for daily she tolerated the advances of Edgar with feigned good-humour, and disdainfully refused to notice the respectful admiration of the secretary. Had Warwick been better acquainted with the female heart he would have seen that this haughtiness was intended to mask a deeper feeling, but, unlearned in such recondite matters, he lost heart at the neglect of his mistress, and became daily more jealous of the successful Edgar.

Hitherto his sojourn at the Manor House had been very pleasant; but now, devoured by jealousy, and tortured by the sight of Celia's disdain, he grew silent and unhappy. To all appearance he might as well wish for the moon as for the smiles of Miss Lelanro; and therefore he tried vainly to school his heart into acceptance of the inevitable. Since the downfall of his air castles when shown the dwarfs' cemetery by Dr. Pryce, he had surrendered all hope of learning the truth concerning his birth. Ballard was dead, and, so far as he knew, no one else could reveal the truth. At this period of his life Warwick took a very

gloomy view of his future, as it seemed as though all things he most desired were beyond his reach.

Lord Lelanro, seeing the youth's unhappy face, was uniformly kind, but made no advances towards an explanation, and so long as Warwick fulfilled his duties he seemed to overlook his individual woes. Exasperated by the indifference of his patron, by the neglect of Celia, and the studied insolence of Edgar, who lost no opportunity of making himself disagreeable, Warwick resolved to end the matter by giving up a position which was one of constant pain. The only thing which withheld him from doing so without further delay, was the thought of Madam Tot, who he knew would sadly miss him and his music. Nevertheless he was half determined to take his leave, and carry out his original intention of going to London; but first he resolved to speak with the dwarf, of whose shrewd brain he had a great opinion, and learn if possible the reason of Celia's coldness.

Another reason which induced him to interview the little lady, was that she had not yet resolved the riddle which he had submitted to her; or if she had done so, the solution had not yet been placed before him. Failing Ballard, who was dead, and his fancy of kinship with the Lelanros, which had been proved false by Pryce, there only remained the chance of his descent being explained by that name and date. Much as he hoped that the truth might be learned thereby, Warwick feared there was but a slender chance of matters being set right in so frivolous a fashion. "Algernon, 24 December, 1857." Who could make anything of such solemn trifling?

Madam Tot received him in her own special doll's house, where he had revived from his swoon on that eventful morning. With a dexterity begotten by constant practice, Warwick went down on his hands and knees, and wriggled himself gingerly through the low door. His bulk took up the most part of the room, and Madam Tot hastily cleared

the tiny chairs and tables out of the way, lest they should be crushed by this colossus. Owing to the narrow limits of the chamber, as compared with ordinary rooms, surrounded by the miniature furniture placed beside the tiny dwarf, whose near presence accentuated his size, Warwick seemed abnormally large, and lay stretched on the carpet with his head resting on the sofa, like Gulliver in the largest temple of Lilliput. In this instance truth was stranger than fiction.

"Well, Man Mountain," cried Madam Tot, who was well acquainted with the romance of the great Dean, "why have you sought me in my bower? The garden is better for you, sir."

"I wish to speak to you particularly, Madam Tot."

"If it is about your riddle, Mr. Warwick, I do not intend to tell you of it till the moon shines full on the Faery Ring. That will be next week."

"Have you read the riddle?" asked Warwick eagerly.

"Of course I have," retorted the dwarf disdainfully; "it required but little skill to make it out."

"Yet what sense can you make out of a name and a date?"

"Aha! That is my secret. It makes sense sure enough as you will learn in six days."

"Why not tell me now?"

"I have my reasons, Man Mountain," retorted Madam Tot sharply. "Why do you wish to upset my plans?"

"Because I am going away."

"Going away!" cried the little creature, with shrill dismay. "Why? Has any one been treating you badly?"

"No; that is—no one in particular," stammered Warwick, feeling himself at a disadvantage, "but I think I have stayed long enough at the Manor. It is time I went out into the world to seek my fortune."

"Your fortune is not in the world, sir, it is here," replied Madam Tot, nodding her head wisely. "Do not seek in

far lands what you may find on your own doorstep! Ha," she added, with a sudden start, "it is Edgar Winyard you complain of?"

"Indeed no, Madam Tot; I am not the man to let myself be upset by a boorish manner."

"He is a boor," assented the dwarf smartly; "a real Bottom the Weaver. I've told him so several times, but the creature hasn't read *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, and cannot see the application. So it's not Bottom," pursued Madam Tot reflectively; "is it Blunderbore or Pryce?"

"Neither."

"Hah! do you mean to say that my brother——"

"I say nothing about Lord Lelanro," interrupted Warwick hastily; "he is kindness itself. But I have my reasons for wishing to go, and if you will kindly tell me the riddle I will make my arrangements and take my departure."

"Indeed you will do no such thing," retorted Madam Tot angrily. "Here you are and here you shall stay. Don't be impatient, sir; wait and hope. All will come right, and in a way you little dream of."

"What do you mean?"

"Oh, I know what I mean. I saw my brother the other day, and we talked you over—well over," said she emphatically; "he is satisfied, and so am I. Fate has great things in store for you."

"Alas! had she only one thing in store for me, I should be content," sighed Warwick regretfully.

Madam Tot cocked her head on one side with a roguish look in her bright eyes, and then clapping her tiny hands burst into an elvish laugh.

"Prythee why so pale, fond lover?" quoted she gleefully. "Oh! so my great-niece has been wringing your heart."

"I—I—didn't say so, Madam Tot."

"Man Mountain, I am no fool! Don't judge my brain by my little body. I can see well enough that you love Celia."

"Yes, I do," returned Warwick defiantly. "I can't help it."

"Who wants you to help it, you great goose?" retorted the dwarf, smiling. "If you love the girl, why not tell her so?"

"I dare not! I am a nobody—a penniless outcast. How can I hope to aspire to the hand of a great lady?"

"H'm," said Madam Tot, with a twinkle in her shrewd eyes, "no doubt you are right. As Warwick the fiddler, you are no match for our family."

Warwick thought the little lady was rather heartless, and hastened to take his leave, as it was apparent he would get no sympathy from so whimsical a being. Madam Tot guessed his feelings, but in place of soothing them, merely laughed and tittered as he withdrew from her chamber. There was a great deal of malice in her nature, and she enjoyed the unhappy plight of her favourite. Yet when he left her room she made some amends.

"Man Mountain?"

"Yes, Madam Tot."

"Don't you leave the Manor till I read the riddle next week. Come to the faery ring when the moon is full, and hear your fate."

"Very well, Madam Tot," grumbled the disconsolate lover. "I will wait a week. After that I shall leave you for ever."

When his retreating footsteps died away Madam Tot clapped her hands again, and skipped lightly about her chamber, screeching with laughter. Evidently the woes of Warwick caused her great amusement. At this moment a rap came at the casement, and the dwarf opened it smartly, to find Celia's face smiling at her. So low was the window, and so tall Celia, that she easily looked into the room.

"Go away, you bad creature," snapped Madam Tot, slapping her relative lightly on the cheek; "you torturer of poor young men's hearts, go away."

"Aunt," said Celia, blushing at the hint conveyed, "what do you mean?"

"He has just left me, you flirt—you coquette—you siren without a voice."

"Edgar?"

"Edgar, indeed!" replied Madam Tot in high disdain. "As though I would let that great creature into my bower! No, Celia, it was not Edgar, it was—— Ah, you know well enough! I'm sure he loves you dearly, and you are too much of the woman, my dear, not to have seen it long ago."

"It's that silly Mr. Warwick," cried Celia, blushing still deeper. "What has he been saying, aunt?"

"That he is going away!"

"Going away! Oh, he must not go away, Madam Tot," cried Celia, with a dismay which directly contradicted her former speeches.

"H'm," said the dwarf, inspecting the girl's blushing face, "so the wind blows that way, my love. Well, well, I had rather you married Mr. Warwick, penniless as he is, than that horrid stable creature."

"There is no question of marriage, aunt!"

"There will be soon, Celia. Wait till the full moon shines on the faery ring. Now go away. I want no more lovers' tales. Be kinder to the young man, you wretched girl, or you will lose him."

Celia, finding herself no match for this sharp tongue, walked away with her head in the air.

"If I were as tall as you," cried Madam Tot, determined to have the last word, "I'd marry him myself. There!"

CHAPTER XVII

AUTOLYCUS

ON the Wednesday of the following week a gruff individual in a dirty white great-coat, with a still dirtier white hat and a red worsted scarf hiding most of his pimply countenance, presented himself at the Manor House, and requested to see Mr. Algernon Warwick.

"Likewise," continued this odd visitor, to impress the supercilious footman, "the lord."

He thrust into Mercury's hand a stout piece of cardboard, inscribed "Autolycus, Proprietor of the Rarest Collection of Monstrosities in the Unbounded Universe"; and chuckled hoarsely as he conveyed further information—

"The Collecshun is set up on the village green, young man; and I hev known those civil to Autolycus git on the free list."

The footman did not seem to be overwhelmed by this offer, hut still supercilious, departed, holding the card betwixt a dainty finger and thumb. During his absence the showman took a seat, and breathing hard the while, examined the stately hall in which he found himself. Autolycus had been in too many cathedral towns to be impressed by the beauty of this interior; and in place of admiring the arched roof, and lofty pillars, and chequered marble floor, he sighed to think that amid these splendours Warwick would soon forget the Rarest Collection in the Unbounded Universe.

"Such a fiddler as he was," ruminated Autolycus, solacing himself with a peppermint drop. "He danced the public in even if they didn't want to go. It's a rum start, this here. I wonder how he flew so high! Ah! I allays said he was a heagle."

His further reflections were put an end to by the foot-

man's return, and he learned that both Lord Lelanro and Warwick waited him in the library. Autolycus stumped bravely after the still scornful domestic. Before he advanced into the room he marked his disapprobation of this conduct by making a speech, short and to the point—

“Instead of being a deadhead, young man, I'll charge double for your admission. No sniffers are allowed in my show.”

He might have added more, but that Mercury, having announced him, withdrew promptly from such low company, and Autolycus found his hand in the warm grasp of Warwick.

“I am glad to see you, Autolycus,” said the young man heartily; “let me introduce you to Lord Lelanro, who is anxious to make your acquaintance.”

“I allays said you were a heagle,” murmured Autolycus, taking in the improved looks of his friend; “an' you've soared wunnerful. Ah, lord,” he added, turning to Lelanro, “I hopes as I sees you well?”

“I am quite well, Mr. Autolycus, and I am glad to see you.”

“No 'andle to my name, lord,” said the showman, taking a seat. “I got it out of a play of Mr. Shakespeare, as you may have heard on. There was no Mister there, so I don't hold to tacking it on here. Well, Algeernon Warwick, you have growed,” he added, turning to the youth. “Why, you could make a dozen of your parent. That is——”

Here Autolycus closed his mouth and winked mysteriously at Warwick, to know if he could speak openly. The secretary soon reassured him on that point.

“Lord Lelanro knows all my story, Autolycus,” he said quickly. “I told him of my father, the dwarf, and of your kindness to me.”

“Oh, that wasn't much, Algeernon. I couldn't see a bright lad like you sink when 'twas your natur' to soar! A heagle, I said, allays a heagle. Well, lord, I've come

with the whole show ; it's down at the village, under charge of the missus."

" Ah, I must go and see my old friend Mrs. Guss."

" Mrs. Guss," repeated Lelanro, wondering why the wife's name was different to that of the husband ; " your better half, Autolyucus ? "

" Humph ! She thinks 'erself the better whole," growled the showman, who was evidently under petticoat government. " My name, lord, is Guss ; but I call myself professionally Autolyucus. She, well known to the public as the Boundin' Sylph, now answers to the private name of Mrs. Guss."

" I understand," said Lelanro, smiling. " Mr. Warwick, I think you may go down to the village and renew your acquaintance with Mrs. Guss. I wish to speak with this gentleman—alone."

" Certainly, my lord," answered Warwick, wondering what could be the reason of all this mystery ; " I will go at once."

" And pray, Mr. Warwick, request Dr. Pryce to give me the pleasure of his company," pursued Lelanro, accompanying his secretary to the door. " I will give you my reasons in a few days," he added in a lower tone, noting the young man's wonder ; " you can trust me, Mr. Warwick."

" I should be ungrateful if I did not," replied Warwick, taking the hand held out to him ; " I leave myself in your hands."

When the door closed behind him, Lelanro returned to his seat and looked with some interest on Autolyucus, who, unused to high society, strove to hide his confusion by another peppermint drop.

" You wonder no doubt why I have sent for you, Autolyucus," said Lelanro slowly ; " but the fact is, Mr. Warwick arrived at my house some time ago, and as I have taken a great fancy to him, I made him my secretary."

" A heagle, lord. That's what he is."

"Mr. Warwick told me his story," pursued Lelanro, smiling at the remark, "and I notice that there is a mystery connected with his birth."

Before Autolyucus could remark on this speech, Pryce entered the room, and having been duly presented to the showman, took a seat beside Lelanro to assist at extracting information regarding Warwick.

"I should like you to tell us, Autolyucus," said Lelanro, when the introduction was over, "what you know of Mr. Warwick."

Autolyucus wiped his countenance with a red bandanna handkerchief, and looked sharply at the two men before him. In spite of his eccentricities he was no fool, and liked Warwick too well to make any revelation which, for all he knew, might be hurtful to his future.

"First, lord and doctor," said the showman, placing a stumpy forefinger in the palm of his left hand, "I'd like to know your game?"

The reply to this leading question required some consideration. Lelanro was by no means inclined to trust this man of the people with the secret of his house, and so he framed a cautious answer, which, while satisfying the scruples of Autolyucus, yet preserved the dignity of the Lelanros.

"I design no ill to Mr. Warwick," said he, after a pause. "On the contrary, I wish to do my best to advance his interests. But you must be aware, Autolyucus—since it pleases you to be called so—that unless I know all about the youth I cannot hope to assist him as I should wish."

"That's fair enuff, lord," answered Autolyucus, revolving this reply. "I can tell ye all I know, for there ain't anything as is best to hide. You know his story, I b'lieve?"

"We know that his father was a dwarf, who married the Fair Circassian, and that he was sent to a public school at



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“ ‘First, lord and doctor, . . . I’d like to know your game?’ ”

your instance," said Pryce. "That was a good deed of yours, Autolycus."

"Nothin', nothin', lord and doctor. I said he was a heagle to soar, and wanted to 'elp him. Not but what I was sorry to lose him, sirs. What a fiddler he is!"

"He plays the violin excellently," said Lelanro impatiently; "but about his father. Where did you obtain this dwarf?"

"Ay! That's Algeernon, the Pigmy Napoleon; so we called him professionally, lord and doctor. Ay, he was a draw! I never saw a freak like him. Beautifully made he was, and could 'ave gone into a teacup."

"Where did you get him?"

"I got him," repeated Autolycus slowly, "from a man called Ballard; but where *he* got him I don't know."

Pryce and Lelanro looked at one another and seemed to approve of this speech.

"In what year did you receive this dwarf from Ballard?" asked Lelanro anxiously.

"It was in 1849," replied Autolycus, scratching his head; "leastways, I think so, 'cause I lost money at Rochester that year, and the next Algeernon pulled it back for me. Ay, lord and doctor, he was a draw, that Pigmy Napoleon."

"Warwick has a paper given him by his father," said Pryce, "in which the date of his birth——"

"Of whose hirth, doctor—Algeernon I. or Algeernon II.?"

"The first—the father. This paper says he was born in 1857; so that being the case you couldn't have received him in 1849, before he was born."

"Oh, that's nothin', sir," said Autolycus contemptuously. "The Pigmy Napoleon, you must know, gentlemen, was allays thinking himself a great person and descended from crowned heads. He b'lieved in that paper, which he said came from Ballard, who sometimes came to see how he was;

but it didn't mean much. He said that the figures and the letters of the name *Algeernon*, which was his own, would prove his rank; but he never could find out the meaning, and Ballard wouldn't tell him. From what I know," added *Autolycus* emphatically, "he was born in 1846, for I got him in 1849, and he was then three years old. To be sure, I ain't certain of his real age. He might have been two when I got him—these dwarfs are so misleading from their smallness."

"Then how do you account for the eleven years' difference inscribed on that paper?" asked *Lelanro*.

"It was a riddle, sir. Leastways, Ballard said so; and I guess he altered the figures from four to five to suit the finding out of it."

Lord Lelanro nodded, to imply that the explanation satisfied him, and made two or three memoranda on a slip of paper. Then he asked another question.

"Did this man Ballard give you any explanation as to how he came by the dwarf?"

"No, he didn't," retorted the showman gruffly. "He was as deep as a well, and told me to mind my own business. He had a share in *Algeernon*."

"A share!"

"Yes, lord! I gave him so much on the takings, for the *Pigmy Napoleon* was a great draw with the public. Now he's dead, and the rest of the show don't attract like he did. I wish Ballard could have got me another dwarf like him. I'd give him the same price, I would."

"Don't talk like that, man," said *Lelanro*, who looked rather pale. "I don't want to hear these details."

Autolycus, rather wondering at this unaccountable agitation, took another peppermint drop, and, being wise in his generation, held his peace.

"Ballard is dead, is he not?" asked *Pryce*, seeing the old nobleman was too upset to speak.

"Ay, doctor! I didn't know it when I told young

Algeernon to go to Lunnon for the second time. But when I wrote to that Ballard in Duke Street, a month ago, I found out he was dead—Died in furren parts, gentlemen, as a valet to a travelling gent."

"Where was this dwarf of yours married to the Fair Circassian?"

"In St. Martin's Church, Canterbury," replied the showman. "Oh, it was all straight, lord. I wouldn't have profligacy in my caravan. Neither would the missus. She's very, very moral, she is," concluded Autolycus, shaking his head. "As moral a Boundin' Sylph as I ever did see."

"Have you a picture of this dwarf?" demanded Lelanro, making another memorandum.

"I brought one with me, as I guessed from young Algeernon's letter you wanted to see me about his father," replied Autolycus, producing a photograph from his pocket, and laying it down before Lelanro. "You don't happen to know, lord, where Ballard got that dwarf? I'd give a good deal to get another of 'em, male or female. My stars, he was a draw—so beautifully made, so——"

"That will do! that will do!" said Lelanro sharply. "Leave me for a time, Autolycus—I'll see you later on and renew this conversation. Pryce, ring the bell!"

The doctor did so, and when the footman appeared Autolycus was delivered into his charge with instructions to look after his creature comforts. Pryce conducted the showman to the door and dismissed him with a last warning.

"Not a word of this conversation to a soul," he said hurriedly.

Autolycus laid a stubby finger on one side of his red nose, to imply silence, and stumped out of the room in the wake of Mercury. Dr. Pryce returned to find his patron with a drawn face full of pain leaning back in his chair.

"My sin has found me out, Pryce," said Lord Lelanro, with a groan.

"True enough," replied Pryce coolly; "still, you have a chance of making reparation to the son for what you did to the father."

"Do you think he'll forgive me, Pryce?"

"Under the circumstances," said the doctor, after a pause, "I think he will forgive you. I only hope," he added rather anxiously, "that he will forgive me also, for at your request, Lord Lelanro, I misled the poor boy by a false statement."

CHAPTER XVIII

RENUNCIATION

AUTOLYCUS had come and gone; but it did not seem to Warwick that his visit had resulted in anything tangible. Ignorant of what had taken place in the library, he could not understand why Lord Lelanro had sought speech with the showman; and as nothing was said on the matter, he did not seek to force the confidence of either Pryce or the old nobleman. Things went on as usual after the departure of Autolycus, save that Edgar Winyard made himself more disagreeable than ever, and Celia assumed a kinder manner. Warwick could not understand the reason of her new-born geniality.

After the rebuke administered by Madam Tot, her great-niece had seriously examined her mind, so as to ascertain beyond all doubt what were her feelings towards Warwick. As she might have guessed, the examination showed her that she was hopelessly in love with the young man; and as that love, according to Madam Tot, was ardently returned, Celia foresaw for herself and him a very unhappy future. As Celia she could not be happy without the love

and companionship of Warwick; as Miss Lelanro it was out of the question that she should attain such blessings through the medium of so imprudent a marriage. She was the daughter of a noble house, he a nameless orphan, penniless and obscure. It were less difficult to join fire and water than these two in holy matrimony; yet in such junction lay the future happiness of each.

Edgar, with the keen eyes of a jealous lover, guessed the feelings of his cousin towards Warwick, and hated them both accordingly; Celia for her weakness, Warwick for his insolent aspirations. Greatly as he would have liked to end the matter by ridding the house of Warwick, such a course was out of the question while the young man remained the favourite of Lelanro. Once or twice, indeed, Winyard had hinted at the lad's presumption, but the old lord persistently refused to believe that his *protégé* could do anything wrong, and told Edgar plainly to leave such matters alone. Celia also had reproved him sharply for remarks made in the same spirit, so Edgar could do nothing but look on hopelessly and wrathfully at this interloper assuming his place in the household. With the petty spite of a narrow understanding he lost no opportunity of rousing Warwick's temper; but his malice was thwarted by the supreme disdain manifested by the young man. Even Winyard's thick hide of egotism was stung by this calm contempt.

Though Warwick held his own bravely, and strove by masking his emotions to keep things smooth, yet he was very unhappy, and, thinking Celia was beyond his reach, he resolved to end his folly by absenting himself from her presence. It was truly the desire of the moth for the star, but in this instance the star had stooped of late to the lowly sphere of the moth, and it was this point that most troubled the unhappy lover. As an honourable man he could not win clandestinely the love of his patron's grand-daughter.

Sometimes he had it in his mind to throw himself at her feet and implore her compassion ; but a constant memory of Lelanro's kindness prevented such folly, and in the effort to preserve his honour, he was the more disdainful of the two. These lovers were working at cross purposes, and consequently they felt daily more unhappy, a state of things not ameliorated by the watchful hatred of the inconvenient third.

Madam Tot was well aware of Warwick's passion for her great-niece, but notwithstanding her pride, which was great, she did not seek to discourage the wooing. Nay, more, on all possible occasions she brought the couple together in her garden, and by looks and hints she seemed to desire to bring about an understanding. Celia, who by this time had thrown prudence to the winds, was in nowise disinclined to bring matters to a crisis, but Warwick, with a strength of will far beyond his years, did his best to withstand temptation. At length the effort became too great, and he sought Lelanro in order to confess his unhappy feelings, and ask permission to withdraw from so dangerous a neighbourhood.

Had this resolution been made known to Madam Tot, she would have been greatly offended, as she desired Warwick to remain till she solved his riddle by the faery ring when the moon was full. He, however, anticipating no benefit from her revelation, was impatient of her whimsical fancy to blend the real with the ideal, mortal doings with faery fantasy, and with youthful impetuosity he poured out his heart to Lelanro, with a final request that he might leave without delay.

Strange as it may appear, the haughty old nobleman did not seem angered at Warwick's presumption in loving Celia, but heard him to the end with a benign smile.

"And you are resolved to leave me," he said, when the lad ended with hanging head and flushed cheek.

"I must, my lord. It is torture for me to stay here, and no good can come of a hopeless passion."

"No; that is very true," replied Lelanro smoothly; "the disparity between your ranks renders marriage impossible."

"I suppose so. But I am not to blame for loving her. King Cophetua loved a beggar-maid, my lord; this passion of mine is the reverse."

"It is honourable of you to tell me this," said Lelanro gravely. "But you must know that I can only answer in one way."

"I am aware of that, my lord," replied Warwick bitterly; "I never blinded myself to the real aspect of the affair. The desire of the moth for the star. The moth must go, and the star——"

"What of the star?"

"Will wed another who is not worthy of her."

"If you mean Mr. Winyard," said Lelanro quietly, "I can disabuse your mind on that score. Celia does not love him, I do not respect him, so she will never become his wife."

"Ah!" sighed Warwick, drawing a long breath, "if only I had rank and position to offer, there might be a chance for me."

"Do you think rank and position would weigh with Celia, then?"

"I don't know. I have not spoken," stammered Warwick, rather startled by so direct a question; "but yourself, my lord."

"We will talk of that another time," said the old gentleman, with a dry cough; "in the meantime I observe you have not asked me concerning my interview with Autolycus."

"Did you learn anything from him, my lord?"

"Well, yes; I learned something of your family."

Warwick turned pale, for the idea that he would at last know who and what he was seemed too good to be true.

"My family?" he gasped, with a quick indrawn breath; "did—did Autolycus know?"

"He knew something. Dr. Pryce and myself knew the rest."

"But what can you know about me?" cried Warwick in despair. "Do not raise my hopes only to dash them to the ground."

"No, my boy; I shall not do that," said Lelanro, laying a kind hand on his shoulder. "I would tell you the truth now, but that I promised my poor little sister the joy of breaking the news to you. She is so proud of that riddle."

"The riddle?"

"Precisely. She has solved the riddle, which was an easy matter to her. Why, she will tell you herself. You have had many strange adventures, Mr. Warwick; but the most wonderful is yet to come. To-night you shall hear the truth."

"Here, my lord?"

"No. I told you of my promise to my sister. The poor little creature, as you know, Mr. Warwick, is fond of designating herself a changeling, and in her own imagination participates in faery revels. To-night, as the moon is full, she indulges in this freak, and then intends to let you know the truth. Afterwards, you will come to Pryce's study and see me."

"But, my lord, it is too serious a matter to me to——"

"To be mixed up with the follies of Madam Tot, you would say," said Lelanro quickly. "Perhaps it is; but as she made the first discovery it is only right that she should have the pleasure of communicating it at first hand. And after all, Mr. Warwick," concluded the old man pathetically, "you surely do not grudge this trifling pleasure to so afflicted a creature. Be kind to her for my sake."

"Let it be as you will, my lord," said Warwick, taking the hand held out to him. "I am quite agreeable to be

informed as Madam Tot pleases ; but when I know the truth will I stay or go ?”

“I shall leave that to you, sir,” said Lelanro, smiling. “It depends on yourself.”

“Or on Miss Lelanro,” hinted Warwick, with a daring which astonished himself.

“In that case,” said the old lord, pausing a moment at the door, “you had better speak to Miss Lelanro herself.”

And with that significant observation he passed out of the room, leaving Warwick too surprised to make a remark. Left alone, he sank into a chair, and strove to collect his scattered senses, which the concluding speech of Lelanro had dispersed to the four winds of heaven. That so proud a man as his patron should actually encourage him to woo Celia seemed inexplicable. The only solution lay in the fact that Lelanro must be satisfied that the race whence he sprang was equal to his own.

Again Warwick thought of the possibility of his father being one of the Lelanro dwarfs, and himself heir to the estates ; but this idea vanished when he thought of the tiny grave with the date on the headstone. In the face of such evidence, all chance of his hopes proving true was at an end, and he reluctantly dismissed the thought that he was a Lelanro. Yet if the grave was strong evidence on the one side, the fact that his father had been a dwarf was strong evidence on the other ; for it was impossible that so curious a circumstance could be a mere coincidence. Warwick at length grew so bewildered that he did not know what to think, and decided to leave the matter to time.

“Whether I be a Lelanro or not,” said he hopefully, “from what my lord says, I am certainly of sufficiently good birth to aspire to the hand of Celia. That is sufficient for me, and I ask no more of Providence.”

CHAPTER XIX

FAERY MUSIC

THAT same evening Winyard, undeterred by the memory of former refusals, proposed to Celia for the third time. Aware of his pertinacious disposition, and having some inkling of his intention, she had hitherto managed to evade an interview; but now, finding herself alone with him in the drawing-room after dinner, she submitted to her fate. Yet had not Edgar been blinded by self-conceit he might have guessed what would be the result of his ill-advised application.

"Cousin Edgar," said she, after he had solemnly asked her to be his wife, "I am very sorry that you should still hope for the impossible. Twice I have refused you, and I do so now for the third time."

"But think of the advantages of our marrying," urged Edgar anxiously. "I will be Lord Lelanro within a measurable time, and own this property, so it is better for you to become my wife than to lose your home at the Manor House."

"I would rather lose it than take you with it, cousin," retorted Celia sharply. "I wish to marry no one at present, least of all you."

"But I love you, Celia."

"I am sorry to hear it, for once and for all I refuse to become your wife."

Edgar, tracing in this contemptuous refusal the influence of Warwick, lost his temper, and made thoughtless remarks about Celia and the secretary, which roused her wrath.

"You love that sneaking Warwick, Celia," he cried savagely, "and would be willing enough to marry him if he asked you. But you shall not marry him; I'll have him turned out of the house."

"That will be your own fate if you speak like this," said Celia, rising to her feet with a glowing cheek. "Mr. Warwick is my very good friend, nothing more. If he is poor and unknown he is at least a gentleman, which I regret to say you are not."

And without further speech she turned her back on the discomfited lover and walked towards the door. Enraged at her scorn, Edgar sped one last venomous shaft.

"You are going to meet the fellow now, I believe."

"Yes, I am," replied Celia, with supreme disdain. "Mr. Warwick is at present in the company of Madam Tot, and I am going to see them both. If you so choose you can employ your time in telling my grandfather."

Her cousin could find nothing to reply to this last remark, and so permitted her to leave the room without further speech. Left to himself, he raged impotently at the thought that he could do no harm to this interloper; and at length, losing all sense of wisdom in his hatred, he went in search of Lelanro, in order to insist upon the instant dismissal of the presumptuous secretary. His interference benefited in place of harming Warwick, and, by the irony of fate, Edgar Winyard, who of all men would have declined the task, was the means of restoring the man he hated to his rightful position in the world.

It was the night of the full moon, and Madam Tot, enamoured of her whimsical idea, had summoned Warwick to the elfin solemnities at the faery ring. This, as has been stated previously, was a circle of discoloured grass, which to her distempered fancy was haunted by the peaceful neighbours. Whether she suffered from hallucination, or whether she pretended to see her airy fancies embodied in actual forms, it is impossible to say, but she certainly described what was taking place to Warwick with a vividness which almost enabled him to behold the fantasy with his own eyes.

On the plea that the little people did not like a mortal

to espy on their solemnities, she made Warwick sit down on the bench encircling the elm-tree near the summer-house, and hidden in the shade he looked out on the moon-lit sward, over which moved fantastically the tiny figure of Madam Tot. As a compliment to the faeries she had assumed their favourite green colour, and with a crown of roses, and her ebony staff held wand-fashion, she looked like an actual inhabitant of Elf-land. Titania was not more graceful, Puck more impish, or Queen Mab more airy than this odd little dwarf skipping about the lawn to the music of the violin.

"Do you not see the little people," said she, running into the shade, "yonder in the cold moonlight? They whirl round and round in a ring with linked hands, and flying hair. The green urchin, bonneted with a purple Canterbury bell, is Oberon's lantern-bearer; that pale faery in filmy white is the queen of spring flowers, as you can tell by her snowdrop crown. And oh! oh! oh!" piped Madam Tot, clapping her hands, "just look at yonder red goblin with the grey beard and pointed cap. My dear, he is a gnome, and digs gold in haunted caverns to weld into faery rings."

"Ask him to bring me one," said Warwick, marvelling at the descriptive power of the little woman, which almost made him credit her fancies.

"I spoke of it some time back," replied Madam Tot in a matter-of-fact tone, as though the procuring of faery rings was quite an ordinary business; "he will bring you to-night—a wedding-ring!"

"A wedding-ring, Madam Tot?"

"Yes, my dear! A ring of red gold to bind you hard and fast to a fair lady."

"Who is the lady?" asked Warwick, divining some purpose in these foolish speeches.

For answer Madam Tot whirled herself in a magical manner, and while thus revolving, shrilled out:

“Come together, ne'er to part,
Hand to hand, and heart to heart.

You see, Man Mountain,” she added, dropping into prose, “I call and she comes. Never deny that I am a witch.”

Across the sward came Celia, looking pale and serious, for the late interview with Edgar had somewhat disturbed her equanimity. The cunning dwarf had caught a glimpse of her emerging from the house, and thus utilized the opportune arrival for the fulfilment of the prophecy. With the moonlight glinting on her russet hair, Celia in her white robe looked like a visitant from another world; and Warwick could not remove his eyes from her passionless loveliness. Saluting her with an elfish scream, Madam Tot danced up to her like a large doll.

“I bid you welcome to the festival,” said she, striving to reach Celia's hand; “it is by special permission of the neighbours of peace that you are here. To-night they will bestow on you a rare boon. Take your place, my love, and watch.”

With due solemnity she conducted Celia to the bench, and intimated that she should sit beside Warwick. Rather confused by the request Celia obeyed in silence, and was glad to think that the shadows hid the blushes she felt rising hotly in her cheeks. The young man, overcome with pleasure at her near neighbourhood, did not venture a remark, and so these two sane people waited the behests of the mad dwarf lady.

“Play!” cried Madam Tot, raising her hand. “I dance with my shadow.”

Warwick swept the bow across the strings, and a ripple of notes gushed forth. With a gasp of pure pleasure the dwarf sprang from shadow to light, and holding up her quaint green dress, footed it as merrily as though she were sixteen instead of sixty. She swayed, and swung, and whirled, and bowed, with waving hands and nimble feet, till Celia almost fancied she saw a tiny witch at some

Lilliputian Walpurgis Night. With beck and bend she coquetted with her shadow, kissed her tiny hands as it wavered on the sward, fled from it, pursued it, and spun in circles after its retreating blackness. The music rose and fell, rippled through the still air, and laughed and sang till one would have said the violin was as elfish a thing as Madam Tot herself. Suddenly she whirled towards the faery ring and sank in a heap in its centre. Warwick hastily laid down his violin and rose as to help her ; but she angrily called to him to keep back.

"You will break the spell," she cried shrilly. "I now listen to the dwarfs who bring your marriage ring from the subterranean caves."

So speaking, she laid her ear to the turf, while Warwick and Celia, in the deep shadow of the tree, looked at one another, bubbling with silent laughter. The oddity of the whole situation appealed to the romantic side of their natures ; but knowing the irritable nature of Madam Tot, they did not dare to show disrespect by giving vent to their secret feelings of amusement.

"Do you think she sees anything really?" asked Celia in a low whisper.

"She may have hallucinations," replied Warwick in the same tone ; "and I think her imagination is vivid enough to conjure up all the elves of England. Poor little thing," he sighed sympathetically, "it is a harmless pleasure in which she indulges."

"You seem very fond of Madam Tot, Mr. Warwick!"

"She is a quaint, lovable little creature," he answered softly. "I shall be sorry to leave her."

"But you are not going?" said Celia, with dismay.

"I must. As soon as I learn the meaning of the riddle, I go," replied the young man firmly ; "it is better for my peace of mind."

"But—but think how we—how I shall miss you," gasped Celia imprudently.

Whether it was the influence of the moonlight, the music, or the whole fantasy of the scene, Warwick did not know; but almost without thinking, he enclosed Celia's hands in his warm clasp.

"Would you miss me, Miss Lelanro—Celia?"

"Can you ask me that?" she replied reproachfully. "I would miss you more than any one in the world."

"But, Celia, I am poor and unknown. I—I—— Oh, it is impossible; I dare not."

"Then you do not love me?"

"I do love you fondly—passionately. But you—you—— Oh, Celia, have mercy on my folly."

He slid off the bench on to the ground, and looked up to her with enamoured eyes. She, having passed the Rubicon, forgot that she was Miss Lelanro and he a servitor of her grandfather; she forgot social laws, social barriers, and, only feeling in her own heart that she loved him above all men, bent down and kissed him softly on the forehead.

"Do you mean it?" he asked, hardly able to believe that his goddess had stooped from her sphere.

"Do you wish me to kiss you again, to prove that I do?" she replied, smiling through the gloom. "I do mean it! I love you!"

"And I—I——"

He rose to his feet, unable to articulate another word, and clasped her in his arms. In the warm gloom, heart beating on heart, lips laid to lips, they forgot the barrier of caste and prejudice; it fell, they came together, and knew that they loved, they adored each other. Youth and beauty and passion proved too strong for social laws. Rash, foolish as it was, the knowledge had come on them in its full strength. They loved.

An elfish titter made them spring apart, and they looked down to see Madam Tot close beside them. But no frown was on her face, and instead of appearing to be angry, she expressed her pleasure loudly.

"Things have turned out well," she said, smiling; "you will marry one another, and become lord and lady of Lelanro Manor."

"How can that be?" asked Warwick in surprise. "The riddle——"

"No interruption!" frowned Madam Tot, holding out her hand. "Here is the faery ring which the gnomes have brought for your wedding. Place it on Celia's finger, and then I read your riddle."

The ring she proffered, wherever it came from, was certainly tangible enough, and Warwick, hardly knowing what he was about, slipped it on the slim finger held out by Celia. She was smiling, and seemed to understand her great-aunt better than did Warwick, who was too bewildered to speak.

"That faery circle binds you together for ever and ever," said the dwarf solemnly. "Our solemnities are at an end, and I return to the actual world. In the study of Dr. Pryce my brother awaits you, so lead your bride thither, Algernon Lelanro."

"What name did you say?" cried Warwick, hardly crediting his ears, and looking from the dwarf to Celia.

"You are Algernon Lelanro," said the latter, smiling, "and I am your cousin Celia. Foolish boy, I knew it well, else I never would have listened to your wooing."

CHAPTER XX

ALGERNON. 24 DECEMBER, 1857

IN the study the three who entered found a waiting three. Beside the desk sat Lord Lelanro, looking proud and happy, yet with a glint of uneasiness in his eyes as they turned toward Warwick. Dr. Pryce, shifting some papers,

bent beside him, and some few paces beyond, Edgar Winyard, looking anxious and expectant, leaned against the wall. The trio were evidently awaiting the arrival of Madam Tot and the newly-pledged lovers.

Into the warmth and mellow light of the room came Warwick, with Celia on his arm; but so moved was he by the communication of his kinship with the Lelanros, that he stood stock-still at the door, gazing open-mouthed at those who waited. Celia touched his arm softly to intimate that he should advance, but, finding the hint unheeded, she led him forward to where her grandfather sat in the great chair. Madam Tot, blithe as a lark, acted as mistress of ceremonies.

"Brother," she said, looking up at the head of the family, "all has gone as you wished. They have plighted their faith to one another, and on her finger gleams the ring of faery gold. He," she added, pointing an emphatic forefinger at Warwick, "now knows that he is your grandson, my grand-nephew, and heir to the title and estates of the Lelanros. He——"

With an exclamation of rage and astonishment, Winyard started forward to interrupt the explanation of the dwarf.

"What foolery is this?" said he, directly addressing his kinsman. "Why does that malicious monkey call that fellow your grandson and heir?"

"Because it is the truth, sir," replied Lelanro haughtily; "and I advise you to be more careful of your expressions in speaking of my sister."

"No matter, brother; no matter," tittered Madam Tot, with a malignant smile. "I can listen now to his coarse tongue. Through me he has lost title and lands."

She nodded with great satisfaction, and was rewarded with a black scowl from Winyard, who began to think that, after all, there might be truth in her speeches. By this time Warwick, who, out of sheer bewilderment, hitherto had

kept silent, recovered his tongue, and advanced impetuously towards Lelanro.

"What is the meaning of all this, my lord?" he demanded anxiously. "Is it a jest to amuse Madam Tot?"

"It is the truth, Algernon," replied Lelanro, addressing the young man for the first time by his name. "You are indeed my grandson—the offspring of my dwarfish son."

"But that son died," stammered Warwick, looking at Pryce. "I saw his grave."

"That is true enough," answered Pryce, lifting his head. "You saw his grave, but that grave was empty. Albert Lelanro, who resembled that little creature, was not buried there, but was taken away by Ballard and given to Autolycus. He, and not the father of Miss Celia, was the heir to the estates. You, as his son, inherit his rights, and will succeed to my lord. The grave was made, and the tombstone erected, to avert unnecessary questions."

"It's a lie!" cried Edgar, bringing his fist down on the table.

"It is the truth," retorted Pryce, in an assertive tone. "If you doubt me, ask your cousin."

He pointed to Lord Lelanro, and Edgar would have immediately questioned him as to the rights of Pryce's assertion, when Madam Tot, unused to neglect, bustled forward and claimed the attention of the company.

"Lift me up on that chair," she said to Warwick in a peremptory tone, "and look over my shoulder. I will now explain to you the riddle, and show you how to make Lelanro out of Algernon."

Burning with curiosity, Warwick lifted her into the seat, and looked at the paper which she spread out on the table. Edgar also came closer, in order to see if there was truth in these unpleasant declarations which robbed him of his expected heirship. Only Celia, her grandfather, and Dr. Pryce held aloof; they knew well the reading of the riddle, and did not require to assist at the explanation. With the

two young men looking down at that fatal piece of paper, Madam Tot, delighted at the prominent position she now occupied, deftly unravelled the riddle which had perplexed Warwick for so long.

"You wonder, perhaps, why I guessed this the moment you gave it to me," said the dwarf, with an upward glance at Warwick; "but I would not have done it so quickly had I not invented the riddle myself."

"You invented it, Madam Tot?"

"Yes. You know I am fond of such things," replied the little lady, enjoying his wonder. "I invented—or rather selected this name, which, by transposing the letters, contains our family title, Lelanro."

"But how do you know which letters to transpose?" asked Warwick curiously.

"I take the figures of the date of birth and place the letters in that order," said Madam Tot complacently. "It is true that your father was born on the twenty-fourth of December, 1847, so to make the letters transpose rightly, I was forced to add ten years to that date, and bring it up to 1857."

"Then my father was forty-three when he died," cried Warwick, noting the figures.

"You surely did not go by this paper and think he was thirty-three, did you?" said the dwarf contemptuously; "in that case, according to your age, you were born when your father was only eleven years of age, instead of which, at the date of your birth he was rightfully twenty-one."

"That in itself is quite sufficient to show the falsity of the whole thing," said Winyard savagely.

"Nothing of the sort, Mr. Winyard," retorted Warwick promptly. "I did not know my father's age, neither did he. Foolishly enough he believed this paper to be true, but as he was a dwarf, and scarcely so keen-witted as other folk, you can hardly blame him. I saw the flaw of which Madam Tot speaks long ago, and it was that which made

me doubt whether the truth was to be found on this paper. I am not so foolish," added Warwick indignantly, "as not to know that this is 1890, and that if my father had been born in 1857 I could not possibly be his son."

"Well, you see the explanation," said Madam Tot quickly. "Your father was born in 1847, and you when he was twenty-one years of age."

"I see that; but how do you transpose the letters?"

Madam Tot placed before him a piece of paper, on which was written the name Algernon and the date 24 December, 1857.

"Read that as 'Algernon, 24, 12, 1857,'" she said, "substituting the twelfth month for December. Now run all the figures together without division, and they read 24121857. Now, Mr. Warwick. How many numbers are there?"

"Eight."

"Good. And how many letters are there in the name Algernon?"

"Eight."

"Good. And in the name Lealanro, going by the old way of spelling it?"

"Eight."

"Quite right," said Madam Tot, delighted at the way in which he followed her explanation. "Now I apply the figures to the letters. The first number is two. What is the second letter of the name Algernon?"

"L."

"Yes. The second figure is four. What is the fourth letter of the name?"

"E."

"There you are, Mr. Warwick: Le. Now the first letter, 'a'; the second again, 'l'; the first once more, 'a'; the eighth, 'n'; the fifth, 'r'; and the seventh, 'o.' Now what does the whole spell?"

"Lealanro."

"Of course. Which is the old spelling of our name Lelanro," cried Madam Tot, clapping her hands. "I invented the name Algernon out of it by adding ten years to the birth, as you see. Ballard found the paper in my chamber, and I have no doubt he gave it to your father, quite ignorant of the hidden meaning."

Warwick could not sufficiently admire the ingenuity of the dwarf, and complimented her highly, at which she was much gratified. Then it was true that his name was Lelanro, and that he was the grandson of his patron. With a flush of joy overspreading his face, he advanced towards his grandfather and held out his hand.

"I am grateful, sir, that you have restored to me my name and rank," he said, in a voice of emotion, "but I can never be sufficiently grateful for your kindness when I was a poor and unknown wanderer."

"I do not believe a word of all this rubbish," broke out Winyard before Lord Lelanro could reply, "and I shall not submit to be robbed of my rights in this manner. I shall go to law over it."

"You will do no such thing, sir," retorted the old lord, in a stern tone which quelled the fiery anger of the young man; "this is a family matter and must be settled here. Not a word must be breathed outside these walls."

"Why so?" demanded Edgar insolently.

"Because the father of that lad was a dwarf," said Lelanro, pointing to Warwick. "Do you think for a moment that I will let you take this matter before the House of Lords, and permit the secret of our family to be known? Never! You will abandon all claims to my title and estate, and receive instead a yearly income to be fixed by me."

"And if I refuse?"

"You dare not refuse," replied Lelanro, in a dangerously quiet tone; "if you did question the rights of your cousin, and shame our family by betraying the secret of the dwarf's

chamber, you would gain nothing but beggary. The proofs which make Algernon Warwick the heir are too strong to be controverted. Show him the papers, Pryce, and let him decide at once what course he intends to take."

Edgar turned sullenly towards Pryce, who spread out the papers for his inspection. "The first," said he, "is a certificate of the birth of Albert Lelanro, a dwarf, given by my predecessor, Dr. Gulder, in 1847. The next a confession by Walter Ballard, stating that he took the dwarf from here by order of my lord, and disposed of him to one George Guss, a showman, commonly known as Autolycus. The third is a statement by Autolycus, stating that he received the dwarf Albert Lelanro from Ballard, and called him Algernon from that paper so often referred to. Here is also the certificate of Albert Lelanro's marriage at the Church of St. Martin in Canterbury, with Emily Marby, commonly known as the Fair Circassian. Again, the certificate of birth, date 1868, of Algernon Lelanro, now known as Algernon Warwick, and finally an affidavit sworn by Autolycus, that Algernon Warwick is the son of the dwarf, Albert Lelanro. You will see, Mr. Winyard, that not a link is missing, and that our friend Warwick is really and truly the grandson of your kinsman, Lord Lelanro."

Winyard could not deny that the proofs were plain enough, and stood sullenly looking at his successful rival. Madam Tot clapped her hands with glee at the solution of the mystery which had perplexed Warwick for so long, and then the latter spoke.

"How is it that Ballard took away my father from this place?" he said, looking at Lord Lelanro with eager curiosity.

The old man flushed with shame, and he hung his head before the gaze of his grandson.

"That was my fault," he said, in a low voice, "and one for which I must ask your pardon. Albert, your father,

was my eldest son ; but when he was pronounced a dwarf I could not bear the idea that he should succeed to the title and estates, which were rightfully his, nor did I think it wise that he should be kept in the dwarf's chamber, lest he should be discovered by accident, and in after years, on learning the truth, might insist on his rights. I therefore gave him to Ballard to take away, and this was done. I did not intend to lose sight of him, but Ballard disappeared, and I could not trace him. Then my second son, Celia's father, was born, and I thought myself sure of a successor. But he was killed, and my sin was brought home to me, for then there was no one but Edgar to inherit. I tried to find out what had become of the dwarf Albert, but could not discover a trace of him. Then you appeared opportunely, and when you told your story I thought that the dwarf father you mentioned might be my son. Aided by Pryce I went to work and learned all you have heard ; but the truth might have remained undiscovered, had not the landlady of the 'Lelanro Arms' brought to Dr. Pryce her brother's confession."

"That was why Mistress Sally was in this study on that night."

"Yes," said Dr. Pryce, taking up the story ; "she did not guess the truth, being in ignorance of your story. But the question you put to her on that day made her fearful of keeping the confession of her brother any longer, so she brought it to me. It was then that Lord Lelanro and myself knew that you were none other than the heir."

"But you told me that Albert Lelanro was dead," said Warwick reproachfully.

"Yes ; at the request of Lord Lelanro," said Pryce rather shamefacedly. "You must forgive me for that."

"I did not want you to know the truth till I had proved you," said Lelanro quickly. "Had you been a boor, an untutored clown, I might have held my peace, but when I saw you so clever, so well-bred, so handsome ; in a word, so

well fitted to be my heir, I determined to reinstate you in your rightful position. I have erred, Algernon," he added, looking steadily at his grandson, "but it was for the honour of the family, and you must forgive me."

Warwick held out his hand, too delighted at his good fortune to bear malice at such a moment.

"I do forgive you, and Pryce also," he said heartily. "I would indeed be ungrateful did I withhold forgiveness after all your kindness to me."

The old lord took the lad's hand and placed it in that of Celia.

"This, perhaps, will seal your forgiveness," he said, with a smile.

Edgar cast one look of hatred on the lovers, and fled from the room, pursued by the mocking laughter of the dwarf.

CHAPTER XXI

AN IMPORTANT COMMUNICATION

ABOUT two years after the events heretofore recorded, Warwick—as Celia continued to call him—had occasion to write to his grandfather, who was then in Paris.

"I regret to hear," he wrote among other things, "that Winyard is dead. He did not live long to enjoy the income you so kindly allowed him, and I am afraid it was my succession to his place of your heir, that induced him to take to the dissipated courses which have now terminated in his death by his own hand. But if you, my dear grandfather, write about the end of one life, I have information to impart concerning the beginning of another. Celia has just confided to me that she trusts shortly to become a

mother, and I am in great hopes that it will be a son, so that the direct succession may be secured.

“As is natural, I cannot help wondering if I shall be the father of a dwarf. My father was one, as you know, so it is not improbable that the hereditary taint will re-appear in the person of my son or daughter. I trust that this will not be so, and that it may be many a long day before the dwarf's chamber is provided with another tenant. Still, I am anxious, and I shall continue to be so until the matter is proved otherwise.

“Several times I have consulted with Pryce, but medical science can give us no aid. Some taint in our blood induces the re-appearance of these extraordinary beings at irregular intervals; but Pryce suggests that, as your generation produced Madam Tot, and the succeeding one my father, it is not improbable that, my own generation being free, the next one may be the same. How thankful both I and Celia shall be if our expected child proves to be free from this terrible curse! So terrible does it seem to me, that I often question whether it was wise for you to lift me from my obscurity and let me marry Celia. If Winyard had succeeded to the estates, being a distant relation, the taint might have disappeared in his children; but Celia and myself being in the direct line, I dread the worst.

“This being the case, I should like you to come back at your earliest convenience, in order to discuss the matter. If a dwarf is born, are we justified in shutting up the unfortunate creature in the chamber? It seems to me to be rather cruel, for though Madam Tot appears to be happy and content, yet she pines at times for a breath of the outer world. Again, if our dwarfs were ugly monstrosities I could understand the reason of their seclusion; but they are so perfectly made, so intelligent, so attractive in every sense of the word that, beyond the fact of their tiny size, I see no reason why our family should not openly avow their existence. This point will bear a great deal of dis-

cussion, though, perhaps, it may not be raised, as there is no use anticipating trouble, and the future generation may be free from the taint.

“During your absence I have amused myself by writing a record of my adventures from the time I arrived, footsore and hungry, at Dalesford. It is astonishing how interesting they prove to be, for the whole circumstances with which I was brought into contact are so odd, that were they set forth in a novel, I doubt whether they would gain credence. People would deny the existence of our hereditary taint; they would scout the idea of a dwarf's chamber of a tiny size and furnished, as is Madam Tot's, with doll's tables and chairs. No doubt they would laugh to scorn her fanciful ideas regarding faeries and gnomes, and ascribe them to insanity. As we know, this is not the case, for her fantasies are but the result of an over-vivid imagination, and her brain is as clear as crystal.

“Mistress Sally remains as ever my very good friend, and I rarely ride past the ‘Lelanro Arms’ without pausing for a tankard of her famous ale, and a few minutes' gossip. As you may remember, she was greatly amazed at my proving to be the heir to your name, and, notwithstanding our care in concealing the truth, she shrewdly suspects that I am the son of the dwarf who was taken away by her brother. But in spite of her garrulity, she is as close as the grave on this one point which affects our honour, and never by word or deed hints that she knows of the secret chamber, or of the race of dwarfs.

“I have often talked to Madam Tot about that ingenious puzzle which she constructed out of our name. Had she only been able to do so without altering the date of birth, I might have discovered the truth sooner. As it was, the taking of ten years from my father's life threw me all out; and, indeed, I have often questioned myself as to whether, under the circumstances, I could possibly be his son. Of course the adding of ten years proves that I was born when

he was twenty-one, instead of at the absurd age of eleven ; so I am now fully convinced to the contrary. Yet had not Madam Tot been present at that important interview to explain her alteration of the date, grave complications might have arisen concerning my identity.

“She is just the same good little creature, as full of fancies and faery ideas as ever. I play my violin often to her and then she is happy, while it is ridiculous the care the tiny creature takes of Celia, who towers above her. She passes most of her days in the summer-house, for she is much less inclined to join in the faery revels than aforetime. There I found her yesterday weeping bitterly, and after some persuasion she confided to me the cause of her trouble.

“‘I had hoped,’ she said mysteriously, ‘that Oberon would have sent you and Celia a faery changeling like myself so as to make you happy, but he will not do so. Yesterday the little red gnome told me that the King of Faery had decided to leave the human child and not replace it by a faery infant. So your child will grow into a man mountain like yourself, and I who hoped for a faery playfellow will be left desolate.’

“Though this was but a fantasy of her brain, I was secretly glad to hear it, and I trust that her prophecy may come true. Indeed, she says that when she dies, the dwarf's chamber will be shut up, for Oberon, irritated at the way in which you sent your son out of the house, had decided to give no more changelings to the Lelanro family. Nay, more, he will signify his intention by taking back again to faeryland the charmed cup which Sir James Lelanro stole from the little people. But Madam Tot seems to have forgotten that the cup is not now in the possession of our family.

“With such fancies does Madam Tot beguile her weary days, and I am afraid she will not live long. How happy would I be could I think she was likely to be the last dwarf

of our family ; but I am by no means hopeful. Both from a faery and scientific point of view, we are ignorant of the matter, and it must be left in the hands of Providence.

“ And now, my dear grandfather, I trust you will return soon and see me about these matters. Celia and Madam Tot send their dear love, and I remain, as ever,

“ Your dutiful and affectionate Grandson,

“ ALGERNON LELANRO.”

MISS JONATHAN

CHAPTER I

THE United States has succeeded in creating a unique type of female beauty. Such causes as climatic influence, mixture of race, social developments on the dollar basis, and the equality of the sexes have resulted in the formation of that charming being—the American girl. The Tree of Liberty planted by George Washington in lieu of the cherry-tree he cut down has borne the blossom of Miss Jonathan. She is indigenous to the soil of Manhattan, Boston, and the City of the Capitol, and may be called the new Eve of a special race of the distaff order. Her Adam is selected by preference from the English Peerage. *Aut Cæsar, aut nullus.*

The apparent fragility of Miss Jonathan conceals a constitution of iron, her frothy conversation hides a 'cute intellect. She can dance all night, ride, walk, swim, play, and flirt all day, without dimming the brilliancy of her colouring or dulling the edge of her wit. Enhancing her piquant beauty by perfect costumes, she invariably contrives to interest the other sex by the charm of her manner. Her sole defect is a liability to neurosis, which entails premature old age, but this very defect in many cases is the cause of her preternatural brilliancy. Take her for all in all, she is a smart angel. No other collocation of words can express Miss Jonathan.

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This description in the abstract is a characterization of Matty Kierman in the concrete. She was a typical American girl, and as attractive a specimen as could be found. Her beauty was great, her charm of manner greater, her astucy of character greatest of all. A very April was she for smiles and tears, and unexpected changes of temperament. Like a bee, she could sting—with glances and words; like a bee she could make honey—the honey of conversation and charm. These two qualities she exercised impartially, and by tossing men betwixt such extremes in shuttlecock fashion she managed to secure a horde of distracted lovers. Can you wonder at her success?

The female composite of oppositional qualities is always attractive to the male. By the rapidity with which she can pass from one phase to the other—from sweetness to acidity, from frowns to smiles—she keeps him in a constant state of alarm and fearful pleasure. He woos danger, as it were, at the cannon's mouth. A careless word ignites the powder, and his hopes, his pleasures, and his comfortable assurance are shattered on the instant. He has scarce time to contemplate one side of her character before she presents him with another. So Cleopatra held chained the fickle Anthony. Novelty never stales, nor do surprises weary.

At Newport, Mrs. Scheveningen took upon herself to read Matty a lecture. This matron was thirty-five years of age, experienced in social observances, and in the intricacies of the masculine character. She had not experimented with Mr. Scheveningen's heart fifteen years before without knowing something of the organ. Her learning instructed her how far she could advance into the enemy's camp without cutting off her retreat. In plain English, she knew how to manipulate the characters of men when rendered workable by love. This notable information she imparted to Matty. The maid, wise in the conceit of twenty years, did not take kindly to the instruction.

"It's not that I mind your flirting," said Mrs. Scheven-

ingen, frankly; "there's no harm in that, though it is playing with fire. Men can look after themselves, and their hearts are tough enough where their vanity is concerned. But if you mean business you must be careful. Now, there's Silas Winter, who——"

"I don't want to marry him," interrupted Matty, pursing up her lips; "he's a dude. I don't like dudes, they're so dreadfully like women. Dress, and scent, and lisp, and vanity! How can you advise me to marry such a creature?"

"He is rich, you wretched girl, and you have no money."

"I have enough to live on," replied Matty, carelessly. "You don't suppose I'd marry your Winter creature for a home?"

"You must marry for something."

"Then I'll marry for love."

"Sentiment!" groaned Mrs. Scheveningen, lifting her hands; "and your face is your fortune. You ought to marry a rich man."

"Do you call Silas Winter a man?" said Matty, scornfully. "I don't."

"My dear, he is rich, and he loves you."

"There's always two to a bargain," rejoined Miss Kierman, calmly. "I'm not rich, and I don't love him. When I marry," continued she, with increasing colour, "I'll marry a man."

Mrs. Scheveningen arose from her chair, and approaching Matty, tapped the tell-tale cheek. Then she kissed her visitor warmly, and began to ask questions. The situation explained itself between them without a word. At times the peculiar feminine faculty of intuition amounts to genius.

"What is his name, dear?" asked the elderly lady, insinuatingly. "Who have you in your mind's eye?"

For answer, Matty led her questioner to a table, and

pointed to a silver-framed portrait, full length, of a young man.

"I have that person in my mind's eye," said she, with a roguish glance.

"My!" ejaculated Mrs. Scheveningen, taking stock of the photograph. "It's your cousin!"

"It is my cousin, Leonard Conway, of The Firs, Kent, England," asserted Matty, nodding her head. "I'm in love with him. Hasn't he a noble brow? Isn't his figure like that of The Dying Gladiator? And his face, my dear, perfect! Do you think he and Silas belong to the same species? I don't. Or else the monkey has not yet merged in the man. Silas is only the missing link so far."

After she had digested these enthusiasms, Mrs. Scheveningen returned to her seat, and entered a protest against them. It took her some time to recover her breath for the purpose.

"Matty Kierman, you can't be in love with a man whom you've never seen."

"Why not? There no law against it."

"He may be a fool!"

"Not with that brow."

"No doubt he has a bad temper!"

"With that mouth, impossible."

"Very likely he isn't a marrying man."

Matty looked at her piquant face in the mirror, was satisfied with the reflection, and smiled.

"So long as he isn't married, that's all right," said she, touching a little curl on her forehead. She was a young lady with an excellent opinion of her charms.

"You conceited little thing," laughed Mrs. Scheveningen, "do you think you can make him fall in love with you?"

"I'll try, anyhow! That is, if I like him. All your objections are fair enough. I shouldn't fall in love with a phantom; but as I'm going over to England this fall, I'll see my phantom in the flesh. If I find him desirable, I'll

see if he is a Saint Anthony, which he isn't with those eyes!"

Mrs. Scheveningen began to laugh. Something struck her as excessively ridiculous; but what it was Matty could not conceive, and she was curious accordingly. She shook her friend in pretended anger, then kissed and coaxed her, and used innumerable arts to learn the cause of such laughter. In the end Mrs. Scheveningen wiped her eyes of their merry tears, and produced a letter. This she shook at Matty in playful warning.

"If you will share the fate of Bluebeard's wife, you shall know all," said she, solemnly. "I have Leonard Conway's private opinion of you in this letter."

"How can he have an opinion of me when he doesn't know me and hasn't set eyes on me? And how can you know his private opinion when he's an absolute stranger to you?"

"That is easily explained," replied Mrs. Scheveningen, opening the letter. "When I heard that you were going over to The Firs this fall, I wrote to Minnie Dawson, and asked her about the Conways."

"I could have saved you the trouble," retorted Matty, disdainfully; "they are our cousins a hundred times removed. A Conway settled here about the time of the Revolution. My mother is his descendant, and as the English Conways condescend to acknowledge me as a relation, they have asked me to spend a few months in the old country. They know nothing about me, and I have no doubt they are in a state of mortal terror as to what kind of creature I may prove to be."

Mrs. Scheveningen listened to this speech with an ostentatious air of polite interest, but paid no attention to the information conveyed therein. On the contrary, when Matty ended, she blandly took up the thread of her discourse where she had dropped it a minute or so before. Matty felt inclined to slap her friend for such indifference.

"I was at school in England, you know," pursued Mrs. Scheveningen, sweetly, "and Minnie Dawson—then Minnie Butler—was the only English girl I ever liked. We are bosom friends, and have corresponded for years. She knows Leonard Conway intimately, so to post you up in all his idiosyncrasies I wrote for a detailed report of his character. Here is Minnie's reply."

"I am all attention," said Matty, with a faint show of curiosity. She really desired to know something of this unknown cousin.

"'You ask me about Leonard Conway,'" read Mrs. Scheveningen, holding the letter close to her nose; "'he is handsome, rich, talented, and, I am afraid, a trifle priggish.'"

"Give me the American translation of the last word."

"A prig," said the reader, thoughtfully, "is a person who thinks himself perfection, and who ostentatiously reveals his thoughts. A prig is an intellectual Pharisee."

"I have met creatures of that type," remarked Miss Kierman. "New York is full of them. What a nasty person your Minnie is to say that my cousin is priggish! I don't believe it."

"Minnie also says that Mr. Conway told her that you were coming, and what he thought you would be like."

"Mr. Conway has doubtless created a monster after the fashion of Frankenstein!"

"So I think," said Mrs. Scheveningen, vivaciously. "Here is your picture as a monster, my love. I——"

"Give it in full," interrupted Matty, calmly. "I don't mind how uncomplimentary it is. I'll punish him some day."

"'Mr. Conway told me that his cousin, Miss Kierman, was coming over,'" resumed Mrs. Scheveningen, picking up her letter, "'and that he rather dreaded her coming. He is so ignorant of American girls, my dear, that he fancies the girl of fiction to be a true representation of the girl of

reality. "She will no doubt use American slang," he said, referring to his cousin, "and smoke cigarettes, and flirt with a strong accent. No doubt she will hunt for a title, and purchase a Peerage with her money." I strove to reassure him, but he persisted in considering his cousin as a girl like Fuschia Leach in Ouida's novel. As a rule he is reticent, and only our long friendship would have caused him to speak freely. As Miss Kierman is a friend of yours, I am sure she is not what Mr. Conway's fancy paints her. But these are his opinions. I am afraid he is prejudiced against American girls."

Matty made no comment on this letter for the moment, but walked slowly towards the window, with a smile on her lips. Then she turned to Mrs. Scheveningen with a flush on her face.

"I guess I'll make him sit up all round for that," she said, with a strong American accent.

"Matty, don't speak in that horrid Yankee manner," said Mrs. Scheveningen, in dismay. "It is the kind of way in which he expects you to talk."

"That's a fact, anyhow," replied Matty, still affecting the American girl of fiction. "What he expects, that shall he have. I'll be the Fuschia Leach of real life. I'll talk slang with an accent. I'll dress like an angel, and get round freely. Cigarettes I'll smoke, though I hate them. My cousin shall see me just as his fancy paints me."

"In that case you'll be back here in a month," said Mrs. Scheveningen, resignedly. "I never heard of such a mad idea. He'll simply detest you."

"Oh, no, he won't," replied Miss Kierman, determinedly. "He'll fall in love with me, notwithstanding my slang, my cigarettes, and my accent. Then I'll show myself in my true colours and refuse to marry him."

"You'll never gain him by showing the worst side of yourself, Matty."

"I'll try, at all events. My turquoise brooch against your ruby ring that I succeed."

"No; I shan't encourage such mad folly!"

"You're afraid."

"I am not afraid."

"Then book the bet," said Matty smartly. "I want your ruby ring."

Mrs. Scheveningen laughed, and ultimately yielded.

"Very well, dear, I agree. But you'll lose your brooch, or else——"

"Well, or else?"

"You'll win my ring, and marry your cousin."

"No. I may win your ring, but I'll never marry a man who holds such opinions. Now, good-bye, dear; I'm going to buy *Moths*, and study the part of Fuschia Leach."

CHAPTER II

THAT Christmas Miss Kierman was the life and soul of the house-party at The Firs. None of the solemn English people there assembled had met before with a novelist's creation in the flesh, and they were startled and charmed alternately. The men were enchanted, the women horrified. She charmed the first by her beauty and vivacity; she alarmed the last by her freedom of speech and disdain of conventionality. A new dictionary was required to explain the recondite words which issued from her pretty lips. The possession of a fortune was necessary to account for the splendour of her dresses. Perhaps Mrs. Scheveningen could have explained this last, as she had financed Matty to a considerable extent. But Mrs. Scheveningen was in New York, and in default of enlightenment the house-party credited Matty with a large income. Such fictitious wealth added to her charm.

Leonard Conway was half pleased, half vexed with his cousin. It was gratifying to his perspicuity to see that he had not been mistaken in his estimate of her character, appearance, demeanour, and behaviour. It was irritating that one so utterly at variance with his ideal of female excellence should be so attractive. Despite his thirty years, and knowledge of the world, and high standard as to what qualities were requisite for a wife, Leonard found himself strongly drawn towards this scatterbrain creature, who satisfied him on no point, yet attracted him on all. To his mind she was the feminine counterpart of the contradictory man in Martial's epigram. He explained this after his own fashion to Mrs. Conway.

"I don't like her, and yet I do like her, mother," he said, one day when Matty had been particularly aggravating. "She sets my teeth on edge with her slang one minute, and charms me in spite of myself the next."

"She is full of contradictory qualities," replied Mrs. Conway, who always agreed with her idol Leonard.

"I never met with the species before, so I can't classify her," said Leonard, in a vexed tone. "She puts me in mind of Heine's Sphinx. Her mouth caresses, her claws wound."

"Oh, Leonard!"

"Don't be shocked, mother. I only speak figuratively. You wouldn't like her for a daughter-in-law, I suppose?" he added, looking up suddenly.

"No, I certainly should not," answered his mother, decisively. "She would not make you happy."

"Oh, yes, she would—for a minute, and the next put me out of temper. But you need not be afraid, mother; my head can look after my heart."

"I wish you would marry Isabella Montray," said Mrs. Conway, plaintively; "she is such a thoroughly good girl."

"And such a thoroughly dull girl," retorted Conway. "No, thank you, mother; I don't want to go to the other

extreme. If I could only find the happy medium between Matty and Miss Montray, I should discover an ideal wife. The vivacity and beauty of the one would go excellently with the pure English and good-breeding of the other. But I am not likely to find such a combination," he finished, with a sigh.

In point of fact, he was more attracted by Matty than he chose to acknowledge, even to himself. She filled a void in his life, if not in a satisfactory manner, at least in a way which showed him that he would never be happy without her. On the other hand, he could never be happy with her. Altogether the situation was unsatisfactory. He wished she would depart, then he hoped she would remain. He sought her society one day, and resolutely avoided her the next. It was most perplexing.

"I wish she would marry Kendrick and go away," he groaned in bitterness of spirit. "Those sort of girls always want a title. Kendrick would just suit her, and yet who could wish her tied to such an idiot?"

This was unjust. Lord Kendrick was shallow, but by no means an idiot. He was not cultured, but he held his own in all out-door sports. He could shoot, fish, ride, and row admirably; moreover, his skill at billiards was undeniable, and he could dance exceedingly well. If not an Adonis, he was at least good-looking. If not a Chesterfield, he possessed an average amount of good-breeding, and his title and fortune covered the multitude of his sins. That evening Matty spoke about him to her cousin. She could hardly fail to see that both men were in love with her; therefore she played off one against the other in her usual fashion. The comedy amused her greatly.

There was a ball taking place at The Firs. From far and near the provincials came to partake of Conway's hospitality. He was greatly liked and respected in his county, and had in him the making of a future Lord-Lieutenant. Looking at the brilliant throng of his friends

in the ball-room, and knowing how popular he was with them all, confident in the possession of money, health, good looks, and youth, he should have been supremely happy. Yet he was the reverse at this moment, for Matty was playing off her witcheries at his elbow. Alternately she shocked and charmed him. One moment he could have kissed her, the next he felt a mad desire to shake her thoroughly. Matty guessed the duality of his feelings,



“Lord Kendrick’s sry in the leg line, I guess!”

and perversely accentuated her assumed manner. She impaled her victim on a pin, and watched him writhe with complacent satisfaction. “Sweet is revenge, especially to women.” Who dare deny Byron’s knowledge of the sex?

“Lord Kendrick’s sry in the leg line, I guess,” she said, watching the energetic revolutions of her titled lover. “He’s as lively as a woodchuck.”

"He certainly puts his heart into his work," replied Leonard, coldly, "but to dance with one woman and to look at another at the same time is hardly likely to be successful."

"That's a fact, anyhow. He's been sharp-shootin' at me all night."

"Do you like him?"

"Some. He's real sweet, and I love him hard."

"I can't say much for your taste," said Leonard, taking advantage of his cousinship to be rude. He felt that the remark was abominable; but Matty exasperated him so much that he could not help putting his thoughts into words. She guessed that his observation was wrung from him against his will, and only laughed at his petulance. Had Silas Winter spoken so, she would never have forgiven him; but it suited the requirements of her comedy to allow Leonard free speech, therefore she rejoined smartly, in the same strain—

"I guess you don't like my taste, or anything else American."

"I beg your pardon; I was rude. You know I like you, cousin Matty."

Miss Kierman measured off an inch on her fan to illustrate her next remark.

"You don't cotton to me that much," said she, solemnly.

"I'm not your style, cousin Leonard."

"Can I get you any refreshment?" said Leonard, determined not to be drawn into an argument.

"H'm! I'm pretty crowded, but I can squeeze another ice."

Leonard winced. Her slang grated on his ears. Matty saw his repugnance to her imagery, and smiled behind her fan. Unfortunately it was transparent, and Leonard saw the smile.

"What are you laughing at?" he asked, as they elbowed their way to the supper-room.

"At your gettin' on stilts," she retorted, coolly. "Sakes alive! you're as prim as a school-marm."

"I evidently do not find favour in your eyes," he said, in a piqued tone. "Of course, I'm not Lord Kendrick."

"I guess that's so! He makes things hum when he spreads himself."

"Shall I—er—spread myself?" asked Leonard, delicately.

Matty paused, with a spoonful of ice on its way to her mouth, and laughed gaily.

"You're not that sort! My! you are stiff! Why don't you marry that Montray girl? She's your style!"

"She is not my style," rejoined Leonard, with some heat. "I prefer infinitely to be with you."

"If that's a pop, it's no go."

"What do you mean, Matty?" he asked, considerably taken aback.

"I mean that I'm goin' to hook a Lord."

"You need not put it so plainly, at all events," said Leonard, with strong displeasure. "My remark was not a pop, as you call it. Let me take you back to the ball-room."

This passage of arms thus terminating, Conway resolutely evaded his cousin for the rest of the night. The bitter-sweet pleasure to be obtained by dancing at her heels was becoming so necessary to him as to be dangerous. In vain he told himself that she was full of imperfections, that he could not possibly be happy with so capricious a wife, that she would be a plaything for him rather than a companion; all these strong arguments were nothing when opposed to the overwhelming strength of the passion growing up in his heart. He became mortally jealous of Kendrick, and was positively offensive to that well-meaning young man for daring to hint that he admired Matty.

"I call Miss Kierman positively rippin'," said Kendrick, as they sat in a corner of the smoking-room. "She understands a fellow so well."

"I shouldn't think you were very difficult of comprehension, Kendrick."

"Oh! I don't mind your sarcasms, Conway," replied the young man, good-humouredly. "I know you are cleverer than I am. I could never come within miles of you either at Eton or Christchurch, but at least I know as much about women as you do."

Leonard knew that Kendrick's career had been anything but creditable since he had left college, and felt inclined to retort sharply. Happily, his position as host and a sense of good-breeding restrained him from such folly. He merely nodded his head, and smoked on in grim silence, while Kendrick rambled aimlessly on.

"You'll marry one of those advanced women, I dare say, Conway. I can't bear 'em. There was one after me the other day who talked astronomy. She said the stars were ruled by the law of attraction, and that human beings were like stars. I saw pretty well what she meant, and got away from her. She didn't attract me."

"Does Miss Kierman attract you?"

"I should just think so," replied Kendrick, with simple enthusiasm. "She can talk to a fellow about things he knows. I like the way she puts things; don't you?"

"If you refer to her American expressions, I don't."

"Oh! you're so particular, Conway. A man can't be always talking by the book. I like Miss Kierman's way of talking, and I like her. We jump together."

"That's one of her elegancies, I presume."

"Yes. Good, isn't it? Oh! she's no end of fun! How long does she stay in England?"

"Till next August, I believe. She wants to have a season in town."

"I'm glad of that," said Kendrick, half to himself; "there'll be a chance for me."

By this remark Leonard knew that his friend contemplated matrimony. The idea displeased him greatly.

He could not make up his mind to marry his cousin himself, yet he did not relish seeing her the wife of another. There was a good deal of the dog-in-the-manger about Leonard at that time. He knew that from a worldly point of view he had no chance against Kendrick, and felt enraged that she might choose to accept the young Lord. Perhaps his doubts might have been set at rest had he heard Matty talking to Mrs. Dawson in the seclusion of her bedroom.

"Of course, when Julia Scheveningen told me of your absurd plot I disapproved of it," said the latter: "and I do so more than ever. You ought to show yourself in your true colours."

"No. I shan't do that!" said Matty, obstinately. "I came here with a certain purpose, and I intend to carry it out. Leonard must be punished for the opinion he expressed to you about me."

"I wish Julia had not shown you that foolish letter, Matty. I suppose you don't intend to act this slangy part all your life?"

"Certainly not. When I make Leonard propose to me, slang and all, I'll tell the truth."

"He'll never propose to you in such a character."

"Oh, yes, he will! He's on the high road to a proposal now."

"So is Lord Kendrick," said Mrs. Dawson, mischievously.

"He has a title, and——"

"I wouldn't marry him for fifty titles," interrupted Matty fiercely. "He's very nice and kind, but, oh! so dull. Leonard is worth a dozen of him."

"I believe you love your cousin."

Matty made no reply, but pushed Mrs. Dawson out of the room. The remark was a true one, but she was not going to strike her colours by confessing it to be so. In her heart she was weary of the ridiculous comedy she was playing, and longed to show Leonard that she was not a

slangy, fast piece of vivacity, but a clever, cultured, and well-bred girl. Yet with inconceivable obstinacy she persisted in wearing the mask. But even if she did not, and he proposed?—"I believe I'll marry him after all," she said, crossly, and went to bed.

CHAPTER III

THE next season Matty carried the Stars and Stripes triumphantly through Belgravia and Mayfair. Mrs. Conway was astonished and somewhat dismayed by the social success of the young lady whom she had undertaken to chaperon. Of a quiet and retiring disposition, she was overwhelmed by her sudden access of popularity as the guardian of Matty. Dozens of young men besieged her for introductions to the American heiress, and her visiting list doubled itself during her stay in town. Miss Jonathan, as some wit christened Matty, was decidedly the queen of the hour. Wherever she went she was surrounded by a court of admirers, who repeated her sayings and basked in the sunshine of her smiles. The triumphs of New York were repeated in London on a larger scale. Matty bore her honours with saucy dignity, and had—as she termed it in her choice vernacular—"a real good time."

"I've caught on in the old country," she wrote rapturously to Mrs. Scheveningen. "It's just too lovely for anything! I believe it is within the limits of probability that I can become a Peeress. Dukes are expensive articles, and beyond my purse, but there is a certain Lord Kendrick who wants to marry me. He hasn't spoken yet, but you know how easy it is to tell when a man's in that state of mind. He is always by my side, and smiles and looks silly when I glance at him. The other one does nothing but

scowl. You know whom I mean. He is in a great rage with me, which promises well for my little scheme. I am certain he also is on the marrying tack. I fancy that ruby ring of yours will look very well on my finger. But enough of men. Let me tell you of the fashionable frocks. They are worn——” and from discussing her position Matty drifted into masses of millinery and elaborate explanations.

From her letter it could be seen how delicate was her position. Both Kendrick and Leonard were more than ever in love with her, and showed their passions in different ways. The one smiled, and followed Matty about like a poodle; the other stood aloof, and looked on gloomily at the triumphs she was winning in the fashionable world. Many a time did Matty wish to tell him all, and so put an end to the embarrassing situation, but her foolish pride stood in the way of her doing so. Long ago she had confessed to Mrs. Dawson that she loved Leonard, but she declined to take that lady's advice, which was short and to the point.

“Explain, and marry him,” said Mrs. Dawson, wisely.

“How can I when he won't propose?” replied Matty, tearfully. “He keeps away from me as though I had the plague.”

“He won't propose so long as he thinks you are what you show yourself to be. Display your true colours, my dear, and you will become Mrs. Conway in a remarkably short space of time.”

“No. I won't let him triumph over me in that way!”

“Then give up all idea of your cousin, and marry Lord Kendrick,” said Mrs. Dawson, tartly.

She was seriously angry at Matty's perversity in keeping up the deception. Leonard was a great favourite with her, and she could not bear to see him so unhappy, when a single word on the part of Matty would have put things in a proper light. But that she had promised Matty to keep silent, she would have told him herself of the comedy his

cousin was playing. This, however, she could not do, and she found relief in scolding Matty for her folly. Meanwhile, Miss Jonathan pursued her triumphant way, attended by the smiling Kendrick and the scowling Leonard.

"I shall be real mad at goin' back to New York city," said Matty to her cousin at the last garden party of the season; "but it's vury necessary that I should recross the herring-pond."

"I think that matter rests entirely with yourself," replied Leonard, significantly.

With a sudden access of colour, Matty looked up at his face, but she saw that his eyes were fixed on Kendrick, who hovered round Mrs. Conway some distance off. The mistake annoyed her immensely.

"I guess you're too deep for me," she said, in pretended grievance.

"You do not usually find me so. Permit me to recall your remark that you intended to marry a title. I think you are within reasonable distance of realizing your ambition. Now, if——"

"I guess Lord Kendrick can do his own courtin', without you chippin' in," said Matty, dryly.

"I have no wish to do so, I assure you."

"How you do get on stilts, cousin Leonard!"

"How you do tease me, cousin Matty!"

They looked at each other and smiled. Had they only been left alone at that moment, it is probable they would have come to an understanding; but Fate, desirous of protracting the misconception, sent Kendrick to interrupt them. He had been eying them jealously for some time, and found comfort in the thought that they were quarrelling as usual; but when he saw Matty smiling on her cousin, he could bear it no longer, and so came forward as a spoilsport. Matty laughed at the sulky expression of his face.

"I guess you've lost a dollar and picked up a cent," said she smartly. "You do look cross!"

"Oh, I am quite amiable, I assure you," replied Kendrick, with elaborate courtesy.

"Schucks!" said Matty, disdainfully. "I can see without glasses, some."

Leonard looked at the pair with a reflective eye. So far as he could see, Matty had quite made up her mind to be Lady Kendrick. The idea of losing her made him wrathful. Notwithstanding her accent, her slang, her freedom, her want of repose, and of many feminine traits which he valued highly, he was deeply in love with her. There was something about Matty which he could not understand. At times she forgot to play her part in the comedy, and on such occasions Leonard had been charmed and fascinated beyond all expression. A chance word, a sudden glance, a womanly action—all these betrayed a deeper nature hidden under the frivolity of her exterior. But such words were rare, and just when he began to wax sympathetic, she would flash back into the wayward Society beauty all sparkle and surface brilliance. Then he was puzzled and angered.

"She is like a diamond," he thought, strolling away and leaving her with Kendrick; "as brilliant and as hard."

"Mr. Conway, come and sit by me. I wish to speak with you."

He turned and saw Mrs. Dawson tapping a chair with the ferrule of her parasol. Knowing she was a sympathetic soul, to whom he could freely confide his troubles, he accepted her invitation readily.

"I hope you are amused with this entertainment," said he, in a conventional manner.

"I am more amused with that entertainment," answered Mrs. Dawson, glancing towards Matty and her attendant cavalier.

"Are you? I am not."

"You would be more than human if you were, Mr. Conway."

“What do you mean?”

“Am I blind? Am I a fool?” said Mrs. Dawson, impatiently; “or are you an ostrich, burying your head in the sand, under the delusion that no one can see you?”

“I understand,” replied Leonard, after a pause. “But I did not know that my passion was so patent to all the world.”

“Am I all the world?”

“You are a representative.”

“Why don’t you marry her?” asked Mrs. Dawson, abruptly.

Leonard reddened, pulled his moustache, and answered—

“She won’t have me.”

“Put her to the test.”

“I have no chance against Kendrick,” replied Conway, savagely. “I haven’t a title. Besides, much as I admire my cousin, she—she——”

“Oh! I know all about that,” said Mrs. Dawson, cutting him short. “She falls short of your standard of feminine excellence. I remember the picture you painted of her last year, and how you expressed your detestation of the American girl. Well, she is as you see—faulty, but charming. Yet, if you are in love with her, don’t let Kendrick carry her off. Marry her yourself.”

“But——”

“Let me tell you a parable, Mr. Conway. A certain man picked up a glittering stone. Said he, ‘It glitters and glitters, but it’s only a piece of glass after all, and not worth keeping.’ Then he threw it away, and it was picked up by his neighbour. The neighbour did not throw it away, but examined it carefully. Then said he, ‘Lo! it is not glass, but a diamond worth a king’s ransom.’”

“Well?”

“Well!” replied Mrs. Dawson, with supreme disdain. “Cannot you read my riddle? Are you going to throw away the diamond because you believe it but worthless

glass? Take my advice, Mr. Conway," she added, earnestly, "be the second man of my parable."

When Leonard returned home that evening, he thought long and deeply over Mrs. Dawson's allegory. It seemed to hint at some mystery connected with Matty, of which she was cognizant. He felt inclined to propose to Matty, and take the chances of her being the costly diamond or the worthless piece of glass, but he dreaded lest she should prove to be the latter rather than the former. His mother called him into her boudoir before she retired that evening. She was radiant.

"Lord Kendrick asked me if he could speak to Matty to-morrow afternoon," she said, smiling at her son.

"Does he intend to propose?" asked Leonard, with an odd feeling in his breast.

"Of course he does. It will be a brilliant match for Matty."

"Will she accept him, mother?"

"My dear, she would be mad to refuse," answered Mrs. Conway, impressively. "Lord Kendrick is young, handsome, titled, and wealthy. What more can the girl want?"

Leonard muttered something unintelligible, and left the room as quickly as possible. The news dismayed him greatly. He was on the point of then and there seeking Matty, with the intention of asking her to become his wife. Two circumstances restrained him. The one was that Matty had gone to rest, the other that it would not be fair to Kendrick. Conway thought of Mrs. Dawson's parable again, and made up his mind what course to adopt.

"If she accepts Kendrick, I'll go on a shooting trip to Africa," he decided; "but if she refuses him—ah!"—he drew a long breath—"if she refuses him, I'll see if Matty is the diamond or the piece of glass."

Next day he saw nothing of his cousin, as he resolutely kept away from home. All the morning he remained at his club, and caught a glance of Kendrick looking radiant

with expectation of success. Not feeling inclined to speak with his rival, he left the club, and went for a solitary stroll in the Park. Several times he was greeted by friends of both sexes, but kept away from their neighbourhood. He worried himself with thoughts of Kendrick's success, and Matty's triumph in becoming a peeress. Not till that moment did he guess how deeply he was in love with his cousin. Notwithstanding her many deficiencies, he would gladly have made her his wife, but so far as he saw it was too late to think of such a thing.

In the afternoon he could bear the suspense no longer, and returned home to learn the worst. It was now close on five o'clock, and Kendrick must have learned his fate. Leonard entered the house with an assumption of calmness he was far from feeling. As he ascended the stairs, Kendrick came hastily down, and brushed past him without a word.

"I say, Kendrick! I say——!"

Lord Kendrick muttered a hurried excuse, seized his hat, and without waiting for the footman to open the door, did so himself. On the stairs Leonard remained transfixed with astonishment, yet with a feeling of exultation in his heart. He took in the situation at a glance.

"She has refused him!" he thought, joyfully. "Now it is my turn!"

Without giving himself time for further consideration, he ran up-stairs and entered the drawing-room.

Matty was looking out of the window, scarcely less white than was her dress, and looked strangely at him as he entered. With the unerring instinct of a woman, she guessed his errand from the expression of his face, and her heart gave a throb of joy as it was borne in on her that Leonard had come to ask her to be his wife. Now came the crucial test of her capability as an actress, and, strange as it may appear, she determined in one swift moment of thought to finish the comedy as she had planned. Perhaps

the confident look on his face made her come to this decision. No woman likes her answer in a case of this sort to be thought certain.

"He thinks I'll drop like a ripe peach," she murmured, as he came towards her. "Well, we shall see."

Leonard caught her hands passionately, while she nerved herself to play the part of a heartless coquette.

"Matty," cried her cousin, "you have refused him?"



"Buried her face in the sofa-cushions and burst into tears."

"What do you mean?" she asked, snatching her hands away. "I guess you're too free, cousin Leonard."

"I met Kendrick—I saw his face—you——"

"I have declined the honour of becoming Lady Kendrick. Are you vury sorry?"

"No, I am glad! I am delighted! I—I wish you to marry me."

Matty looked at him with a well-simulated look of surprise. No one would have guessed the power of her self-control from that careless glance at the man kneeling at her feet. It was the moment of her revenge.

"You wish to marry me?" she replied, slowly. "Well, I——"

"I love you, Matty! I love you!"

"Sakes alive, just hear him!" laughed Matty, with mirthful eyes.

Leonard sprang to his feet with a scarcely suppressed oath. The remark grated on his ears. A diamond! this slangy American flirt—rather was she the worthless piece of glass! Still fascinated by the piquant beauty of her face, he made another attempt.

"This is no jest, Matty. Will you be my wife?"

"Your wife! Well, I should smile."

This finished it. Without a word, with a glance full of impotent anger, Leonard swiftly left the room. Matty was triumphant, but looked anything but pleased at the success of her comedy. Her smiles vanished as the door closed, and she sat down on the sofa, biting her lip to keep back her tears. Still, in her foolish pride she strove to console herself with the thought of her own firmness of character.

"I said I would bring him to my feet in spite of slang and eccentricity," she muttered, defiantly; "and I have done so! He is punished for the way in which he spoke and I'm quite satisfied. I—I—I—am—quite—quite—sat——"

In proof of which she buried her face in the sofa-cushions and burst into tears. She was hardly a minute in this humiliating position when she felt two strong arms lift her up. With a cry she turned her tear-stained face upward, and saw—Leonard.

"Matty! Matty! I cannot go! I have come back. Surely you love me as I love you! These tears tell me so."

All Matty's pride was gone by this time, and she leaned her head on his shoulder. By finding her in tears he had her at a disadvantage.

"Say you will marry me!" urged Leonard, in a low voice. "You must marry me!"

"I am not fit to be your wife," cried Matty, striving to release herself. "I use American slang, I smoke cigarettes, I flirt with a strong accent, and I have hunted for a title."

Leonard looked at her in amazement. She spoke good English, with hardly any Transatlantic accent, and, moreover, she repeated almost word for word his opinion of American girls.

"Mrs. Dawson has been telling you my foolish speech regarding you," he said, gravely.

"No! I saw a letter she wrote to Mrs. Scheveningen about me. Your fancy portrait was so ridiculous that I determined to punish you by realizing it."

"Oh!" cried Leonard, a sudden light breaking in upon him. "Then you have been playing a part?"

"Yes! To punish you!" said Matty, laughing, in spite of tears and anger.

"I am sufficiently punished. But now that you have finished your comedy, perhaps you will condescend to accept me as your husband. True comedies always end in marriage."

"But I talk slang."

"You don't at present."

"I smoke cigarettes."

"You only did that out of bravado."

"True enough," said Matty, ruefully. "I can't bear smoking. But you forget I hunted for a title."

"And let it go when you caught it," replied Leonard, smiling. "Come, Matty, we have been at cross purposes long enough. I was anxious to marry the false Matty, I am still more anxious to marry the real one. Will you be my wife?"

Matty looked up into his face with a smile, and——

Her answer may be guessed from the text of the cablegram she sent next day to Mrs. Scheveningen, in New York :—

“Send me your ruby ring, and expect a piece of my wedding-cake.”

THE DEAD MAN'S DIAMONDS

I

ALL things considering, I scarcely think that my uncle acted in strict accordance with his religious principles. As a man,—as an injured husband, doubtless, he had—broadly speaking—some excuse for his conduct ; but seeing that he was a clergyman, and Rector of Polwheal, Cornwall, he should have forgiven his enemies, and not have discounted his chances of salvation by plotting crime on—as one may say—his deathbed. But the Tregarthens were never famous for meekness of spirit ; and after all, he gave the guilty pair at least one chance of escape,—which they did not take. Had they done so, this story would not have been written, nor would I have been so well-to-do as I am.

“They” were his divorced wife Lillian, and Jack Westleigh, the man who had brought about the intervention of the law. I cannot hold Uncle Tregarthen entirely blameless in the matter : for he should have known better than to have married, at sixty years of age, a girl whom he knew to be in love with her cousin. If Westleigh had not been poor, Squire Lawton would not have objected to the match : but a briefless barrister and a pauper spinster ?—the idea was madness. Lawton only acted within his fatherly rights, and wisely, when he forbade the cousins to see, or even to think of each other.

These prohibitions, however, were of no avail, for

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Westleigh, in defiance of paternal wrath, took up his quarters in the village and gained occasional glimpses of Lillian. They corresponded also by letter, making use of an aged oak on the borders of Lawton Park as an intermedium of communication. Into a hole in the trunk—a disused tit's nest—Westleigh would slip a note, and next day return for the answer which invariably awaited him in this strange post-office. Occasional glimpses, still more occasional conversations, and continual letters went on for six months between this Juliet and her Romeo; until the Squire, discovering Love's roguery, ended the romance by marrying Lillian to Mark Tregarthen, rector and eccentric.

The harsh-featured and whimsical old man was not attractive to the nineteen-year-old girl, and Lillian, although she did not dare to disobey her father, bitterly resented the match. Her married life was unhappy and short; for, unable to agree with her aged husband, impatient of his eccentric habits and domineering ways, she fled to London, and there sought the protection of her lover. Uncle Tregarthen obtained a divorce; after which he refused to mention the name of his disgraced wife, but retiring into his misanthropic self, he became daily more odd in his conduct. These things happened ten years before I became personally acquainted with Uncle Tregarthen, so I repeat them from hearsay. In the sequel I took an active part, as will be seen hereafter.

Uncle Tregarthen was my mother's brother, but she had long since ceased to see, or even to correspond with him. This was less her fault than his, for he designedly cut himself off from the family, leading a misanthropic and solitary life among his wild parishioners. These were mostly fishermen and miners, to the saving of whose souls Uncle Tregarthen paid less attention than to his hobby for collecting diamonds. He lived in a dilapidated rectory; he scrimped and screwed his housekeeper and himself in the matter of food and creature comforts; in all ways he

behaved in a most miserly fashion, and devoted the money thus saved to the purchase of gems. His private income, his stipend, his savings in the matter of household and other expenses, were used solely for this purpose, and Polwheal Rectory was looked on as the Golconda of Cornwall.

Why my uncle should have developed so expensive and useless a hobby I could never understand. No one, save himself, saw his diamonds, which were locked up in an iron safe let into the wall of his study: he did not even adorn his wife with them during the short period of her married life. So long as they were in his safe, he was satisfied; and for forty years he added to his collection, until the value of the gems amounted to a fabulous sum—I am afraid to say how much. The rough fishers, and still rougher miners, knew of his wealth, but none attempted to steal the jewels. They were too attached to their eccentric parson to think of doing so; therefore Mark Tregarthen's riches were as safe in that house on the lonely Cornish coast as they would have been in the Bank of England.

I regret to say that my father—a thriftless man of letters—was indifferently well off, and when he died left my mother almost penniless, to bring me up as best she could. In this strait she applied to her husband's well-to-do relatives for assistance, and received monies from all save Uncle Tregarthen. He did not even trouble to acknowledge the letter, much to the anger of my mother.

"All the same, he may remember us yet," she said, after many fruitless applications, extending over several years. "I am his only sister, and you, Francis, his only nephew; he must leave his money to one or the other of us."

"Unless he marries himself," I suggested.

"Mark will never marry," replied my mother convincingly; "he is a confirmed bachelor."

Subsequent events proved her to be wrong, for shortly we received the news of the marriage to Lillian Lawton, which dashed our hopes to the ground. A year afterwards came

the intelligence of his divorce, which raised them again. Five years later a letter from the eccentric himself came to hand.

"I have been informed," began the letter abruptly, "that your son Francis is now twenty years of age. If he is not a fool—which he must be if he takes after his father—I should like to see him. Send him to me at once; it will be the better for him and for you.—Your brother, MARK."

In response to this amiable invitation I obtained a month's holiday from the office wherein I was then employed, and repaired to Polwheal, where I presented myself before my eccentric relative. I found him a powerful-framed, grizzled man, moody and suspicious: he beheld in me an etiolated youth with pale cheeks and round shoulders, both induced by desk work. Neither of us approved of the other's looks.

"You miserable whelp," said grim Uncle Tregarthen, "you need Cornish air and out-door life to change you from tadpole to man. Write and resign your appointment in your London den."

"But my mother, sir: she depends upon——"

"I'll see to your mother," he retorted shortly; "you stay here!"

I hesitated to accept this offer without confirmation, whereat, in a breath, the dour creature blamed me for my distrust, and praised me for my caution. Afterwards he instructed his lawyers to pay my mother fifty pounds quarterly, conditionally that she never sought Polwheal Rectory, wherein I was henceforth to take up my abode. With an eye to future favours, we accepted these somewhat harsh terms, and for three years I dwelt with Uncle Tregarthen, a kind of prisoner on parole. The old man was not unkind to me, but neglectful and uncompanionable. He gave me no pocket-money, he rarely permitted me to travel beyond the confines of the parish, and scrimped me, along with his other dependents, in the matter of food and light.

Shooting was my great resource, and many a day did I spend on the moors, solitary but happy. My skill with



“He passed by me groaning heavily.”

the gun kept the larder supplied at the mere cost of powder and shot; therefore the Rector rather approved of, than

grudged my sport. The out-door life developed my frame, the scanty fare kept me in excellent health, and in a few years I became an uncommonly powerful man. As will afterwards be seen, I owed my life to this rigorous training.

What puzzled me during my sojourn at Polwheal were the singular habits of my uncle. Sometimes he went to London for the purpose of buying diamonds, at others he attended to his parishioners ; but for the most part he would disappear for hours, and return covered with grime, and exhausted with toil. Where he went, what he did, I could never discover ; nor did I seek to force his secret, until one day, as I returned across the moors, I fell in with him unexpectedly.

The place was on the verge of the sea-shore, and everywhere the ground gaped with the shafts of disused mines. Out of one of these Uncle Tregarthen suddenly appeared, and I had just time to slip behind a giant stone before he passed by me groaning heavily. In the fast-falling night it was difficult to see plainly, but I noted his pale face, his dragging gait, and I heard the laboured breath which told of severe toil. My curiosity to know the meaning of these things got the better of my prudence ; and when the old man vanished, I slipped into the mouth of the mine whence he had emerged.

Within all was thick gloom, but I was provided against that emergency. For the purpose of exploring tin mines, I always carried matches and candles ; so before diving into the shaft I lighted up, and stuck my taper, miner-fashion, in my cap, with a lump of clay. Forward I went, doubled up, for the roof was low, and advanced cautiously lest I should fall into some snare. It was just as well I did so, for the gallery ended in a yawning chasm, which led to the lower workings of the mine. Down this hung a stout rope, attached to a massive rock at the lips of the well ; and I would have swung myself down, but that my candle fell

from my cap. I had no other light, so for the moment I was reluctantly compelled to abandon the exploration.

On my return home bad news awaited me. Uncle Tregarthen had arrived an hour previously, had called for brandy, and while lifting the glass to his lips he had fallen dead. As I afterwards learned from the doctor, the old man died of aneurism of the heart, induced by the overtaxing of his strength. I had no doubt but what the Rector had worked hard at some manual labour while in the depths of that mine, but his reasons for so doing I could not understand. Sooner than I expected these came to light, and singular enough they were.

At once I communicated with my mother, who came to Polwheal in time to see the last of her brother, before he was buried. After the funeral, the will was read, and then we received an unpleasant surprise. I had always looked on myself as the heir to the Rector's jewels, but to my dismay the diamonds were left to the divorced wife Lillian and her lover : failing their acceptance of the same the gems were to become my property.

"As if they would refuse," lamented my mother. "There must be fifty thousand pounds' worth, Francis ; and to leave them to that wicked woman ! Can't we upset the will ? I'm sure your uncle was mad."

"I don't think so, mother : he was eccentric, but not mad. The will is likely to stand the test of the law, so the only thing for us to do is to communicate with Mr. and Mrs. Westleigh."

"I have already done so," said the lawyer ; "they will be here this week."

"Why were they not present at the reading of the will ?" I asked sharply.

"Because they were abroad, and could not come earlier. I am sorry for you, Mr. Carson, but you are young, and will soon make your way in the world."

"Cold comfort that," I rejoined bitterly. "Uncle

Tregarthen took me out of a situation, and now turns me loose to live as best I can after five years of idleness. I do not think I have been treated fairly."

"It is scandalous," cried my mother.

"Quite so! quite so!" said the lawyer. "But the will is all right. I don't deny the leaving of the property to the divorced wife is hard, but Mr. Tregarthen was always eccentric."

"By the way, where are the jewels?" I asked, out of mere curiosity.

"In the safe, I suppose," said the solicitor, selecting a key. "I looked in there the other day, and could not find them; but as a matter of fact my examination was cursory—very cursory indeed. We will search for them now."

Surprise number one was the provisions of the will, surprise number two, the searching of the safe. It was empty: no diamonds were therein concealed, and the three of us stood looking at one another in dismay. Then Mr. Pryce, the lawyer, suggested that the jewels might be concealed in some other part of the house, so we made a close search. It was useless, for not a single gem could we discover. The Rector had hidden his diamonds to some purpose, for no one knew their whereabouts save himself—and he was dead.

"Dear! dear!" murmured Mr. Pryce, "this is most extraordinary. You have no idea where they can be, Mr. Carson?"

"Not the slightest. The only key to that safe was on the Rector's watch-chain all the time I have been here. I have never seen the diamonds. Uncle Tregarthen did not honour me with his confidence so far."

I thought Pryce eyed me somewhat suspiciously, as though he thought I had stolen the jewels. My mother saw his looks, and gave him a piece of her mind which made him beat a hasty retreat. When he was gone, she turned to me—

"Francis! you have never seen the diamonds?"

"No, mother."

"You have no idea where they can be?"

"No, mother."

We said no more, for the situation, and the suspicions of Pryce, disturbed us greatly. Mr. and Mrs. Westleigh, the legatees under the will, were to arrive on the morrow—but where was the legacy?

II

BUT for the loss of the diamonds my mother and I would have left the Rectory before the arrival of the Westleighs. I had no particular wish to meet my divorced aunt, and my mother was of that aggressively virtuous matron type which dreads contact with the fallen. Nevertheless we remained, as departure might complicate matters, and I had my character to defend. Not only Pryce had conceived a suspicion, but Mrs. Lowdy, the half-starved housekeeper, imbibed his ideas, and looked askance at me. I never felt so uncomfortable as at that time. It was bad enough to be thrown penniless on the world, through the whims of an old man; but it was worse to be suspected of thieving the property which morally, if not legally, I looked on as mine. There was something ironical about such circumstances.

Nor was my discomfort lessened by the arrival of the Westleighs. He was a fresh-coloured, insolent creature, loud-voiced and coarse-minded; she a pretty woman who adored this male brute, and was a slave in consequence. That he loved her in an animal sort of way I do not deny, but his selfish egotism would not permit her to be happy.

To my mind the second marriage of Lillian Lawton was even more unfortunate than the first.

My mother was kind but cold to the wife; a compliment returned by Westleigh, who was insolent and overbearing to me. For obvious reasons I kept my temper, although he tried it sorely by pointed allusions to the loss of the diamonds. With characteristic meddlesomeness Pryce had driven to the nearest railway station, and had informed Westleigh of the loss, and of his doubts, so that when the man arrived he was quite prepared to accuse me of the theft without a shadow of foundation.

"A strange business this, Mr. Carson," he said, when we were alone after dinner.

"You mean about the diamonds?"

"Yes. Where are they?"

"I am afraid I cannot tell you, Mr. Westleigh. All the time I have lived with my uncle, I have never even seen the jewels. I understood that he kept them in his study safe—but they are not there now."

"Do you know their value?"

"I have not the least idea."

Westleigh looked at me with a sneer.

"Yet you no doubt expected to be your uncle's heir."

"Certainly! The jewels ought to have been left to me. Your wife—excuse me, Mr. Westleigh, for speaking so plainly—but your wife forfeited her claim to my uncle's property by her behaviour."

"H'm! No doubt you wish to make her suffer for that slip."

"What do you mean, sir?"

I asked the question indignantly, for the man's insolence stung me cruelly. He, like myself, was on his feet, and leaning one hand on the table, he bent towards me with a frown.

"I mean, Mr. Carson, that you know more about these jewels than you choose to tell. Naturally you are aggrieved

at being left out of the will, and I dare swear you have taken steps to remove those diamonds to a safe hiding-place."

It was fortunate that Mrs. Lowdy entered the room at that moment, and compelled me to restrain myself, else I should have sprang on the insolent brute, who so coldly accused me of theft. As it was, I stood silently controlling my passion, while Westleigh received a letter from the housekeeper.

"My late master asked me to give you this on your arrival, Mr. Westleigh," said Mrs. Lowdy, with a curtsey, "and having placed it in your hands, sir, I have discharged my duty."

She then left the room, and after a doubtful glance at me, Westleigh tore open the envelope. Wondering what Uncle Tregarthen could have to say to the man who had wrecked his domestic happiness, I waited. Westleigh read the note—it was not very long—and then turned towards me with a studied courtesy which was even more objectionable than his insolence.

"I ask your pardon for my late speech, Mr. Carson," he said, in a voice charged with excitement, "for I have suspected you wrongly. I know now where the Tregarthen diamonds are hidden."

"Indeed! Does that letter——"

Before I could finish my remark he placed the note in my hands, and in the crabbed Greek handwriting of my late uncle, I read as follows—"The diamonds are hidden for safety in the Trevethy Mine. Enter the shaft with the red star, follow the rope, and it will guide you to the hiding-place. Take spade and pickaxe, for the place is hermetically sealed. One thing only I ask of you. When you seek the jewels, take with you my late wife Lillian. Both of you have wronged me deeply, and you owe it to me to obey my last request. Seek the jewels together, or leave them to my nephew, Francis Carson."

There was no signature to this extraordinary letter, and I returned it to Westleigh with a sudden enlightenment of the mind. This then was the reason of Uncle Tregarthen's long absences—of his toil and grimy appearance—the reason of his emergence from the shaft of the Trevethy Mine. The diamonds were concealed therein. I wondered that I had not guessed as much, when they were missing from the house.

"I expect he was afraid of being robbed," said Westleigh, with a peculiar glance at me, "and so concealed the jewels in that mine. Well, we will seek them to-morrow—will you come also, Mr. Carson?"

"Certainly, if you wish it," said I quietly; "but the letter stipulates that your wife should go with you."

"I'll see her about it at once," he replied resolutely. "No doubt she will make some objection; but I am not going to lose a fortune simply because she is afraid of descending a tin mine."

As Westleigh anticipated, his wife was by no means willing to descend into the depths of the Trevethy Mine. She appeared apprehensive lest the letter of the dead man should conceal some sinister design; and indeed I had my doubts on the matter also. A dour creature like Uncle Tregarthen was not likely to forgive an injury: and his ostentatious pardon of the pair who had wronged him so deeply seemed ironical. Mrs. Westleigh thought so too.

"I am afraid, Jack! I am terribly afraid," she cried, clinging to his arm, when he broached the subject, "evil will come of this. Let us give up the diamonds to the nephew, and go away."

"You must take me for a fool, Lillian," replied her husband crossly. "Give up fifty or sixty thousand pounds? I'll do no such thing. We will go down this mine to-morrow."

"No! No! I shall not!"

"You shall! You must! Don't be foolish: there can be no possible danger."

Mrs. Westleigh thought differently and continued to object; but during the night the stronger will dominated the weaker, and next morning she professed her willingness to carry out the dead man's instructions. In the meantime Westleigh had sent for Pryce, and when he arrived showed him the letter.

"Most extraordinary," said the lawyer, when he had mastered its contents. "I was always under the impression that my late client kept the jewels in his safe. That was evidently a blind, and he constructed a secret place in the Trevethy Mine. Mr. Carson," he added, turning to me, "I beg to apologize for my unjust suspicions. I see now that you are innocent."

"I owe you no thanks for that, Mr. Pryce," said I bitterly. "The evidence of this letter is too strong for you to disbelieve; but you might have given me the benefit of the doubt."

These three people were all hostile to me, and but for my curiosity concerning the hiding-place of the diamonds, I should have left Polwheal Rectory that day with my mother. As it was I persuaded her—sorely against her will—to stay, and at twelve o'clock we set out for the Trevethy Mine to seek the jewels. As I passed out of the door, Mrs. Lowdy plucked me by the sleeve.

"I ask your pardon, sir," she whispered. "I suspected you wrongly; but you will be rewarded for your trouble, Mr. Carson."

"What do you mean, Mrs. Lowdy?"

She screwed up her mouth and nodded significantly.

"When they find the diamonds, you come back to me, and I'll give you a message from the master."

Before I could ask for an explanation, she vanished into the house and shut the door, while I ran on to join the party, now some distance ahead. I began to be suspicious

of the motives of my dead uncle. He had left a letter for Westleigh, and a message for me; and I suspected that blindly we were carrying out some design dangerous to some, if not to all of us. So strongly was this borne on us that I determined to dissuade Westleigh from descending the shaft.

There was no difficulty in finding the main entrance to the Trevethy Mine. It was the same whence I had seen the old man emerge on the day of his death. And to distinguish it from the other gaping mouths a splotch of red paint was rubbed on the grey stone face. Under the bright blue sky, on the verge of the rugged shore, we stood, a party of five, looking at the yawning mine, down which we had to descend to recover the jewels. Westleigh, as instructed by the letter, had brought a pickaxe and shovel with him, and with these over his shoulder he prepared to step into the mouth. Lillian with a sudden access of terror drew back, and flung herself into the arms of my mother.

"I can't, Jack! I daren't," she wailed fearfully; "there is danger. I am sure there is danger."

"Rot!" cried Westleigh, seizing her roughly by the hand. "You must come. I don't wish to lose the jewels for your scruples. Come on!"

"I think Mrs. Westleigh is right," I interposed. "I feel sure that Uncle Tregarthen has some sinister design in this."

"Bah!" sneered Westleigh. "You want the jewels for yourself."

Pryce took a pinch of snuff, and looked doubtfully at me.

"It might be as you say, Mr. Carson," he remarked. "I never yet knew your uncle to forgive his enemies."

"Don't go; don't go," said my mother, drawing back Lillian; "let the diamonds be."

"You want them for your son," scoffed Westleigh; "but

they are mine by right, and I mean to have them. Come, Lillian."

She shuddered, and gave one despairing glance around at sky, sun, and sea, then, dominated by her husband's will, she followed him into the tunnel, leaving the three of us looking at one another.

"You are afraid to go, I see," said Pryce, with a jeering look at me.

"No!" I answered, "I intend to see this out. I suspect something is wrong, but if Westleigh does not keep his eyes open I shall."

Silencing my mother's objections with a kiss, I slipped into the gallery after Jack Westleigh and his wife, and in a few minutes I found myself standing with them on the lips of the hole which led into the bowels of the mine. The three of us were now fully committed to the adventure. Would that we had foreseen the end, and had retired while there was yet time!

III

THE situation was enough to try the nerves of a stronger woman than Mrs. Westleigh, and she leaned against the sides of the tunnel faint with terror. Seeing this, her husband administered a sup of brandy from his travelling flask, and so braced her up for the adventure. She became as anxious as he to find the jewels, and professed her willingness to descend into the shaft, whence she had shrunk some minutes before. Taking advantage of this sudden access of courage Westleigh made ready for the descent.

"It will be awkward for you to scramble down by this rope," he said, kneeling on the edge of the shaft. "Hullo !

here's a rope-ladder ; that's capital. Lillian, I shall go down first, you follow me, and then if Mr. Carson chooses to come he can do so."

"Mr. Carson does choose to come," I said sharply ; "but how are you going to lower this pickaxe and spade?"

"By this rope, of course," replied Westleigh, drawing up the cord which swung by the rope-ladder. "See, I'll tie them to the end and lower them so. The shaft is not so deep as I thought."

We heard the clink of the iron as axe and spade clashed at the bottom of the shaft. Afterwards, with a reassuring word to his wife, Westleigh cautiously descended the rope-ladder, and bending over the yawning mouth I could see the candle fastened in his cap, twinkling starlike in the thick gloom. After the elapse of some minutes, he apparently reached the ground, for we heard him shout faintly, and felt the guiding-rope violently shaken.

"Now, Mrs. Westleigh, it is your turn," said I ; and as she started nervously back I added encouragingly, "Do not be afraid, I will tie the end of this rope to your waist, and you will thus be supported while descending the ladder."

With an effort she consented, and pulling the rope up I bound the end round her waist. Then she swung herself fearfully on to the shaking ladder, and I let the cord pay out slowly through my hands as she clambered down. In a few minutes she accomplished the descent also, and like glow-worms the candlelights glimmered at the bottom of the shaft. Without hesitation I gripped the rope, and making no use of the ladder, I precipitated myself into the abyss. Accustomed as I was to cliff climbing, it was easy work for me to descend, and shortly I found myself standing beside the pale wife and the anxious husband in the bowels of the earth.

By this time the effect of the spirit had died out in Mrs. Westleigh, and in the wavering light of the candles her

face looked curiously pale. Notwithstanding her awe of Westleigh, I believe she would have fled, but that it was now too late to retreat. Her husband, with flushed face and bright eyes, paid little attention to her agitation, but he groped about for the rope, which, as mentioned in Uncle Tregarthen's letter, would guide him to the place where the jewels were hidden.

"Here it is," he cried in an exulting tone, picking it up from the side of the gallery. "Carson, look after my wife and follow me."

Little as I liked her I was sorry for the poor woman. She gripped my hand with the courage of despair, and we hurried along the gallery after Jack Westleigh. The tunnel proceeded in a horizontal direction for some distance until it stopped short at another chasm, down which depended a rope-ladder. Our descent was accomplished in the same manner as before, and again we walked on. I judged that by this time we were under the sea, so that the adventure was even more perilous than we had deemed it.

"Hark!" I said, pausing a moment with Lillian's hand in mine, "we are under the ocean. Do you hear the reverberation of the waves?"

We all listened intently, and heard distinctly the rumble of the waters overhead, the grating of the rocks grinding along the bed of the sea, and the drowsy swell of the waves seething on the rugged beach. By the lights of the candles we could see that the rocks within which we were entombed were quite dry, and here and there a glint of light was struck from the veins of ore threading the sides of the tunnel. The air was thick and muggy, so that we could hardly breathe.

"Oh, Jack, I am afraid—I am afraid," moaned Lillian in wide-eyed terror; "let us go back."

"What! After coming so far? Not if I know it," was his response, and he seized his wife as she sank on the rocky floor. "Get up and come along, you fool."

Passive in his hands from sheer terror, she permitted herself to be led forward, and after five minutes we emerged on to a kind of platform beyond which opened a huge vaulted chamber. The rope descended here, and Westleigh looked over to find the expected ladder. There was none.

"I must scramble down as best I can," he grumbled, slinging axe and spade over his shoulder. "You can wait here, Lillian, with Carson."

"Shall I help you?" I asked, as he gripped the rope.

"No, thank you," was his sneering retort, "I would rather find the jewels alone; I don't trust you, my friend."

Indignation held me silent, and I busied myself attending to Mrs. Westleigh, while her husband dropped into the darkness. The precipice proved of no great height, for we saw his light suddenly steady as he touched ground ten feet below.

"The rope runs to the right," he called up; and then we saw the glimmer of his candle moving athwart the gloom. A shout of joy announced that he had reached the end of his journey, and had found the treasure place. "The old man has bricked up the hole," he shouted, "it's about four feet square; but I'll soon have this wall down. It runs all along the side of the vault."

A moment afterwards the blows of the pickaxe echoed in the vault, and Lillian on her hands and knees peered into the gloom, watching the dancing light, as her husband moved his head with every stroke. For a few minutes he plied the pickaxe; then rose a cry of fear, the light went out, and we heard the roar of many waters. Lillian shrieked aloud.

"Help—help—Carson—Lillian!" cried Westleigh in muffled tones. "I have let in the sea. I have——"

The waters broke down the brickwork which ran along the side of the vault, and surged tempestuously into the hollow. They gripped Westleigh in their strength and dashed him against the rocky sides. He gave one shriek,

echoed by Lillian, and then all was still save the roaring of the rapidly-rising waters.

"Mrs. Westleigh, let me save you," I cried, seizing her in my arms.

"No! No! My husband! Ah!" she screamed, as a dark body borne on the turbid waters swept under the feeble glimmer of our candles. "Jack! Jack!"

Before I could tighten my grip on her, before I could guess her purpose, she tore herself from my arms, and hurled herself into the black pool, now streaked and marbled with white foam. I heard her cry as she was swept into the darkness, and I staggered back under the force of the incoming flood, which now was up to my knees. I could save neither him nor her; I was in danger of losing my own life, and in an agony of fear I turned and raced for safety along the lower gallery. Even in that terrible moment I recognized the fearful vengeance which had been meted out by Mark Tregarthen to the guilty pair.

Quick as I was in gaining the first shaft which led to the higher levels, the waters were quicker still, and as I rapidly clambered up the rope-ladder, the salt flood growled and bubbled at my heels. It forced its way up the narrow shaft at tremendous speed, and the floor of the second gallery was already ankle-deep before I had covered half the distance. At the last shaft the turbulence of the flood somewhat abated, therefore I judged that I was on a level with the ocean; but as I scrambled up the second ladder the waters still continued to swell, though slowly. Half-way up they stopped, and rolled hoarsely from side to side. With a prayer of thanksgiving for my escape I flung myself exhausted on the floor of the tunnel which led to the open air. Of the three of us I alone had saved my life.

The reason for my uncle's strange will, and stranger letter, can now easily be guessed. He had forgiven neither his wife nor Westleigh, but by appealing to their greed he

had brought about the death of both. For years he must have toiled constructing that brickwork which alone kept out the waters of the sea. How he managed to accomplish so great a task unaided I cannot say ; by what means he pierced the ocean floor so that the waters should pour into the mine the moment the brickwork was destroyed, it is impossible to guess. But the fact remained that with inconceivable malignancy he had made Westleigh the instrument of his own fate. By tempting him with the promise of the diamonds, he had induced the wretched man to destroy, by his own free will, the only barrier between him and death. I saw now why he wished Westleigh and Lillian to go *together* to the mine : it was to doom them to the cruel death which I had escaped so narrowly. The Trevethy Mine was filled almost to the mouth with water, and in its grim depths were concealed the corpses of those who had wronged the Rector of Polwheal. I challenge fiction to produce a more gruesome tragedy than that which I have narrated.

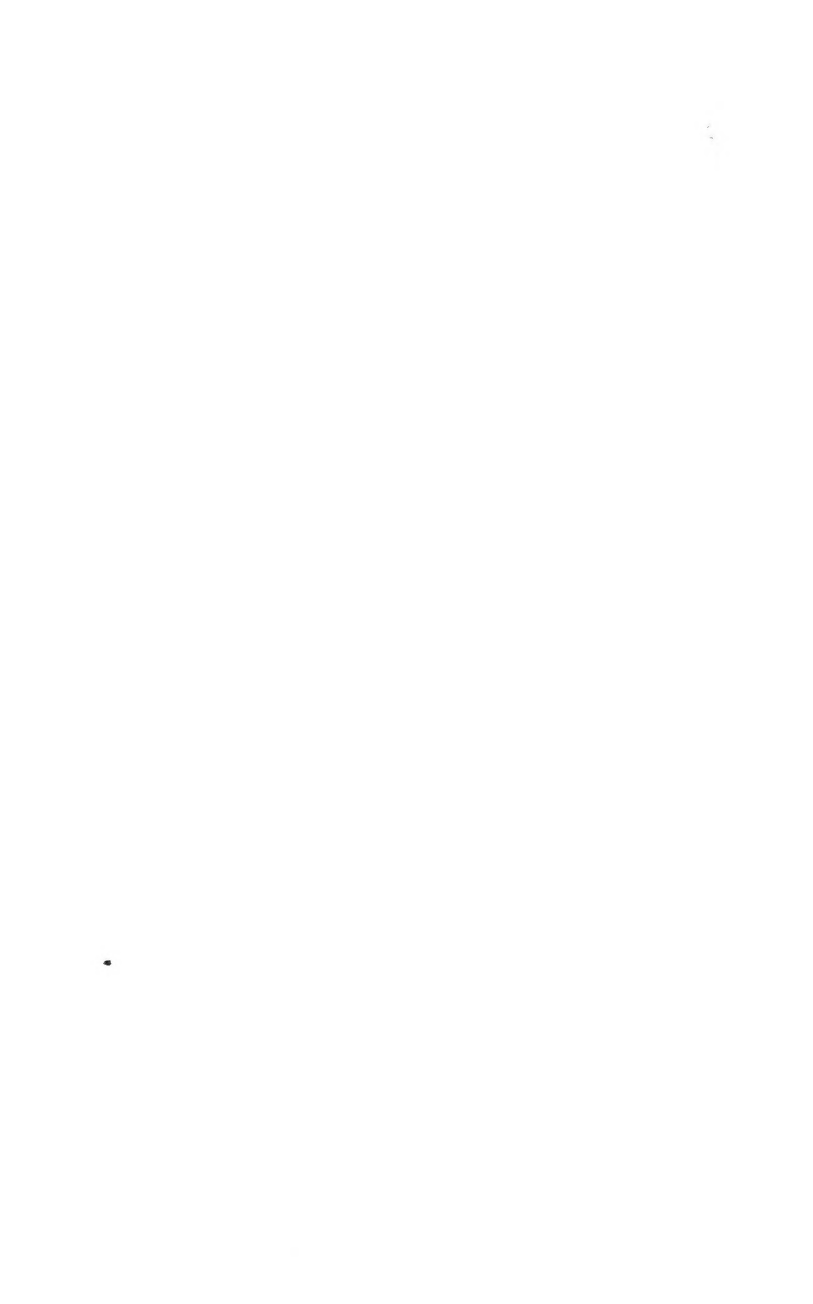
On recovering somewhat from my exhaustion, I staggered along the tunnel, and emerged, battered, bruised, and grimy, into the glare of the sunshine. As in a dream I saw my mother and Pryce rise in alarm from the stones whereon they were seated ; as in a dream I heard them ask for the Westleighs, and I heard my own voice tell of the terrible catastrophe. Then I faintly saw their faces of horror at the recital, and fell down in a swoon, almost as void of life as those unhappy beings entombed in the watery depths below.

And now comes in the strangest part of this strange story. When I came to my senses I was lying on my bed with my mother anxiously bending over me. With maternal care she held some wine to my lips, and so efficacious was the draught that soon I was able to sit up and converse.

“You have been unconscious for over two hours,” said



"I rapidly clambered up the rope-ladder."



my mother in response to my inquiries ; "we carried you here, and then Pryce with some men went back to see if the Westleighs could be rescued."

"Impossible, mother ! They were both drowned before I escaped from the mine. I should have been drowned also, but that I made use of my speed and my strength. What a terrible vengeance Uncle Tregarthen prepared for those unhappy people."

"Terrible indeed, Francis ; but I always knew that my brother was vindictive, although I did not think he would have sinned so wickedly on his dying bed. Lillian is gone, Westleigh is gone, and the diamonds——"

"They are gone also !"

"I am not so sure of that," said my mother significantly, producing a letter from her pocket. "Mrs. Lowdy, who has followed Mr. Pryce to the mine, gave me this for you. It is from your uncle."

I opened the letter and read it aloud without further delay. The contents astonished us both.

"NEPHEW FRANCIS," began the letter, in my uncle's well-known handwriting. "When you receive this letter, I hope my guilty wife and her lover will be dead. I have given them one chance of escape :—by appealing to their moral feelings as to whether they deserve my money or not. If they can conquer their greed and refrain from descending into the Trevethy Mine, doubtless they are alive still ; if, on the other hand, they have been shameless enough to claim the property of one whom they have wronged cruelly—well, you know what has occurred. For years I have brooded over my vengeance, for years I have toiled to build a slight wall against the sea which threatened to flood the mine. How I discovered the danger, how I accomplished the work, there is no need to say. Sufficient is it for me to declare that my hate gave me strength and ingenuity to prepare this trap. If they have fallen into

it I am glad; if they are alive still, God will punish them in His own good time. In any case the diamonds are yours. I did not hide them in the Trevethy Mine—that was but a lure to accomplish my vengeance. No! the jewels, to the amount of eighty thousand pounds, are hidden in the trunk of the oak tree on the borders of the Lawton estate, where my wife was accustomed to meet her lover. Put your hand into the tit's nest they used as a post-office; there you will find a cord, at the end of which is a leathern bag containing the jewels. If I have accomplished my revenge I feel no sorrow; if they are dead I am glad. I shall welcome them to the next world with joy. They sought wealth—they found death. Bless you, my boy—and curse them.—MARK TREGARTHEN."

There is no more to be said. As directed by the letter I sought the oak, I found the jewels, and these ultimately realized the sum of close on eighty thousand pounds. The bodies of Lillian and Jack Westleigh were never recovered, as it was found impossible to drain the mine. Thanks to my uncle's bequest, both my mother and myself live in affluence and ease, but neither of us have ever revisited Polwheal, which to us is fraught with horror. The horrible story of my uncle's vengeance is still related at winter firesides; and no legend is so popular, or so firmly believed, as that of the Dead Man's Diamonds.

'THE TALE OF THE TURQUOISE SKULL'

PART I

THIS story has been told by three different men. Each has embellished it according to his fancy, and constituted himself the hero. I object to these egotistical pilferers, for I am alone entitled to tell, in the first person, the tale of the turquoise skull. Should any one question my right to this principal rôle, I can point out that the forefinger of my left hand is missing. That loss substantiates my statement. I should like to know if those other three story-tellers lack the forefingers of their left hands. If not, they stand convicted of plagiarism.

When Harry Carstone and I went to the U. S. A. on a shooting excursion, we intended to strike for the Rockies. It was by no deliberate design that we found ourselves at Zacatecas. By a series of accidents which need not be set forth here, we drifted aimlessly southward. From New York we travelled to New Orleans, thence took ship to Vera Cruz, and, as a natural consequence, we terminated our journey in Mexico City. And here we should have remained, had not Fate, by her favourite device of feminine influence, lured us—or rather one of us—to Zacatecas. If Harry had not followed Lola Tepeaca from capital to province, he might now be alive.

Missing Page

As it was, he left Mexico City for Zacatecas, where he found Lola, the turquoise skull, and a grave. I came out of the affair with my life and the loss of a finger. To save Harry I would have given willingly the whole hand. But it was not to be; and although I punished Lola for her evil deeds, such reprisal was but poor compensation for the death of my college chum.

Ostensibly we sought Zacatecas in the mining interest, but I gave up my time to sight-seeing, and Harry spent most of his with Lola. Only once did I accompany him to her dwelling; then, seeing that I was an inconvenient third, I went no more. As for Lola, she usually smoked cigarettes in a grass hammock swung on the *azotea*, while Harry sat at her feet and talked. I guessed what formed the gist of these conversations, from my friend's flushed face and sparkling eyes at their conclusion. And, judging that such trifling was unwholesome, I ventured a remonstrance, which he promptly resented. Experience should have taught me the futility of interfering.

"You can't marry the girl," said I impatiently; "she is half Indian, and wholly diabolical."

Harry drew his brows together, as was his habit when annoyed. I remembered that sign of temper at Eton when he went up for punishment. Still, he answered temperately enough—

"I know she is a half-caste, but she is not the—the other thing."

"Isn't she, though! If ever I saw evil in a woman's eyes——"

"You need say no more, Frank," he interrupted, hotly; "it is shabby to speak ill of a woman behind her back."

"I will say it to her face if you like, Harry. Believe me, she is no good, and she will certainly get you into trouble."

"I can take care of myself. I am no fool."

"You are a man, at all events," I retorted, "and all

men are fools where a woman is concerned. Do you intend to present Lady Carstone with a half-caste daughter-in-law?"

"That is neither here nor there," said he sulkily, and turned on his heel to intimate that my interference was uncalled for. Later on he left the hotel to call on his Venus Pandemos. Having been thus rewarded for my mediation, I walked to the Casa de la Estrella to visit Fray Benito. He was a Dominican monk of archæological tastes, with whom I had forgathered shortly after my arrival at Zacatecas. His monastery—named after the star of Bethlehem—was a peaceful old dwelling, with courts and corridors, a wonderful chapel, and an extensive library. When Fray Benito was not praying in the chapel, he was reading in the library; and here I found him wrestling with the crabbed Latin of a priestly author.

Our friendship was based on a common love for archæology; but as Harry's tastes did not lie in that direction, he sought neither monastery nor monk; and although I had observed casually that I had a companion, I had not thought it necessary to inform the holy monk of the existence of Lola. It was only after my fruitless appeal to Harry that I mentioned the name of the half-caste siren to the Dominican. As a popular confessor in Zacatecas, he was likely to know something of the lady, and a little timely knowledge of her peculiarities might enable me to rescue Harry from her toils. This, then, was the main reason for my visit, and after a few words of courtesy I introduced the subject. The pious horror with which Fray Benito received the name of Lola served only to confirm my fears.

"What is this you tell me, Don Francisco?" said he severely. "Have you been led astray by this daughter of evil?"

"No, reverend sir. I speak in the interest of my friend, who is now in her toils."

"God help him!" said the monk, crossing himself. "She

will lure him to death, as she has lured others. Demon, *succuba*, would that the Holy Office were still in existence, to burn thee to ashes!"

"Who is she, Fray?"

"A demon, Señor. Have you not heard of the turquoise skull?"

"No: what is the turquoise skull?"

"It is an instrument of evil possessed by this creature," said Fray Benito, with much energy—"the skull of a heathen king adorned with jewels, and inhabited by evil spirits. With it she works her devilries. Twelve men has she slain. Holy Mary forbid that your friend should be the thirteenth!"

"You don't mean to say that she has murdered twelve men?" I demanded uneasily. The attitude of the monk frightened me.

"Who knows how they die! She lures them with her beauty, and gives them the turquoise skull as a token. Then they perish."

"How do they perish?"

"Nay, Señor, I cannot tell you. There was an unworthy brother of our order who was charmed by this *succuba*, and fell away from his vows. In due time, as is her custom, she gave him the turquoise skull. He bore it to his cell, and he was found next morning seated before it—dead."

"And the skull?"

"We sprinkled it with holy water, and conjured the evil spirit who dwelt therein to depart. But she came, the accursed one, and bore it away. Ay, my son, bolts and bars and stone walls could not keep her out of the House of the Star. She appeared like a demon in our midst, and disappeared with the skull. We buried Fray Anselm at midnight. May his soul find peace!"

At the conclusion of this story the friar betook himself to his prayers and his rosary; and, seeing that my presence was distasteful, I left him to his devotions.



“ An instrument of evil possessed by this creature.”

This was the first I had heard of the turquoise skull, but I was to hear of it again within an hour. This time it was from a *lépero*. There was no connection between monk and vagabond, yet both spoke of the same thing. Fate is fond of duplicating incidents. My acquaintance with Don Panchito Diaz de Grijalva—for so he styled himself—began by my saving his life. The *lépero* was crossing the road, when a stallion beyond the control of its rider dashed round the corner. Had I not instinctively rushed forward and dragged Don Panchito out of harm's way, assuredly he would have been trampled to death. This he recognized, for, having devoutly crossed himself, he shook his fist at the flying steed, and advanced towards me with a lordly air.

"I lay myself at your illustrious feet, Señor," said he in the stately Spanish tongue. "You are my preserver. All I have is yours."

The gift was no princely one, for his whole wardrobe could have been purchased for half-a-crown. His skin was as ingrained with dirt as were his clothes. Beyond a pair of leathern breeches, a ragged shirt, and a cloak, he wore nothing worth mentioning save a tattered sombrero, which he held in his hand during our interview. With his evil eyes, his shining teeth, and his long matted hair, he appeared to be anything but a desirable acquaintance. But, in nowise conscious of his defects, he rolled a cigarette and straddled impudently before me. A finer specimen of the gaol-bird I never beheld, and as I was in no way desirous of continuing the acquaintance I muttered some acknowledgment of his words and turned to go. This, however, he would not permit.

"Do my eyes deceive me," said he, stepping back a pace, "or do I indeed behold the renowned and noble Señor Don Francisco, who honours our city with his magnificent presence?"

I admitted the identity, and turned my back upon him as before; but with no better result.

"Nay, Señor," said he reproachfully, "you must allow Don Panchito Diaz de Grijalva to pay his debts. I owe you my life: permit me to save that of your illustrious friend."

"What is that you say?" I asked, considerably startled.

"Don Henriquez is devoted to Lola Tepeaca. Let him beware, lest she give to him the turquoise skull."

"That skull again! What do you know about it?"

"Everything, your lordship. Was it not I who brought the skull to Lola from the holy hermit Felix, who dwells in yonder mountains? Assuredly it was. Eh, Señor! know you not that he who possesses the turquoise skull surely dies?"

"How does he die?"

"Truly I know not, Señor. It is said that a fiend who slays dwells within the skull; but of the truth of this I know nothing. Four days was I carrying it from the hills, yet still I am alive."

"And Lola, who possesses it; she is alive also."

"The father of sin does not kill his best soldiers, Don Francisco: the demon who dwells within the skull permits her to live and to work harm. Yet," added Panchito, raising a significant forefinger, "twelve has he slain. Beware, Señor, and let not your illustrious friend take the love gift, lest he make the thirteenth."

And with this Panchito took his departure, while I hurried back to the hotel, filled with alarm at the dangers hinted at by Fray Benito and the *lépero*. Both had warned me, in words almost identical, against the turquoise skull. And although I was not sufficiently superstitious to believe in the existence of this demon, yet the assurance that twelve men had fallen victims to the skull resolved me to warn Harry against accepting it from Lola. But my information had come too late, for when I opened the door there was the turquoise skull on the table, and over it bent my friend.

The sight fitted in so dramatically with the stories I had



"I . . . rushed forward and dragged Don Panchito out of harm's way."

heard, that it was impossible to suppress an ejaculation of surprise. Harry looked up, and laughed at my staring eyes and open mouth.

"Well, old fellow," he said cheerfully, "you look a bit off colour. Have you been sampling the wine of the country?"

"Where in the name of heaven did you get that infernal thing?" I stammered.

"Oh, this skull? Queer, isn't it? Lola gave it to me."

"I guessed as much: give it back to her at once."

"Come, now, Frank, don't try me too far; I thought we had settled all that this morning?"

Dropping into a chair without making a reply, I stared at the blue object on the table. It was a man's skull, completely encrusted with rough turquoises, save the cavities of the nose and eyes, which were filled in with Durango rubies. These red and jewelled orbs glittered in so uncanny a fashion as to cause me to suspect the presence of tin-foil. I am fairly self-controlled, but when I remembered how that gruesome skull, with its blue scalp and winking eyes, had caused in some unknown way the death of twelve men, I own that I was unnerved. Shaking and white, I clutched the table, whilst Harry eyed me in angry surprise.

"What the deuce is the matter, Frank? This skull——"

"Will cause your death. Give it back to Lola."

"The sun has been too strong for you," said Harry, with a clouded face; "go and lie down for an hour."

He was about to lift the skull, when I sprang up from my chair and dragged him back.

"Don't touch it, Harry. Fray Benito says——"

"Oh, so that old monk has been gossiping to you about Lola, has he? When I said that you knew him she told me how he hated her."

"Did she mention how this turquoise skull brought about the death of a priest?"

"No; nor would I have believed it if she had. How can this dead thing kill any man?"

"At all events it has killed twelve."

"Fray Benito again!"

"Yes, and not he only: a *lépero* I met with but an hour ago spoke with horror of that skull and of its owner."

"This is becoming interesting," said Harry, drawing his chair close to mine. "Tell me what they say, Frank."

Glad of the opportunity, I recounted the conversations of Fray Benito and the *lépero*. Harry listened attentively, but made no remark until I had finished. Then he shrugged his shoulders and laughed.

"I never heard such nonsense in my life," said he disdainfully. "It is a wonder to me how a sensible man like yourself can swallow such monstrous fables. Twelve men killed by that skull! Twelve fiddlesticks: it is merely a curious relic of a by-gone civilization: the head of some old Aztec or Toltec king embalmed and encrusted with gems. A hermit who knew Lola long before he retired from the world sent it to her as a present."

"Then why does she give it to you?"

"There is some secret connected with it, which she has asked me to discover if possible. Look here."

He handed me a slip of paper, on which were two lines written in Spanish. Having a fair knowledge of the language and a capacity for rhyme, I improvised upon them an English couplet:—

"Find out my secret, and you then shall win
Eternal happiness from that within."

"In allusion to the beatitude of the victims, no doubt," said I bitterly. "Who is the author of these lines?"

"The hermit who sent the skull to Lola," replied Harry, taking back the paper. "She cannot discover the secret, so she has asked me to try."

"I trust it will not cost you dear, Harry."



“The turquoise skull was on the table, and seated before it . . . was my poor friend—dead!”

"Nonsense! what possible harm can this skull do to me? Look at it. It won't bite you."

Taking no heed of his flippancy, I closely examined the bone of contention. The stones were roughly imbedded in a kind of cement, and some were missing, while the base was fashioned crudely of unpolished wood. Externally there was no evidence to show that this ghastly object was of a harmful nature; yet, so influenced was I by the warnings of the monk and the *lépero*, that I still regarded it with horror. For over an hour I discussed with Harry the advisability of having nothing to do with Lola or her barbarous curiosity. But my efforts were vain, for he obstinately refused to restore the thing to its owner until he had discovered its secret. Wearing out by continuous expostulation, I ceased to argue further, and let him carry it to his bedroom. After all, I might be wrong. I must admit that the stories told by Fray Benito and Don Panchito were improbable, so that it was not surprising that a prosaic young man such as Harry should despise them. An imaginative strain, inherited from Highland ancestors, led me to accept with less hesitation these romances of a semi-civilized race. Nevertheless Harry's scepticism was not without its effect upon me, and I retired to rest a trifle ashamed of my championship. But in the morning—

When I entered his bedroom the turquoise skull was on the table, and seated before it, fully dressed, was my poor friend—dead! The number of victims was now thirteen.

PART II

THERE is no need to dilate upon my profound grief. Harry Carstone had been my closest friend at Oxford, as at Eton. Constant companionship had bound us together

by no common ties, and his unexpected death fell heavily upon me. I knew that it would fall more heavily still upon the old couple at Carstone Hall. To them I wrote all details of the death and burial, and then I addressed myself to the task of punishing Lola, whom I regarded as the indirect cause of the tragedy. It is at this point that I assume the principal *rôle*.

I have mentioned the funeral as having taken place at Zacatecas; for although I wished to have the corpse embalmed for transmission to England, such a course proved to be quite out of the question. Whatever the cause of death was—and I was utterly unable to determine it—the state of the body was such as to necessitate a hasty interment. In twenty-four hours the remains of my poor friend were committed to the earth, and I returned from the funeral, to take the turquoise skull to Lola and to compel her to confess by what means it had killed Harry. To my surprise the skull was gone.

“A Señora had come,” explained the landlord, “and had awaited the return of Don Francisco in the sitting-room. But after a time she had changed her mind and departed.”

I had no doubt that it was Lola who had visited my hotel for the purpose of recovering the turquoise skull. So long as it remained in her possession I could not hope to solve the mystery of Harry's death; and how to get it back I could not think. That the woman should dare to approach the scene of her crime angered me greatly, and confirmed my determination to remain for retributive justice. In turn Fray Benito and the *lépero* commiserated with me, but I took neither into my confidence. The first, a religious recluse, could be of no possible assistance, whilst I more than suspected the other of having an understanding with her whom I designed to punish.

Above all was it important that I should regain possession of this turquoise skull. If I could arrive at the secret hinted at in the couplet, I might succeed in discovering the

cause of the thirteen deaths, and so bring Lola within the clutches of the law. If legal measures proved unavailing I intended myself to mete out justice. She had killed Harry, and I would kill her. This savage resolve, entirely foreign to my nature, was the result of the terrible tragedy of the previous week. In some way I was determined to avenge the death of my friend.

Informed by Panchito that it was Lola's invariable custom to request her lovers to solve the secret of the skull, I hoped, by becoming one of these, to secure the instrument of her crimes.

Ignorant as I was of the way in which the thing accomplished its mission, there was the chance that I too might lose my life. But such a contingency did not deter me from prosecuting my design. With great care I might come off harmless; and, even did I not, I hoped before dying to destroy the skull, so that its list of victims should terminate with my death.

Thus prepared for good or evil, I called upon Lola, whom I found in the garden in a grass hammock, with her usual accessories of fan and cigarette. She exhibited no signs of confusion or fear, but, with an audacity which revolted me, she openly lamented the death of Harry. An accident, she termed it, as though she did not know full well the hideous truth.

"Alas, Señor, that I should have given Don Henriquez the turquoise skull!" she cried, with feigned sorrow; "but I knew not that it would cause his death."

"Yet you had experience to go upon, Señora."

Lola closed her fan with a snap, and became alive to the situation.

"What say you, Don Francisco?"

"Those twelve friends of yours who——"

"Who died," said Lola, unfurling her fan with unnecessary violence: "and what of that? Am I responsible for their deaths? Truly no. Why should I slay those who

love me? Oh yes, Señor, I know well that Fray Benito has been talking. *Succuba*, sorceress, demon, those are the words ever on his lips when he speaks of me."

"True enough: that turquoise skull has gained for you no enviable reputation."

"And wherefore? It is only a skull."

"But one that kills. Don Panchito——"

"Eh! you know him, that scamp?" she interrupted hastily: "he could have prevented all these deaths, for he knows the secret of the skull. I do not; hence I have asked those who loved me to discover it. They have died, and so I bear the blame; but it is all Panchito's fault."

"He procured the skull from Fray Felix, I believe?"

"Yes, Señor; he has been talking, I see. Tell me," she added curiously, "do you think that a demon dwells within the skull?"

"You know best, Señora."

"Nay, Don Francisco, you talk foolishly. I am quite in ignorance of the matter. The skull is a dead thing. It cannot slay."

"Nevertheless it does slay."

"Ay," she answered with a shrug; "but how, I know not."

"Why not destroy it?"

"I dare not," said she, in a frightened whisper. "It is the head of a dead king. Who knows what curses the dead may send? Nay, I shall not destroy it. All I wish is to discover its secret. But, alas! I cannot; and they who, to aid me, have sought this knowledge, have perished."

"Let me try, Señora."

"Thou, Don Francisco? No, no: thirteen have died in the quest. Let there be no more. Think of your poor friend. Ah me! how I have wept at his fate!"

This affected sorrow and feigned ignorance did not deceive me. I saw that in truth she was overjoyed at my

offer, but feared to accept it too readily, lest she might fall into a trap.



“What say you, Don Francisco?”

When I thought of how she had caused Harry's death I could have slain her then and there. But I determined to

punish her in a more deliberate fashion. I therefore persisted in my offer ; and after much hesitation she accepted it. Descending to the *patio* with the skull under my cloak, I heard a low laugh of satisfaction. It was Lola rejoicing over her success in adding a fourteenth victim to her list.

"To-day to you, to-morrow to me," muttered I to myself.

On the way to my hotel I met with Don Panchito. He planted himself in my way, and, catching sight of the skull, he touched it significantly with his finger.

"Does Lola wish you also to die?" said he. "Give it back, Don Francisco. There is death under those blue stones."

"Not if you tell me the secret, Panchito."

"Most illustrious Señor, you saved my life, and I would most willingly save yours. But I swear by the Virgin that I know not the secret. Who says so lies."

"Then Lola lies."

Panchito twirled his cigarette with a contemptuous smile. He had evidently a bad opinion of the lady.

"Does she do aught else but lie, your worship? Eh! and what says she of the skull?"

"Very little. But she asked me to search for a spring which opens it."

"Exactly, Señor. She is too wise to search for the spring herself."

"There you are wrong. She has done so and failed."

The *lépero* looked at me dubiously. My unaccountable defence of Lola led him to mistake my feelings towards her.

"Do you love Lola?"

"Nay, Panchito ; I abhor the witch. I take this skull to learn its secret. I hope to punish her for slaying my friend."

"Good. Did I know the secret, the knowledge would be yours. But you are as wise as I, Señor. Yet, this much I can speak. In searching for the spring, should you feel pain or see blood, you die."

Before I could demand an explanation Panchito folded his cloak around him and disappeared. He had a way of coming and going which savoured of magic. On this occasion I resented his unexpected vanishment, for it struck me that he hinted more than he chose to tell. However, his advice was worth taking ; and when I unpacked the skull in my sitting-room I was particularly careful to handle it lightly. The Angelus was ringing before I could persuade myself into attempting the solution of this problem.

Before proceeding to an examination, I laid an axe on the table, for, if all other means failed, I was resolved to smash open the skull and thus roughly end the mystery. Thus prepared, I sat down and gently fingered the turquoise scalp in search of the spring. My sense of touch is unusually delicate, but, though I felt line after line of the stones, I could find no projecting knob to press. Failing so far, I examined the ruby eyes, the wooden base, and lastly the ruby nose. The gems of this latter were particularly irregular in their setting. Being ambidexter, I held the skull with my right hand and pressed hard with the forefinger of the left. Suddenly I felt a thrill of pain, and withdrew my finger to see a tiny globule of blood swelling on the tip. In an instant I remembered Panchito's warning. It explained itself. Blood-poisoning ! That very instant I chopped off my forefinger with the axe, before the venom had time to pass the middle joint, and, with my maimed hand wrapped in a handkerchief, I raced out of the hotel in search of a doctor.

When I returned, white with pain and loss of blood, I found the room occupied. Lola, frowning and surprised, stood looking at the severed finger on the table. She had come to survey my body and to recover the skull. My unexpected entrance caused her to utter an ejaculation ; but whether of regret, of wrath, or of surprise merely, I was too perturbed to notice.

" You see I am still alive, Señora ; and I know now how

my poor friend died. You know also, you infamous creature!"

"Why did you cut it off?" she stammered, still looking at the severed finger.

"To save my life. Else would I now be dead, and you would have taken back your accursed turquoise skull, until you inveigled a new victim within your toils. But this ends it: no more shall die."

Before she could guess my intent, I took up the axe and with one stroke cleaved the skull in twain. Lola screamed and hid her face. From the interior of the accursed thing poured a glittering stream of jewels. Diamonds, rubies, sapphires—all kinds of gems—tinkled out on to the table, and rapped like small shot on to the floor.

The Spanish woman stood aghast at the sight. With a pious exclamation she stooped to pick them up.

"No," I cried: "no, wretch! Look here—not there."

I thrust forward the right hemisphere of the skull, and displayed the wicked mechanism of the interior. A snake's fang, concealed at the back of the nose, curved itself to the surface, and finally emerged between two rubies. At the least pressure this spike, keen as a thorn, ejected venom. This, collected in a small bag, was attached to the root of the fang, so that the poison could trickle drop by drop to the deadly point. Never was there so ingeniously fiendish an invention, and I wondered what devil could have designed it.

"Felix!" she gasped, looking white and sick: "he then intended my death. Ah, what mercy that I touched not the evil thing!"

"It was a pity you did not," said I savagely, "for then thirteen men might be alive still."

"I did not know of this, Señor; I swear I did not. Felix loved me, and fled to a hermitage because I loved another. He sent me the turquoise skull as a gift, saying that I should find eternal happiness if I succeeded in opening



“ That very instant I chopped off my forefinger with the axe.”

it. I was afraid, Señor. I thought there was danger, and so I touched not the thing, and asked my friends to open it. But you, Don Francisco, have discovered the secret."

"Ay, at the cost of my friend's life and my own finger. Leave those jewels!" I added, as she again bent to pick them up.

"They are mine," she cried defiantly. "Felix sent them to me."

"He sent you death, not jewels," I retorted, angered at her heartlessness. "Leave them: you shall not take one with you."

She looked wrathfully at the floor and then at me. I was determined to punish her for her callousness, but I saw that I should have to resort to strong measures to do so.

"Out, you infamous creature—out!"

Lola saw the barrel of my revolver pointed at her, and, with a gasp of terror, she fled from the room. That was the last I saw of her.

I took the skull and jewels to Fray Benito, and told him my story. He did not evince much astonishment at it. Being a Mexican and a confessor, he was well aware of the devilments of his countrymen.

"I knew this Felix," he said gravely: "he was a wild and reckless youth, and he vowed to punish this daughter of sin for her treatment of him. He became a recluse, and while in the mountains he discovered a cave wherein the Aztecs laid their dead chiefs. This is the skull of some mummy, adorned and packed with gems after their barbarous fashion."

"But the poisonous fang, Fray?"

"No doubt Felix placed it there for his revenge. He judged that the evil woman would take his advice and press the skull to find the supposed spring. One touch of that fang, and she would die. But she was too cunning to venture, Don Francisco. From her knowledge of the

sender's character, she suspected danger, and so she let others die for her."

"And the jewels?"

"Felix probably found them in the cave of the dead. They were of no use to him; doubtless he placed them in the cavity of the skull to embitter the dying moments of her he hated."

"I don't understand."

"See you, Señor. Felix concluded that Lola Tepeaca would touch the snake-tooth and thus open the skull and meet her death at the same time. Knowing her greed, it would be an additional pang for her to see these jewels which she could not live to enjoy."

"What a fiendish idea!"

"Ay, my son: human nature is very wicked. Do you intend to keep the jewels?"

"No," I answered, with a shudder; "they would constantly remind me of my poor friend's death. You can make what use of them you please, father. Yet I shall keep a few, with which to reward Panchito, without whose warning I had now been dead."

Fray Benito accepted the gift, and now Our Lady of the Star possesses a fine necklace of variegated gems, which is the wonder of all visitors. They would wonder still more did they but know the history attached to it.

I could do nothing to punish Lola further than depriving her of the jewels. The Mexican lawyer to whom I submitted the case assured me that the evidence was too indefinite to prove her guilty.

On moral grounds she surely merited death, but legally speaking she was as assuredly innocent. So she escaped with her life. I often wonder whether she went to the cave of Felix to cajole him into giving her fresh gems. If she did I have no doubt he killed her. A man capable of inventing such a death-trap as the turquoise skull would not hesitate to do what it had failed to accomplish.

Once again I heard of Lola. It was from Don Panchito, who accompanied me to the railway station on the day I left Zacatecas.

"It is just as well you are going, Señor," said he significantly: "Lola is wild at the loss of the turquoise skull and its jewels. She asked me to knife you, but I refused. Did you not save my life, and have you not given me precious stones? Still, Señor, others may not feel as I do, and the cursed woman may cause you to lose your life as well as your finger."

I quite believed it. A woman who could doom thirteen men to death for the gratification of her curiosity, would not stick at putting the fourteenth out of the way. I have often regretted I did not shoot her at our last interview, and so rid the world of a demon. But if she is in existence, the turquoise skull is not. Neither is the forefinger of my left hand.

THE GREEN-STONE GOD AND THE STOCK-BROKER

AS a rule, the average detective gets twice the credit he deserves. I am not talking of the novelist's miracle-monger, but of the flesh and blood reality who is liable to err, and who frequently proves such liability. You can take it as certain that a detective who sets down a clean run and no hitch as entirely due to his astucity, is young in years, and still younger in experience. Older men, who have been bamboozled a hundred times by the craft of criminality, recognize the influence of Chance to make or mar. There you have it! Nine times out of ten, Chance does more in clinching a case than all the dexterity and mother-wit of the man in charge. The exception must be engineered by an infallible apostle. Such a one is unknown to me—out of print.

This opinion, based rather on collective experience than on any one episode, can be substantiated by several incontrovertible facts. In this instance, one will suffice. Therefore, I take the Brixton case to illustrate Chance as a factor in human affairs. Had it not been for that Maori fetish—but such rather ends than begins the story, therefore it were wise to dismiss it for the moment. Yet that piece of green-stone hanged—a person mentioned hereafter.

Missing Page

When Mr. and Mrs. Paul Vincent set up housekeeping at Ulster Lodge they were regarded as decided acquisitions to Brixton society. She, pretty and musical; he, smart in looks, moderately well off, and an excellent tennis-player. Their progenitors, his father and her mother (both since deceased), had lived a life of undoubted middle-class respectability. The halo thereof still envied their children, who were, in consequence of such inherited grace and their own individualisms, much sought after by genteel Brixtonians. Moreover, this popular couple were devoted to each other, and even after three years of marriage they posed still as lovers. This was as it should be, and by admiring friends and relations the Vincents were regarded as paragons of matrimonial perfection. Vincent was a stockbroker; therefore he passed most of his time in the City.

Judge, then, of the commotion, when pretty Mrs. Vincent was discovered in the study, stabbed to the heart. So aimless a crime were scarce imaginable. She had many friends, no known enemies, yet she came to this tragic end. Closer examination revealed that the escritoire had been broken into, and Mr. Vincent declared himself the poorer by two hundred pounds. Primarily, therefore, robbery was the sole object, but, by reason of Mrs. Vincent's interference, the thief had been converted into a murderer.

So excellently had the assassin chosen his time, that such choice argued a close acquaintance with the domestic economy of Ulster Lodge. The husband was detained in town till midnight; the servants (cook and housemaid), on leave to attend wedding festivities, were absent till eleven o'clock. Mrs. Vincent therefore was absolutely alone in the house for six hours, during which period the crime had been committed. The servants discovered the body of their unfortunate mistress, and raised the alarm at once. Later on Vincent arrived, to find his wife dead, his house in possession of the police, and the two servants in hysterics.

For that night nothing could be done, but at dawn a move was made towards elucidating the mystery. At this point I come into the story.

Instructed at nine o'clock to take charge of the case, by ten I was on the spot noting details and collecting



“Mrs. Vincent was discovered.”

evidence. Beyond removal of the body nothing had been disturbed, and the study was in precisely the same condition as when the crime was discovered. I examined carefully the apartment, and afterwards interrogated the cook,

the housemaid, and, lastly, the master of the house. The result gave me slight hope of securing the assassin.

The room (a fair-sized one, looking out on to a lawn between house and road) was furnished in cheap bachelor fashion. An old-fashioned desk placed at right angles to the window, a round table reaching nigh the sill, two arm-chairs, three of the ordinary cane-seated kind, and on the mantelpiece an arrangement of pipes, pistols, boxing-gloves, and foils. One of these latter was missing.

A single glimpse showed how terrible a struggle had taken place before the murderer had overpowered his victim. The tablecloth lay disorderly on the floor, two of the lighter chairs were overturned, and the desk, with several drawers open, was hacked about considerably. No key was in the door-lock which faced the escritoire, and the window-snick was fastened securely.

Further search resulted in the following discoveries:—

1. A hatchet used for chopping wood (found near the desk).
2. A foil with the button broken off (lying under the table).
3. A green-stone idol (edged under the fender).

The cook (defiantly courageous by reason of brandy) declared that she had left the house at four o'clock on the previous day, and had returned close on eleven. The back door (to her surprise) was open. With the housemaid she went to inform her mistress of this fact, and found the body lying midway between door and fireplace. At once she called in the police. Her master and mistress were a most attached couple, and (so far as she knew) they had no enemies.

Similar evidence was obtained from the housemaid, with the additional information that the hatchet belonged to the wood-shed. The other rooms were undisturbed.

Poor young Vincent was so broken down by the tragedy that he could hardly answer my questions with calmness. Sympathizing with his natural grief, I interrogated him as

delicately as was possible, and I am bound to admit that he replied with remarkable promptitude and clearness.

“What do you know of this unhappy affair?” I asked, when we were alone in the drawing-room. He refused to stay in the study, as was surely natural under the circumstances.



“I examined the apartment carefully.”

“Absolutely nothing,” he replied. “I went to the City yesterday at ten in the morning, and, as I had business to do, I wired my wife I would not return till midnight. She was full of health and spirits when I last saw her, but now——” Incapable of further speech he made a gesture of despair. Then, after a pause, he added, “Have you any theory on the subject?”

"Judging from the wrecked condition of the desk I should say robbery——"

"Robbery?" he interrupted, changing colour. "Yes, that was the motive. I had two hundred pounds locked up in the desk."

"In gold or notes?"

"The latter. Four fifties. Bank of England."

"You are sure they are missing?"

"Yes. The drawer in which they were placed is smashed to pieces."

"Did any one know you had placed two hundred pounds therein?"

"No! Save my wife, and yet—ah!" he said, breaking off abruptly, "that is impossible."

"What is impossible?"

"I will tell you when I hear your theory."

"You got that notion out of novels of the shilling sort," I answered dryly; "every detective doesn't theorize on the instant. I haven't any particular theory that I know of. Whosoever committed this crime must have known your wife was alone in the house, and that there was two hundred pounds locked up in that desk. Did you mention these two facts to any one?"

Vincent pulled his moustache in some embarrassment. I guessed by the action that he had been indiscreet.

"I don't wish to get an innocent person into trouble," he said at length, "but I did mention it—to a man called Roy."

"For what reason?"

"It is a bit of a story. I lost two hundred to a friend at cards, and drew four fifties to pay him. He went out of town, so I locked up the money in my desk for safety. Last night Roy came to me at the club, much agitated, and asked me to loan him a hundred. Said it meant ruin else. I offered him a cheque, but he wanted cash. I then told him I had left two hundred at home, so, at the moment, I

could not lay my hand on it. He asked if he could not go to Brixton for it, but I said the house was empty, and——”

“But it wasn’t empty,” I interrupted.

“I believed it would be! I knew the servants were going to that wedding, and I thought my wife, instead of spending a lonely evening, would call on some friend.”

“Well, and after you told Roy that the house was empty?”

“He went away, looking awfully cut up, and swore he must have the money at any price. But it is quite impossible he could have anything to do with this.”

“I don’t know. You told him where the money was, and that the house was unprotected, as you thought. What was more probable than that he should have come down with the intention of stealing the money? If so, what follows? Entering by the back door, he takes the hatchet from the wood-shed to open the desk. Your wife, hearing a noise, discovers him in the study. In a state of frenzy, he snatches a foil from the mantelpiece and kills her, then decamps with the money. There is your theory, and a mighty bad one—for Roy.”

“You don’t intend to arrest him?” asked Vincent quickly.

“Not on insufficient evidence! If he committed the crime and stole the money it is certain that, sooner or later, he will change the notes. Now, if I had the numbers——”

“Here are the numbers,” said Vincent, producing his pocket-book. “I always take the numbers of such large notes. But surely,” he added, as I copied them down—“surely you don’t think Roy guilty?”

“I don’t know. I should like to know his movements on that night.”

“I cannot tell you. He saw me at the Chestnut Club about seven o’clock, and left immediately afterwards. I kept my business appointment, went to the Alhambra, and then returned home.”

"Give me Roy's address, and describe his personal appearance."

"He is a medical student, and lodges at No. —, Gower Street. Tall, fair-haired—a good-looking young fellow."

"And his dress last night?"

"He wore evening dress, concealed by a fawn-coloured overcoat."

I duly noted these particulars, and I was about to take my leave, when I recollected the green-stone idol. It was so strange an object to find in prosaic Brixton that I could not help thinking it must have come there by accident.

"By the way, Mr. Vincent," said I, producing the monstrosity, "is this green-stone god your property?"

"I never saw it before," replied he, taking it in his hand. "Is it—ah!" he added, dropping the idol, "there is blood on it!"

"'Tis the blood of your wife, sir! If it does not belong to you, it does to the murderer. From the position in which this was found I fancy it slipped out of his breast-pocket as he stood over his victim. As you see, it is stained with blood. He must have lost his presence of mind, else he would not have left behind so damning a piece of evidence. This idol, sir, will hang the assassin of Mrs. Vincent!"

"I hope so; but, unless you are sure of Roy, do not mar his life by accusing him of this crime."

"I certainly should not arrest him without sufficient proof," I answered promptly, and so took my departure.

Vincent showed up very well in this preliminary conversation. Much as he desired to punish the criminal, yet he was unwilling to subject Roy to possibly unfounded suspicions. Had I not forced the club episode out of him I doubt whether he would have told it. As it was, the information gave me the necessary clue. Roy alone knew that the notes were in the escritoire, and imagined (owing to the mistake of Vincent) that the house was empty. De-

terminated to have the money at any price (his own words), he intended but robbery, till the unexpected appearance of Mrs. Vincent merged the lesser in the greater crime.

My first step was to advise the Bank that four fifty-pound notes, numbered so and so, were stolen, and that the thief or his deputy would probably change them within a



“ ‘Tis the blood of your wife.’ ”

reasonable period. I did not say a word about the crime, and kept all special details out of the newspapers; for as the murderer would probably read up the reports, so as to shape his course by the action of the police, I judged it wiser that he should know as little as possible. Those minute press notices do more harm than good. They

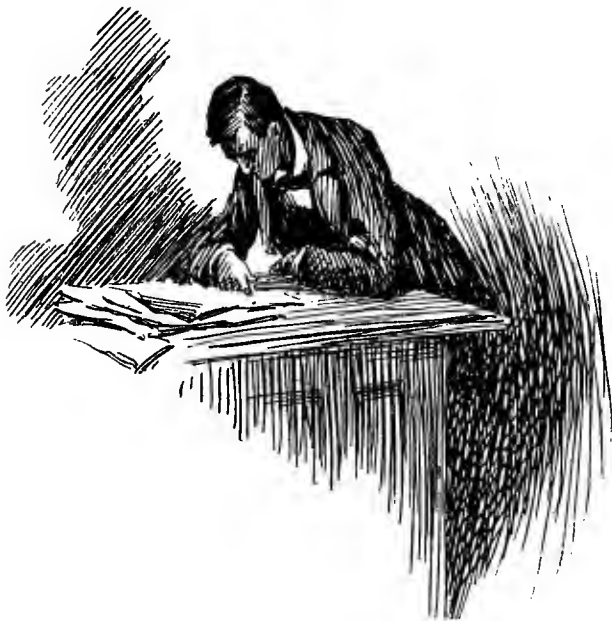
gratify the morbid appetite of the public, and put the criminal on his guard. Thereby the police work in the dark, but he—thanks to the posting up of special reporters—knows the doings of the law, and baffles it accordingly.

The green-stone idol worried me considerably. I wanted to know how it had got into the study of Ulster Lodge. When I knew that, I could nail my man. But there was considerable difficulty to overcome before such knowledge was available. Now a curiosity of this kind is not a common object in this country. A man who owns one must have come from New Zealand, or have obtained it from a New Zealand friend. He could not have picked it up in London. If he did, he would not carry it constantly about with him. It was therefore my idea that the murderer had received the idol from a friend on the day of the crime. That friend, to possess such an idol, must have been in communication with New Zealand. The chain of thought is somewhat complicated, but it began with curiosity about the idol, and ended in my looking up the list of steamers going to the Antipodes. Then I carried out a little design which need not be mentioned at this moment. In due time it will fit in with the hanging of Mrs. Vincent's assassin. Meanwhile, I followed up the clue of the bank-notes, and left the green-stone idol to evolve its own destiny. Thus I had two strings to my bow.

The crime was committed on the twentieth of June, and on the twenty-third two fifty-pound notes, with numbers corresponding to those stolen, were paid into the Bank of England. I was astonished at the little care exercised by the criminal in concealing his crime, but still more so when I learned that the money had been banked by a very respectable solicitor. Furnished with the address, I called on this gentleman. Mr. Maudsley received me politely, and he had no hesitation in telling me how the notes had come

into his possession. I did not state my primary reason for the inquiry.

"I hope there is no trouble about these notes," said he, when I explained my errand. "I have had sufficient already."



"Looking up the list of steamers."

"Indeed, Mr. Maudsley, and in what way?"

For answer he touched the bell, and when it was answered, "Ask Mr. Ford to step this way," he said. Then, turning to me, "I must reveal what I had hoped to keep

secret, but I trust the revelation will remain with yourself."

"That is as I may decide after hearing it. I am a detective, Mr. Maudsley, and, you may be sure, I do not make these inquiries out of idle curiosity."

Before he could reply, a slender, weak-looking young man, nervously excited, entered the room. This was Mr. Ford, and he looked from me to Maudsley with some apprehension.

"This gentleman," said his employer, not unkindly, "comes from Scotland Yard about the money you paid me two days ago."

"It is all right, I hope?" stammered Ford, turning red and pale and red again.

"Where did you get the money?" I asked, parrying this question.

"From my sister."

I started when I heard this answer, and with good reason. My inquiries about Roy had revealed that he was in love with a hospital nurse whose name was Clara Ford. Without doubt she had obtained the notes from Roy, after he had stolen them from Ulster Lodge. But why the necessity of the robbery?

"Why did you get a hundred pounds from your sister?" I asked Ford.

He did not answer, but looked appealingly at Maudsley. That gentleman interposed.

"We must make a clean breast of it, Ford," he said, with a sigh; "if you have committed a second crime to conceal the first, I cannot help you. This time matters are not at my discretion."

"I have committed no crime," said Ford desperately, turning to me. "Sir, I may as well admit that I embezzled one hundred pounds from Mr. Maudsley to pay a gambling debt. He kindly and most generously consented to overlook the delinquency if I replaced the money. Not having it myself I asked my sister. She, a poor hospital nurse,

had not the amount. Yet, as non-payment meant ruin to me, she asked a Mr. Julian Roy to help her. He at once agreed to do so, and gave her two fifty-pound notes. She handed them to me, and I gave them to Mr. Maudsley, who paid them into the bank."

This, then, was the reason of Roy's remark. He did not refer to his own ruin, but to that of Ford. To save



"A weak-looking young man entered the room."

this unhappy man, and for love of the sister, he had committed the crime. I did not need to see Clara Ford, but at once made up my mind to arrest Roy. The case was perfectly clear, and I was fully justified in taking this course. Meanwhile I made Maudsley and his clerk promise silence, as I did not wish Roy to be put on his guard by Miss Ford, through her brother.

“Gentlemen,” I said, after a few moments’ pause, “I cannot at present explain my reasons for asking these questions, as it would take too long, and I have no time to lose. Keep silent about this interview till to-morrow, and by that time you shall know all.”

“Has Ford got into fresh trouble?” asked Maudsley anxiously.

“No, but some one else has.”

“My sister,” began Ford faintly, when I interrupted him at once.

“Your sister is all right, Mr. Ford. Pray trust in my discretion; no harm shall come to her or to you, if I can help it—but, above all, be silent.”

This they readily promised, and I returned to Scotland Yard, quite satisfied that Roy would get no warning. The evidence was so clear that I could not doubt the guilt of Roy. Else how had he come in possession of the notes? Already there was sufficient proof to hang him, yet I hoped to clinch the certainty by proving his ownership of the green-stone idol. It did not belong to Vincent, or to his dead wife, yet some one must have brought it into the study. Why not Roy, who, to all appearances, had committed the crime, the more so as the image was splashed with the victim’s blood? There was no difficulty in obtaining a warrant, and with this I went off to Gower Street.

Roy loudly protested his innocence. He denied all knowledge of the crime and of the idol. I expected the denial, but I was astonished at the defence he put forth. It was very ingenious, but so manifestly absurd that it did not shake my belief in his guilt. I let him talk himself out—which perhaps was wrong—but he would not be silent, and then I took him off in a cab.

“I swear I did not commit the crime,” he said passionately; “no one was more astonished than I at the news of Mrs. Vincent’s death.”

"Yet you were at Ulster Lodge on the night in question?"

"I admit it," he replied frankly; "were I guilty I would not do so. But I was there at the request of Vincent."

"I must remind you that all you say now will be used in evidence against you."

"I don't care! I must defend myself. I asked Vincent for a hundred pounds, and——"

"Of course you did, to give to Miss Ford."

"How do you know that?" he asked sharply.

"From her brother, through Maudsley. He paid the notes supplied by you into the bank. If you wanted to conceal your crime you should not have been so reckless."

"I have committed no crime," retorted Roy fiercely. "I obtained the money from Vincent, at the request of Miss Ford, to save her brother from being convicted for embezzlement."

"Vincent denies that he gave you the money!"

"Then he lies. I asked him at the Chestnut Club for one hundred pounds. He had not that much on him, but said that two hundred were in his desk at home. As it was imperative that I should have the money on the night, I asked him to let me go down for it."

"And he refused!"

"He did not. He consented, and gave me a note to Mrs. Vincent, instructing her to hand me over a hundred pounds. I went to Brixton, got the money in two fifties, and gave them to Miss Ford. When I left Ulster Lodge, between eight and nine, Mrs. Vincent was in perfect health, and quite happy."

"An ingenious defence," said I doubtfully, "but Vincent absolutely denies that he gave you the money."

Roy stared hard at me to see if I were joking. Evidently the attitude of Vincent puzzled him greatly.

"That is ridiculous," said he quietly; "he wrote a note to his wife instructing her to hand me the money."

"Where is that note?"

"I gave it to Mrs. Vincent."

"It cannot be found," I answered; "if such a note were in her possession it would now be in mine."

"Don't you believe me?"

"How can I against the evidence of those notes and the denial of Vincent?"

"But he surely does not deny that he gave me the money?"

"He does."

"He must be mad," said Roy, in dismay; "one of my best friends, and to tell so great a falsehood. Why, if——"

"You had better be silent," I said, weary of this foolish talk; "if what you say is true, Vincent will exonerate you from complicity in the crime. If things occurred as you say, there is no sense in his denial."

This latter remark was made to stop the torrent of his speech. It was not my business to listen to incriminating declarations, or to ingenious defences. All that sort of thing is for judge and jury; therefore I ended the conversation as above, and marched off my prisoner. Whether the birds of the air carry news I do not know, but they must have been busy on this occasion, for next morning every newspaper in London was congratulating me on my clever capture of the supposed murderer. Some detectives would have been gratified by this public laudation—I was not. Roy's passionate protestations of innocence made me feel uneasy, and I doubted whether, after all, I had the right man under lock and key. Yet the evidence was strong against him. He admitted having been with Mrs. Vincent on the fatal night, he admitted possession of two fifty-pound notes. His only defence was the letter of the stockbroker, and this was missing—if, indeed, it had ever been written.

Vincent was terribly upset by the arrest of Roy. He liked the young man and he had believed in his innocence so

far as was possible. But in the face of such strong evidence, he was forced to believe him guilty: yet he blamed himself severely that he had not lent the money, and so averted the catastrophe.

"I had no idea that the matter was of such moment," he said to me, "else I would have gone down to Brixton my-



"Marched off my prisoner."

self and have given him the money. Then his frenzy would have spared my wife, and himself a death on the scaffold."

"What do you think of his defence?"

"It is wholly untrue. I did not write a note, nor did I tell him to go to Brixton. Why should I, when I fully believed no one was in the house?"

"It was a pity you did not go home, Mr. Vincent, instead of to the Alhambra."

"It was a mistake," he assented, "but I had no idea Roy would attempt the robbery. Besides, I was under engagement to go to the theatre with my friend Dr. Monson."

"Do you think that idol belongs to Roy?"

"I can't say, I never saw it in his possession. Why?"

"Because I firmly believe that if Roy had not the idol in his pocket on that fatal night he is innocent. Oh, you look astonished, but the man who murdered your wife owns that idol."

The morning after this conversation a lady called at Scotland Yard, and asked to see me concerning the Brixton case. Fortunately, I was then in the neighbourhood, and, guessing who she was, I afforded her the interview she sought. When all left the room she raised her veil, and I saw before me a noble-looking woman, somewhat resembling Mr. Maudsley's clerk. Yet, by some contradiction of nature, her face was the more virile of the two.

"You are Miss Ford?" I said, guessing her identity.

"I am Clara Ford," she answered quietly. "I have come to see you about Mr. Roy."

"I am afraid nothing can be done to save him."

"Something must be done," she said passionately. "We are engaged to be married, and all a woman can do to save her lover I will do. Do you believe him to be guilty?"

"In the face of such evidence, Miss Ford——"

"I don't care what evidence is against him," she retorted; "he is as innocent of the crime as I am. Do you think that a man fresh from the committal of a crime would place the money won by that crime in the hands of the woman he professes to love? I tell you he is innocent."

"Mr. Vincent doesn't think so."

"Mr. Vincent!" said Miss Ford, with scornful emphasis. "Oh, yes! I quite believe *he* would think Julian guilty."

“Surely not if it were possible to think otherwise! He is, or rather was, a staunch friend to Mr. Roy.”

“So staunch that he tried to break off the match between us. Listen to me, sir. I have told no one before, but I tell you now. Mr. Vincent is a villain. He pretended to be the friend of Julian, and yet he dared to make proposals



“She raised the veil.”

to me—dishonourable proposals, for which I could have struck him. He, a married man, a pretended friend, wished me to leave Julian and fly with him.”

“Surely you are mistaken, Miss Ford. Mr. Vincent was most devoted to his wife.”

“He did not care at all for his wife,” she replied

steadily. "He was in love with me. To save Julian annoyance I did not tell him of the insults offered to me by Mr. Vincent. Now that Julian is in trouble by an unfortunate mistake, Mr. Vincent is delighted."

"It is impossible. I assure you Vincent is very sorry to——"

"You do not believe me," she said, interrupting. "Very well, I shall give you proof of the truth. Come to my brother's rooms in Bloomsbury. I shall send for Mr. Vincent, and if you are concealed you shall hear from his own lips how glad he is that my lover and his wife are removed from the path of his dishonourable passion."

"I will come, Miss Ford, but I think you are mistaken in Vincent."

"You shall see," she replied coldly. Then, with a sudden change of tone, "Is there no way of saving Julian? I am sure that he is innocent. Appearances are against him, but it was not he who committed the crime. Is there no way—no way?"

Moved by her earnest appeal, I produced the green-stone idol, and told her all I had done in connection with it. She listened eagerly, and readily grasped at the hope thus held out to her of saving Roy. When in possession of all the facts she considered in silence for some two minutes. At the end of that time she drew down her veil and prepared to take her departure.

"Come to my brother's rooms in Alfred Place, near Tottenham Court Road," said she, holding out her hand. "I promise you that there you shall see Mr. Vincent in his true character. Good-bye till Monday at three o'clock."

From the colour in her face and the bright light in her eye, I guessed that she had some scheme in her head for the saving of Roy. I think myself clever, but after that interview at Alfred Place I declare I am but a fool compared to this woman. She put two and two together, ferreted out unguessed-of evidence, and finally produced the most won-

derful result. When she left me at this moment the greenstone idol was in her pocket. With that she hoped to prove the innocence of her lover and the guilt of another person. It was the cleverest thing I ever saw in my life.

The inquest on the body of Mrs. Vincent resulted in a verdict of wilful murder against some person or persons



“ ‘Come to my brother’s room.’ ”

unknown. Then she was buried, and all London waited for the trial of Roy. He was brought up charged with the crime, reserved his defence, and in due course he was committed for trial. Meantime I called on Miss Ford at the appointed time, and found her alone.

“Mr. Vincent will be here shortly,” she said calmly. “I see Julian is committed for trial.”

"And he has reserved his defence."

"I shall defend him," said she, with a strange look in her face; "I am not afraid for him now. He saved my unhappy brother. I shall save him."

"Have you discovered anything?"

"I have discovered a good deal. Hush! That is Mr. Vincent," she added, as a cab drew up to the door. "Hide yourself behind this curtain, and do not appear until I give you the signal."

Wondering what she was about to do, I concealed myself as directed. The next moment Vincent was in the room, and then ensued one of the strangest of scenes. She received him coldly, and motioned him to a seat. Vincent was nervous, but she might have been of stone, so little emotion did she display.

"I have sent for you, Mr. Vincent," she said, "to ask for your help in releasing Julian."

"How can I help you?" he answered, in amazement—"willingly would I do so, but it is out of my power."

"I don't think it is!"

"I assure you, Clara," he began eagerly, when she cut him short.

"Yes, call me Clara! Say that you love me! Lie, like all men, and yet refuse to do what I wish."

"I am not going to help Julian to marry you," declared he sullenly. "You know that I love you—I love you dearly, I wish to marry you——"

"Is not that declaration rather soon after the death of your wife?"

"My wife is gone, poor soul, let her rest."

"Yet you loved her?"

"I never loved her," he said, rising to his feet. "I love you! From the first moment I saw you I loved you. My wife is dead! Julian Roy is in prison on a charge of murdering her. With these obstacles removed there is no reason why we should not marry."



"She advanced step by step."



"If I marry you," she said slowly, "will you help Julian to refute this charge?"

"I cannot! The evidence is too strong against him!"

"You know that he is innocent, Mr. Vincent."

"I do not! I believe that he murdered my wife."

"You believe that he murdered your wife," she reiterated, coming a step nearer and holding out the green-stone idol—"do you believe that he dropped this in the study when his hand struck the fatal blow?"

"I don't know!" he said, coolly glancing at the idol; "I never saw it before."

"Think again, Mr. Vincent—think again. Who was it that went to the Alhambra at eight o'clock with Dr. Monson, and met there the captain of a New Zealand steamer with whom he was acquainted?"

"It was I," said Vincent defiantly; "and what of that?"

"This!" she said in a loud voice. "This captain gave you the green-stone idol at the Alhambra, and you placed it in your breast-pocket. Shortly afterwards you followed to Brixton the man whose death you had plotted. You repaired to your house, killed your unhappy wife, who received you in all innocence, took the balance of the money, hacked the desk, and then dropped by accident this idol which convicts you of the crime."

During this speech she advanced step by step towards the wretched man, who, pale and anguished, retreated before her fury. He came right to my hiding-place, and almost fell into my arms. I had heard enough to convince me of his guilt, and the next moment I was struggling with him.

"It is a lie! a lie!" he said hoarsely, trying to escape.

"It is true!" said I, pinning him down. "From my soul I believe you to be guilty."

During the fight his pocket-book fell on the floor, and the papers therein were scattered. Miss Ford picked up one spotted with blood.

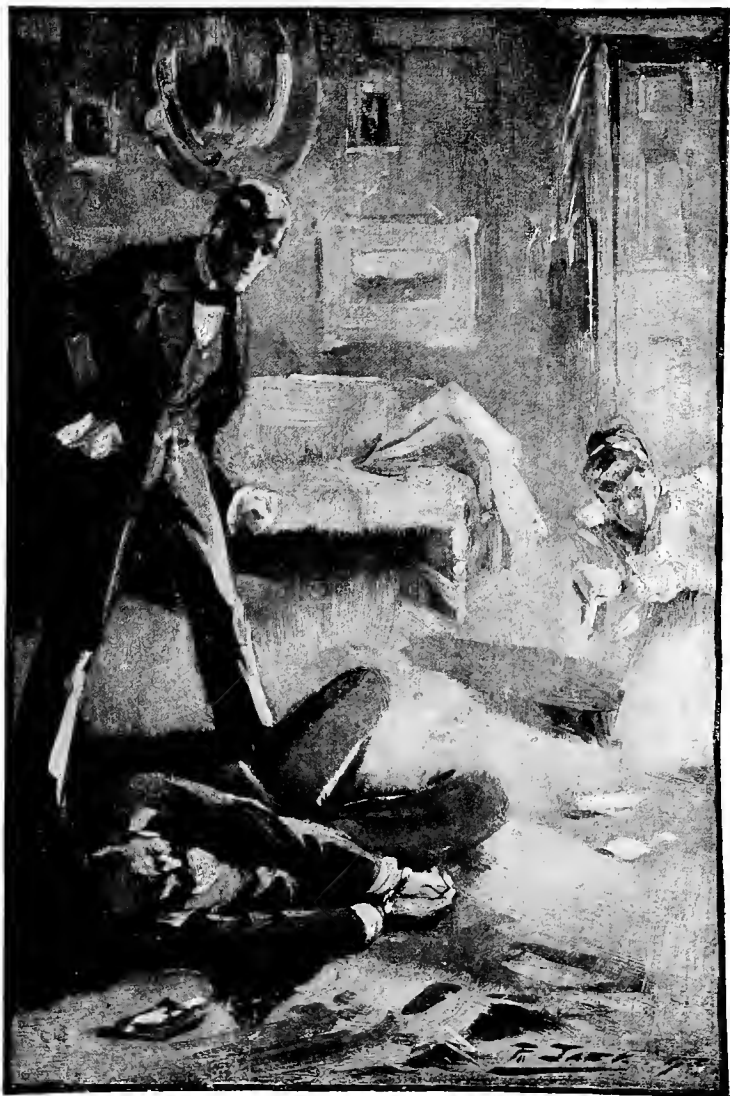
"The proof!" she said, holding it before us. "The proof that Julian spoke the truth. There is the letter written by you which authorized your unhappy wife to give him one hundred pounds."

Vincent saw that all was against him, and gave in without further struggles, like the craven he was.

"Fate is too strong for me," he said, when I snapped the handcuffs on his wrists. "I admit the crime. It was for love of you that I did it. I hated my wife, who was a drag on me, and I hated Roy, who loved you. In one sweep I thought to rid myself of both. His application for that money put the chance into my hand. I went to Brixton, I found that my wife had given the money as directed, and then I killed her with the foil snatched from the wall. I smashed the desk and overturned the chair, to favour the idea of the robbery, and then I left the house. Driving to a higher station than Brixton, I caught a train and was speedily back at the Alhambra. Monson never suspected my absence, thinking I was in a different corner of the house. I had thus an *alibi* ready. Had it not been for that letter, which I was fool enough to keep, and that infernal idol that dropped out of my pocket, I should have hanged Roy and married you. As it turns out, the idol has betrayed me. And now, sir," he added, turning to me, "you had better take me to gaol."

I did so there and then. After the legal formalities were gone through Julian Roy was released, and ultimately married Miss Ford. Vincent was hanged, as he well deserved to be, for so cowardly a crime. My reward was the green-stone god, which I keep as a memento of a very curious case. Some weeks later Miss Ford told me the way in which she had laid the trap.

"When you revealed your suspicions about the idol," she said, "I was convinced that Vincent had something to do with the crime. You mentioned Dr. Monson as having been with him at the Alhambra. He is one of the doctors



“ ‘It is true!’ said I, pinning him down.”

at the hospital in which I am employed. I asked him about the idol, and showed it to him. He remembered it being given to Vincent by the captain of the *Kaitangata*. The curious look of the thing had impressed itself on his memory. On hearing this I went to the docks and I saw the captain. He recognized the idol, and remembered giving it to Vincent. From what you told me I guessed the way in which the plot had been carried out, so I spoke to Vincent as you heard. Most of it was guesswork, and only when I saw that letter was I absolutely sure of his guilt. It was due to the green-stone god."

So I think, but to chance also. But for the accident of the idol dropping out of Vincent's pocket, Roy would have been hanged for a crime of which he was innocent. Therefore do I say that in nine cases out of ten chance does more to clinch a case than all the dexterity of the man in charge.

THE JESUIT AND THE MEXICAN COIN

“YOUR reputation as a detective is known in Devon,” said Lord Tormouth, “therefore I wish you to conduct the case. It could not be in better hands.”

“I feel flattered by your preference, my lord,” said I, “so I shall take charge of it with pleasure. But you must give me a free hand.”

“A free hand, and as much money as you require. I see too much of the Pope’s influence in England to grudge aught likely to keep the Kempion estates out of the priests’ hands.”

“Amen to that,” I answered, being a Protestant myself; “and now, my lord, give me your version of the affair.”

“It is now some six months old,” he replied, “and not being so young as I was I am apt to forget details. Roughly speaking, the story is as follows. Are you ready?”

“One moment; my note-book. Thank you! Now I am all attention.”

“James Kempion died some three years back, leaving his estates to Francis his son. The boy is now eighteen years of age, and he has a rent-roll of eight thousand a year. His father, like all the Kempions, was a Roman Catholic, and quite under the thumb of his confessor, Father Condy. Yet he defied the Church and the priests

Missing Page

sufficiently to marry a Protestant lady—Miss Lee, of Barnstaple. She died, poor soul, in giving birth to Francis, and with her last breath she implored Kempion to have the child brought up in the Anglican communion. Despite the wrath of Father Condy, this was done. Being a Protestant myself, and a firm friend to Kempion, I supported the lad. All went well till Kempion, while on a visit to his brother in Mexico, chose to marry a second time.”

“You did not mention the brother before?”

“My failing memory, sir. John Kempion, the brother of James, is a red-hot Papist, and at present owns the estates.”

“But what about the heir, Francis?”

“I am coming to that,” said Lord Tormouth grimly. “As I said, James Kempion married a second time a Mexican lady—I am not acquainted with her name or her family.”

“Of Spanish descent?”

“Of course! The fickle, faithless blood of Spain is in her veins. When Kempion brought her home, she and the boy got on together capitally. Then James died, and left his heir to the tender mercies of Father Condy and La Señora.”

“La Señora?”

“So she is called by the county side. When Kempion died John came back to the old place, and remained for two years and a half. At the end of that time Francis disappeared.”

“I thought you said he was drowned while bathing?”

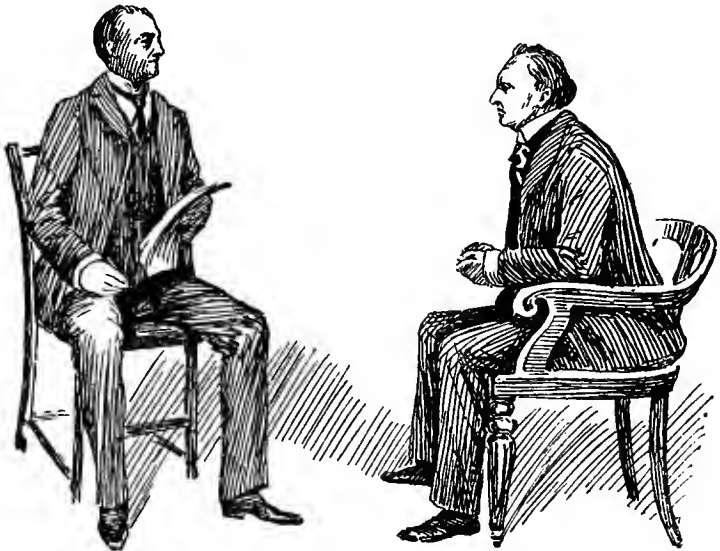
“That is the common report, with which I don't hold. One evening Francis told his stepmother that he was going to the beach for a swim in the moonlight. Since then he has not been seen. They found his clothes on the sands, and, as the current sweeps strongly round that point of the coast, it was supposed that he had been carried out to sea.”

“Then this idea of his death was generally accepted?”

“Yes; by all. Even by the lawyers. John Kempion, a Catholic—mark you, sir, a Catholic—was the next heir to the estates, and entered into possession. It is said,” concluded Lord Tormouth ironically, “that he intends to marry his brother’s widow.”

“I suppose he can do so?”

“What do I know of their heathen customs, sir! La



“‘One moment; my note-book.’”

Señora comes from Mexico, and John Kempion has lived there the greater part of his life. I am ignorant of their notions of morality, but I am certain that, when the year of mourning for Francis is out, there will be a match between John Kempion and La Señora. Then, as now, Father Condy will reign supreme, and use the moneys for the Church’s benefit.”

"Then you don't think Francis is dead?"

"No, I do not, and it is the truth of this which I wish you to prove. It is my opinion, sir," continued Tormouth, tapping me on the knee, "that the Jesuits carried off Francis so as to avert the disaster of a Protestant head to the Kempion family."

"They have murdered him, you think?"

"I don't go so far as that. I will do Father Condry the justice to say that outside his religion he is a kind-hearted man. No, sir, Francis Kempion is not dead! He is alive, but he has been spirited away by the Jesuits for their own ends."

"So you want me to find Francis Kempion?"

"Aye, sir! Spare neither time nor money, but bring back my dear boy."

"It is a difficult task you have set me, my lord," I answered ruefully. "However, I will do my best. Firstly, I should like to see the beach where the clothes were found."

"My servant shall take you there to-morrow."

"Secondly, it is necessary that I see the Kempion household."

"Humph! That is rather difficult. I am not on speaking terms with John. However, you can call on the pretext of looking at their picture gallery. While there you will doubtless see some of the family, and Father Condry. 'Tis a shabby method of getting inside the gates, but in this affair we must not be squeamish."

"Very good, my lord! I shall commence work to-morrow."

Lord Tormouth's seat is, as every one knows, situate on the north coast of Devon, within easy reach of Ilfracombe. It is built on a wooded hill which slopes down to a sandy estuary, and opposite rises another hill crowned by Kempion Hall. I had come down from London in response to his summons, and was not ill-pleased to find myself among

such beautiful scenery, even in December. Alas! though I did not then guess, I had but little time to sojourn in that rural paradise. The exigencies of the case sent me far across the ocean within a fortnight.

Next day, escorted by the confidential valet of Lord



“ It proved to be a Mexican peso.”

Tormouth, I crossed the estuary, and found myself on the long stretch of beach fringing the Kempion woods. A quarter of a mile's trudge brought us round a corner to a little bay, almost land-locked by the silt at the narrow mouth. Standing at the corner I could see the current

swirl in a curve and, following the indentations of the land, sweep out towards Lundy Island. It was from here, said the servant, that Francis Kempion had started on that fatal swim.

As I surveyed the place I saw at once the circumstances which gave rise to the doubts of Lord Tormouth. If Francis Kempion stepped into the water of the little bay he certainly would not be so rash as to venture into the current without noting the force of the sweep, as he must assuredly have done; he would surely have been content to paddle about the safe bay in place of risking his life in the outer waters. After this examination I was as certain as Tormouth that Kempion was not drowned. If so, he must have been drawn into the current, for I made sure that no man in his senses would have ventured in of his own free will.

The servant, a very particular man, pointed out the exact spot where the clothes had been found. I looked round carelessly enough, not expecting to find anything connected with the unfortunate gentleman. As six months had elapsed since his disappearance, this was hardly to be expected. My casual glances, however, picked out a discoloured coin lying lightly on the sand. It proved to be a Mexican peso, value four shillings and some odd pence. The discovery set me thinking, and engendered a theory which later on I unfolded to Lord Tormouth. Meanwhile I slipped the coin into my pocket, dismissed the servant as no longer necessary, and walked up the hill to Kempion Hall.

There was some difficulty in seeing the pictures, as the family were in residence. I represented that I was leaving the neighbourhood in twenty-four hours, so the ancient house-keeper consented that I should walk through the gallery. Mr. Kempion had gone to the Dower House, to see La Señora, said the garrulous old lady, and only Father Condy was within doors. She accompanied me to the picture

gallery, and reeled off her changeless tale of the Kempion glories. In the midst of such eloquence, a servant summoned her, and she left me, for the moment, to my own devices. I walked slowly around, and ultimately faced three portraits. Without doubt, they were those of James



“There was some difficulty in seeing the pictures.”

Kempion, his son Francis, and La Señora. The men were handsome, and the lady was a charming brunette, who smiled bewitchingly from the canvas.

“So that is Francis Kempion,” I said aloud, looking at the brave, boyish face.

"That is Francis Kempion," echoed a voice at my elbow. I turned, and saw the priest. He was a tall, well-set man, with a keen face and restless eyes. "What do you know about Francis Kempion?" said he sharply.

"Nothing, save that he was drowned," I answered—"at least, so says the village gossip."

"Yes, poor lad, he was—drowned," replied the Jesuit, bringing out the last word with an effort which cast discredit on his training.

"A Protestant, wasn't he, sir?" said I, keeping my eyes on the picture.

"The Kempions, sir, are devout sons of the true Church," he returned stiffly. "I perceive you are a stranger here." Then, in response to my bow, "May I inquire why you ask such a question?"

"Idle curiosity, sir, nothing more."

"And the general opinion is in favour of Francis Kempion's death by drowning?"

"Yes! Though for one who must have known every shoal and shallow of the coast, I think it was unwise of him to have ventured into that current."

Father Condy looked at me, and I at him. He was apparently trying to fathom my meaning. However, I kept my face, and with a courteous bow he turned away. Still looking at the picture, I caught a glimpse of his backward glance out of the tail of my eye. Evidently my remark had aroused his suspicions.

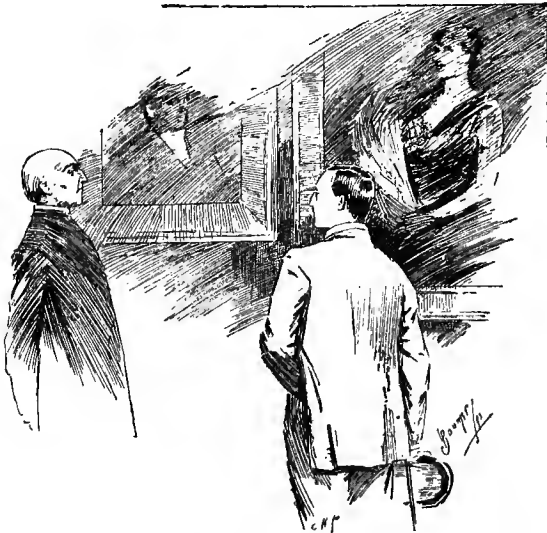
Near the gates I met Kempion and La Señora riding homeward. When they saw me their laughter ceased. She cast a cold look on me as I took off my hat, but a shadow passed over his face.

"I wonder," thought I, setting my face gatewards—"I wonder if John Kempion consented to the kidnapping of his nephew so as to enjoy the property himself."

Lord Tormouth was waiting eagerly for my return, and we talked for fully two hours. He still clung to his idea

that Francis had been spirited away by the Jesuit, so that the Kempion revenues might revert once more to the Church. On the other hand, I was inclined to suspect the present holder of the estates. In proof of this I produced the peso. Lord Tormouth examined it, and shrugged his shoulders.

“I don't think much of that,” said he, turning it over; “it might be a stray coin of the Armada. 'Tis known



“Father Condry looked at me.”

that several treasure-ships of Mexican moneys were wrecked on our coasts.”

“Look at the date, my lord.”

“Eighteen eighty-six,” he read eagerly. “Why! God bless me, sir! This coin was struck last year.”

“Exactly! Therefore it must have been brought from Mexico shortly before Francis disappeared. I found it on the beach where he was last seen, so——”

"So you think that his uncle had something to do with the kidnapping?"

"That is my idea."

"But he was in the house the whole evening. Francis went to bathe by himself."

"He might have employed others to carry out his plans. John Kempion, you say, lived most of his life in Mexico. Judging from the glimpse I had of his face, I should say he was a trifle wild."

"He was a 'ne'er-do-weel,' as the Scotch say," replied Tormouth dryly, "but he is respectable now."

"Then you may be sure he knew a few desperate characters in Mexico who would kidnap the lad for a small sum. One of them dropped that coin. It proves that its owner must have come straight from Mexico. Such coinage is not common in England, and so recent a one as that could not have got there by any other means."

"It might be so," said the old lord doubtfully. "But surely John Kempion would not be such a scoundrel as to kidnap his own nephew."

"Eight thousand a year is worth a crime," said I, smiling.

"If he did so the priest helped him. I won't give up my idea about the Jesuit. He wanted a Catholic head to the family."

"Very likely Father Condy favoured the idea," I replied; "but I think John Kempion was the active party."

"And what do you propose to do?"

"Go out to Mexico and make inquiries about John Kempion. If he employed some Mexican desperado to kidnap Francis, the lad must have been taken out there. No safer plan could be discovered. Beyond all law and order, without the pale of civilization. Depend upon it, my lord, Francis Kempion is to be found in Mexico."

"Then go at once," cried Lord Tormouth radiantly;

“draw on me for what moneys you like. Start by the next boat, and spare nothing to find the lad.”

Within a fortnight of this conversation I was on my way to Mexico. There is no necessity to relate my wanderings in detail. They would spin out into three volumes, and I have neither time nor space at command. So far as relates to John Kempion, I struck his trail at Vera Cruz, followed it to Zacatecas, and finished it at San Francisco. Thenceforward all was known to me, as Lord Tormouth had related how Kempion, a guileless cattle-



“Kempion and La Señora riding homeward.”

dealer, had left the Golden Gate for the rocky Devon coast. He did not narrate the Mexican history of the man. I found that out for myself.

It was a black record. I no longer wondered at the shadow on Kempion's face. A man with a past such as his must have lived in perpetual fear of unwelcome visitors turning up to spoil his respectability. Damocles was more comfortable under his hair-suspended sword.

In six months I was back in London with a closely

written pocket-book relative to the career of John Kempion. The accidental dropping of the silver coin proved a bad business for him. I remained in London to transact some necessary matters, then I went West to report to Lord Tormouth. Before I related my story I asked him what had transpired at Kempion Hall since my departure. His information astonished me.

"I have not been away since you left Devonshire," said he, "as I was determined to keep a watch on Kempion and the Jesuit. In one way and another I learned all that was going on. It did not require much ferreting out, as the scandal is now patent to the whole neighbourhood."

"What scandal?"

"Touching La Señora and a black countryman of hers, Don Miguel Pedroche."

"Whew!" I whistled, "so *he* is here."

"Do you know him?"

"Only too well. So does John Kempion!"

"Ah!" said Tormouth reflectively, "probably that is why he is afraid to kick Pedroche out of the house."

"What! Is he staying at the Hall?"

"I should just think so, much to the wrath of Father Condy. The priest can manage Kempion, but not La Señora and her friend. Oh! it is a most reputable affair, I assure you, sir."

Lord Tormouth tapped his snuff-box, revived himself with a pinch, and continued the story. It fitted in very neatly with what I already knew of Kempion and Pedroche.

"Scarcely had you departed," said his lordship, "when this Spanish fellow came to the Hall and quartered himself there. Neither Kempion nor Father Condy were very pleased to see him, but the Señora made amends for the coldness of their reception. Egad! she'd have had him to stay with her at the Dower House but for the priest's influence. I have seen the fellow, sir," continued Tormouth, in a tone of disgust—"I have seen the fellow kiss La

Señora while they walked together on the beach. Scandalous! most scandalous!"

"Is he her lover, think you?"

"I believe so! The minx is not in love with John Kempion, as I thought. She is a fool if she marries this



"I have seen the fellow kiss La Señora."

Spanish pauper, though, to be sure," added Tormouth thoughtfully, "Kempion will have to support the pair of them. They know too much for his comfort, that's certain."

"Well, I am not so sure of the lady," said I, "but certainly Pedroche knows about the kidnapping of Francis."

"Egad! You don't say so?"

"I do, and more. I say that he kidnapped the boy."

"Spanish scoundrel!" muttered my lord. "At the instigation of Father Condy, no doubt?"

"No! At the instigation of John Kempion."

"Wh-a-t!" said Tormouth angrily. "Do you mean to tell me, sir, that the man was iniquitous enough to kidnap his own nephew?"

"That's so, my lord. This coin—this Mexican peso—dropped accidentally on the beach, was the property of Don Miguel."

"Has he been in these parts before?"

"He was on the beach the night Francis disappeared."

"How did he get there?"

"He came in a yacht belonging to John Kempion."

"Didn't know the man had a yacht! Didn't know the man had a sixpence."

"In Mexico he had a good many sixpences," I said.

"Oh, I could tell you some strange facts about Kempion's career in those parts, but we had better stick to the business in hand."

"Of course! of course! How did the kidnapping take place?"

"John Kempion, my lord, owned a schooner yacht with which he did business in the Caribbean Sea. What that business was you may guess. His first mate was this Pedroche."

"Oh! oh!" said Lord Tormouth, with rising indignation.

"These scamps made money and lost money. Business was bad when Kempion heard of his brother's death, so he came home to see if he could not get the estates for himself. Finding there was more law and order in England than in Mexico, he did not care about risking hanging, so he decided to have the lad kidnapped."

"The scoundrel!"

"Before he left Mexico he made a present of the schooner to Pedroche, and wrote him a letter instructing

him to come to the Devon coast and kidnap Francis. Pedroche made his appearance at Falmouth as a Spanish gentleman travelling for pleasure. If you remember, Kempion went to Plymouth about that time, where Pedroche met him and arranged details. Francis was accustomed to swim in that bay every night during the hot summer months, but he never ventured into the current."



"Seized and carried him to Mexico."

"Just what I said!" exclaimed Tormouth triumphantly.

"During the day that yacht lay behind Lundy Island, and crept shoreward when the night fell. Thus few saw her, and those that did took no notice. No one would think of connecting the disappearance of Francis Kempion with a gentleman's yacht. The rest you can guess, my lord. A boat-load of scamps, commanded by Pedroche, con-

sealed themselves in the woods fringing the bay. When Francis was in the water, they seized and carried him to Mexico. It was during the scuffle that Pedroche dropped the coin which led to his undoing."

"Who told you all this, sir?" asked Tormouth, much agitated.

"I gathered it from various sources, but principally from this gentleman."

I opened the door while speaking, and the next moment Francis Kempion was in the old man's arms. Lord Tormouth prides himself on his self-control, but he broke down altogether at this point. I felt rather queer myself.

"You look first-rate, lad," he said, holding Francis at arm's length. "They didn't treat you badly."

"Not during the voyage," replied Francis. "Pedroche was very kind, but they held me prisoner at Chihuahua, and I had rather a bad time of it there. Fortunately, this gentleman found me out, and rescued me from their clutches. He wouldn't, if Pedroche had been there."

"Pedroche had gone to England, I suppose, to make love to La Señora?"

"Not quite that," I said significantly; "he is her brother."

"You don't say so," said Tormouth, genuinely astonished. "Then why is Kempion jealous?"

"Oh, he is not jealous, but enraged. The Spaniard, no doubt, conducts himself insolently, and, having Kempion in his power, he can do what he likes."

"The biter bit," remarked Tormouth, with a rap at his snuff-box. "By the way, Francis, do you think La Señora is mixed up in this nefarious transaction?"

"I am sure she is not," said the lad earnestly; "she was very fond of me, and behaved most kindly. My uncle alone is to blame."

"So it is not the priest, after all," observed the old lord irritably. "I made sure the Jesuit had something to do

with it. Well! well! we will go over to-morrow, and take back the rightful heir."

There was a highly dramatic performance at Kempion Hall next day. Lord Tormouth arranged the details. Francis was to appear at a given moment, and startle Kempion in the midst of his lies. When we entered the Hall, the young man pulled his slouch-hat over his eyes so as not to be recognized by the servants. He need not have troubled. The present staff were strangers, as Kempion had changed them during his occupancy. None of the old retainers approved of the existing state of things. It was true that John Kempion resided at the Hall, and La Señora dwelt in the Dower House two miles away; but the pair were always together, constituting a scandal to their simple minds. The probability of a marriage struck them as iniquitous. Father Condy thought so too, and had frightened Kempion into acquiescence for the time being. Much as it pleased the Jesuit to have a Catholic landowner under his thumb, he had anything but a pleasant time in keeping matters respectable.

The butler announced myself and Lord Tormouth. Francis we left on the other side of the drawing-room door for production when necessary. Rather startled by the unexpected appearance of his enemy, Kempion arose to his feet, but La Señora and Pedroche, who were also present, exhibited no surprise. They knew nothing of Lord Tormouth's enmity to speak of, and received him as they would have any other visitor. Both were smoking cigarettes, much to the disgust of the punctilious old nobleman.

"Mother of God!" said La Señora, removing her cigarette, "and who is this?" She spoke English very well, and so did her brother. They found the knowledge of tongues useful in conducting shady transactions. I have no doubt, with that pretty foreign lisp, La Señora had talked her way into the foolish heart of James Kempion.

"Lord Tormouth," said Kempion, looking very pale, as well he might, for he guessed what was coming, "why do you enter my house uninvited?"

"I wish to speak seriously with you, Mr. Kempion, and also I desire to avoid scandal."

"Scandal, my lord! That is an ugly word."

"I know of an uglier," retorted Tormouth, whipping out his snuff-box—"kidnapping!"

Pedroche and La Señora glanced significantly at each other, but Kempion reddened with anger. None of the family could keep their temper after provocation.

"You have been looking into my life in Mexico," said he, with a harsh laugh. "Plenty of kidnapping there, no doubt, but what has that to do with England?"

"I am not alluding to Mexico, or to your villainies there, sir; I refer to the loss of your nephew, Francis Kempion."

"He was drowned."

"Ah, poor child!" sobbed La Señora noisily, "he was drowned."

Pedroche laughed, and she glanced fiercely at him out of the corner of her eye.

"You loved him, Señora?" said Tormouth, turning in her direction.

"Yes, I loved him! Ah, God! how I did love him!"

"We all loved him," came the voice of Father Condy from some unseen corner, "but he is dead, poor soul. Why do you come here, my lord?" he added, showing himself—"why do you come here to disturb the peace of this family?"

"I don't think there is much peace under this roof," said Lord Tormouth quietly; "but I have no desire to prolong the scene, so——"

"Then go," interrupted Condy, "and take with you that spy."

This complimentary allusion was directed at me, but I



*Don't miss
the*

“ ‘ Mother of God!’ said La Señora.”

am used to being called names in my profession, and I did not budge an inch.

"This spy, as you term him," observed Lord Tormouth, patting my shoulder, "is a detective who has found out your villainy. I allude to you, John Kempion."

"What mean you, my lord? I have been a villain, no doubt, but not for your calling. By what right do you——?"

"By the right of interest in Francis, your nephew."

"He is dead!" replied Kempion, "drowned off the beach."

"Pshaw, sir! Why keep up the farce? He is alive and well."

"Alive and well!" echoed the other, with a dazed look.

"Don't mock me, sir," said my lord sharply. "You know he is alive, and was kidnapped by your orders."

"'Tis a lie!"

"I appeal to Don Miguel Pedroche!"

"I also say it is a lie, Señor," replied Miguel. "By all the saints, I saw not the boy in all my life."

"Yet he took a voyage with you to Mexico?" said I. Pedroche looked surprised at my knowledge, but said nothing.

"I did not have my nephew kidnapped!" cried Kempion fiercely. "I have been a bad enough man in my time, but of this charge I am innocent. I loved my brother and my nephew, and I would have raised no hand against either. Why should I harm the lad?"

"Because you wanted the property."

"I did not want the property. All I wished was to marry Mrs. Kempion here, and return to Mexico; I hate your English life. Had I kidnapped the boy, I would have been by my faith bound to have told Father Condy. Would he have kept silent? Would he, a priest, have countenanced such injustice?"

Tormouth muttered something about priests being capable of all things, but was too polite to say so out loud.

"You doubtless told Father Condy under the seal of confession," I said; "therefore, by the rules of his Church, he was forced to hold his tongue. Besides," I added, significantly, "I have no doubt that Father Condy prefers a Catholic to a Protestant at Kempion Hall."

"You wrong me," said the Jesuit, in a tone which made me feel mean. "Mr. Kempion made no such confession. Had he done so, I should have found means to have righted the injustice done to the lad, Protestant though he be."

"You carry it off bravely, gentlemen," said Tormouth, in his most cutting tones, "and, had I not proof to the contrary, I might believe you. John Kempion," he added, turning sharply, "I say you kidnapped your nephew, and that Pedroche helped you."

"I say you lie," retorted Kempion doggedly.

"Would you welcome him back to rob you of your ease?"

"Willingly! I take God to witness that the dearest wish of my heart is to see Francis Kempion, my nephew, in his rightful position."

All present had risen to their feet. La Señora was pale with terror, Kempion with emotion. The face of Father Condy was set like a mask. Only Pedroche laughed.

"You will never see him here," said he. "Holy Mary, no!"

In response to a nod from Lord Tormouth, I opened the door. Francis strode into the room, and confronted the baffled conspirators. Pedroche cursed in Spanish, his sister shrieked.

"Here is the lad himself," said Tormouth. "Now, Kempion."

He advanced, and took the young man by the hand, so as to assure himself that his nephew was flesh and blood.

"Welcome back to your own, Francis," he said at length. "I am glad you have come."

"Hypocrite!" muttered Tormouth, snapping the lid of his box.

"I can hardly believe your speech," said Francis coldly, "seeing it was by your orders I was carried off."

"Who told you so?"

"Pedroche!"

The Spaniard tried to get out of the way, but Kempion was too sharp for him, and had his grip on his throat in no time



"You lying Spanish scoundrel!"

"You lying Spanish scoundrel!" he swore, "own up to the truth, or I'll choke the life out of you! Did I order you to kidnap my nephew?"

"No!" gasped Pedroche. "No!"

Kempion hurled him on the floor, and faced us manfully.

"You see," he said, "I am innocent."

"Then who is guilty?" asked Tormouth, perplexed by the train of circumstances.

"I am," said La Señora, gliding forward with a look of

rage on her face. "Mother of God! now this cub is back, I have lost all. Yes, I wrote to my brother, and asked him to take away this fool. Was I to have but a few hundred pounds while he had thousands? Well, I knew that if he were gone, John would make me his wife, and all the money would be ours. Snake!" she added, turning towards Francis, "always I hated you, but pretended to love, so that I could oust you from here. John is innocent. I ordered it all. Miguel obeyed me; but now! now! ah, cursed ones! you gain, and I lose."

She rushed out of the room, followed by Father Condy. Evidently she had told all this to the priest at confession, and he did not wish to be questioned about it. His reign was over, as he well knew.

"Do you believe me now?" said Kempion.

"Yes," said Tormouth and Francis simultaneously, "we believe you."

"Then there is nothing more to be said. This reptile has been the bane of my life. He knew too much about my Mexican experiences for me to kick him out of here, but had I guessed his share in this black business, out he should have gone. By all the saints, yes. As to Luisa, she is a woman, and not accountable for her actions. Good-bye!" and he strode towards the door.

"Where are you going, uncle?" asked Francis, blocking his way.

"Back to the woods, lad. In spite of all, I shall marry Luisa, and be friends with yonder scamp—it is my fate. Good-bye, nephew," he said, shaking the hand of Francis. "Do not think too badly of me. Come, Miguel, my brother-scamp, let us depart."

He caught Miguel by the arm and marched him off. The door closed and we saw them no more. The two Spaniards and Kempion went back to their own wild life, and no doubt flourished under less rigorous laws. Father Condy went also. With a Protestant at Kempion Hall,



“ Now this cub is back, I have lost all.”

he did not care about staying. Once more Francis entered into his heritage, and now that Lord Tormouth looks after him there is no fear of him being kidnapped a second time. As I was leaving, the old gentleman made a remark.

“I am sorry for John Kempion,” said he; “there is more good in him than I thought. But, had it not been for that Mexican coin, I might have deemed him a villain all my life.”

Of the reward he gave for finding Francis Kempion I say nothing. It concerns me more than any one else.

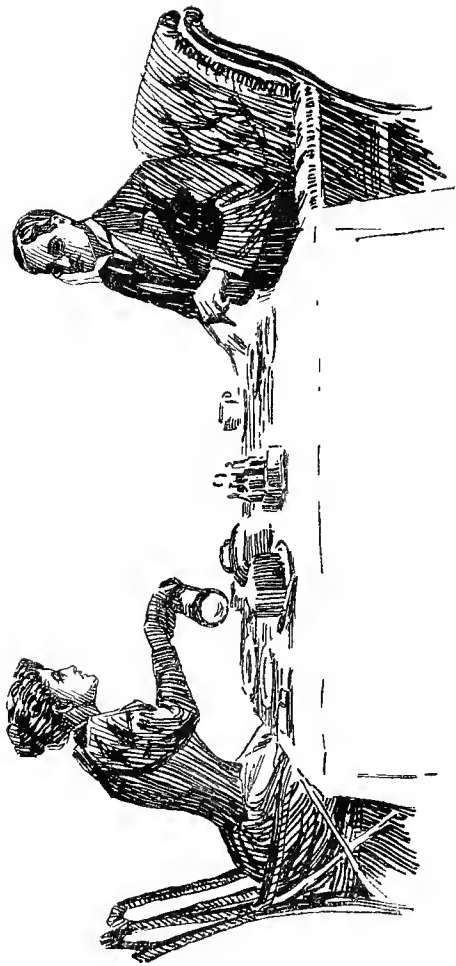
THE RAINBOW CAMELLIA.

COUNTRY solicitors have fewer opportunities than their urban brethren of handling exceptional cases. The friction of metropolitan life develops numerous strange episodes, which are of rarer occurrence in provincial centres. Human nature is no doubt the same in country as in town; but the lack of a concentrated population, by demanding less ingenuity on the part of the criminal, reduces the level of crime. Moreover bucolic wits are not so keen as those sharpened by the necessities of London life. Agrarian wrong-doers are usually commonplace rogues, who sin in a crude fashion unworthy of notice. Crime, which in the capital is a fine art, is in the country commonly the result of a childish outburst of temper. These remarks apply peculiarly to the inhabitants of inland market towns, and to the rural population of their intervening pasture-lands.

Yet at times a case not easily to be paralleled, even in the metropolis, comes under the notice of a country solicitor. Such a one is that of the Rainbow Camellia, which is, to my mind, unique in the annals of crime. It was simply a case of theft, but sufficiently noticeable for the skilful way in which it was planned and executed. My first intimation of the affair came from my wife, who one morning entered the breakfast-room with a face expressive of consternation.

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Missing Page



“My wife poured out the coffee.”

"Fred," said she, in an awestruck tone, "do you remember Eliza Drupp the housemaid who left six months ago?"

"Was that the red-haired minx who smashed our best dinner-service, and who carried a bottle of diamond cement in her pocket to mend breakages?"

"Yes, she has been arrested."

"I'm not surprised. Whose dinner-service is it this time?"

"Don't jest, Fred. I am very sorry for the poor girl, though she has been stealing. Cook told me all about it. She is so excited."

"Who is excited, cook or Eliza?"

"Cook, of course."

"Then the dinner won't be fit to eat. I wish cook would gossip less, and attend more to her stewing and frying. Give me my breakfast, Nell; I must be off early this morning. Well," I added, as my wife poured out the coffee, "and what has Eliza Drupp been stealing?"

"The rainbow camellia."

"What, the whole plant?"

"No, only a bud. She went into the Gardens yesterday and picked it."

"Audacious creature, she'll get six months for that. Old Bendel is on the Bench, and as he is a prominent member of the Horticultural Society, Eliza need expect no mercy."

"I don't know what possessed her to do such a thing," said Nell reflectively; "and the worst of it is, that George Beanfield gave information about the theft."

"Who is George Beanfield, and why shouldn't he give information?"

"Because he kept company with her. It is a piece of spite on his part to punish Eliza for taking up with the greengrocer."

"I congratulate you on your knowledge of kitchen

gossip, Nell. But you have not answered my question. Who is George Beanfield?"

"A gardener in the service of the Horticultural Society. I suppose he will be the principal witness against poor Eliza. How can a man be so mean!"

"A man scorned is as dangerous as a woman scorned, my dear. Eliza should not have 'walked out' with the greengrocer. By the way, was George the man who used to hide in the coal-cellar?"

"No, that was a soldier."

"Oh, then he was the Gargantua who devoured all the cold meat."

"Don't talk nonsense, Fred. Go to your office, and if you hear anything of the case, tell me when you come home. I am so sorry for poor Eliza."

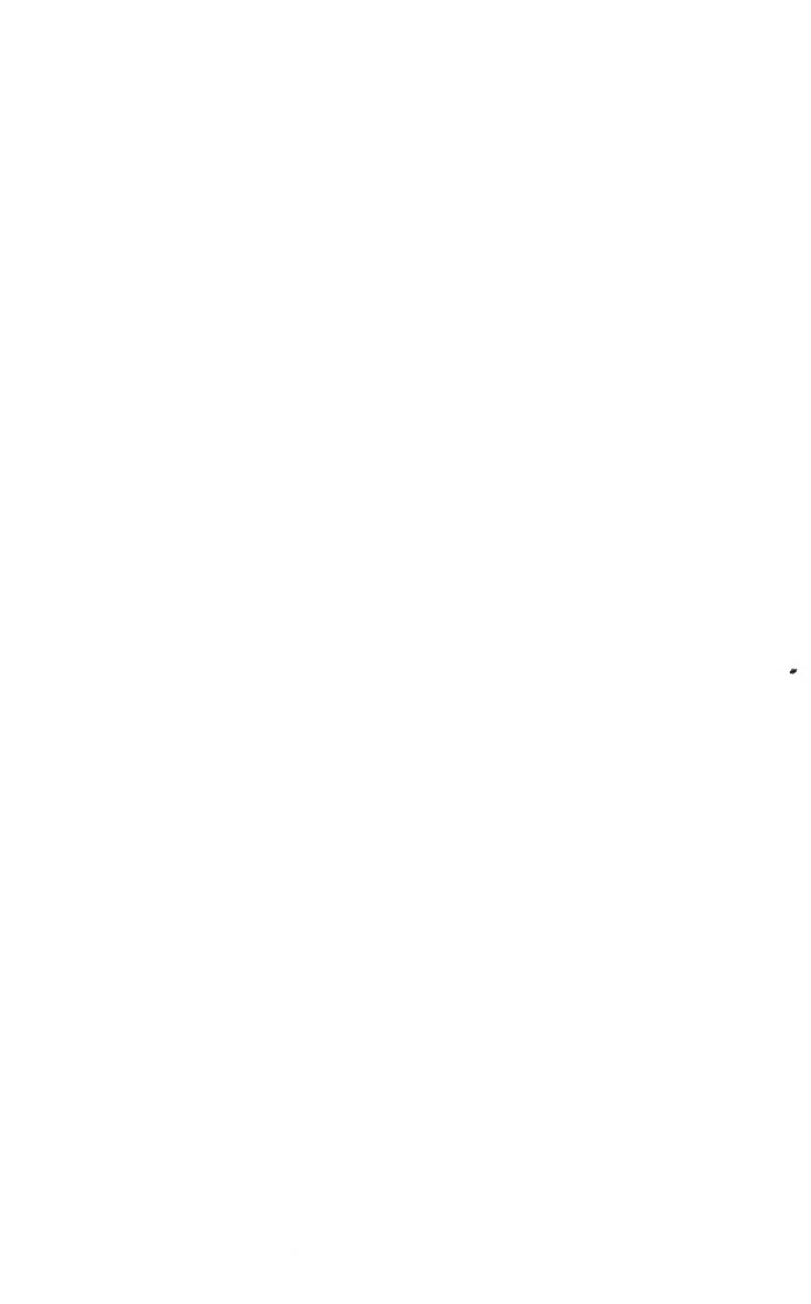
This was very charitable on the part of Nell. So far as I could remember Eliza Drupp had been a sore trial, and I had frequently heard my wife express a hope that the Drupp sins would come home to the Drupp sinner. Now that they had come in the most satisfactory manner, she regretted the accomplishment of her wishes, and pitied the recreant Eliza. I did not. It was impossible to pity a girl who had cost me over twenty pounds in breakages.

When I reached my office, I received a message from Eliza, requesting me to step round to her cell, and discuss the matter. As fish did not come to my net in sufficient quantities to make me despise even such small fry as Eliza, I accepted the invitation, and speedily found myself in the presence of my former housemaid. She was to be brought before Bendel that very morning, so there was no time to be lost in learning what defence she proposed to make.

To judge of the heinousness of Eliza's offence, it is necessary to state that the Horticultural Society of Foxton is the sole owner of the famous rainbow camellia. That unique plant had been brought from China many years ago by a vagrant Foxtonian, and it was the only one in existence



"Eliza was tearful but voluble."



on this side of the world. The Foxtton Society prided itself on the possession of this rarity, the more so as such possession excited the envy of all rival societies. Of these many had attempted to beg, borrow, buy or steal slips of the plant in order to raise rainbow camellias on their own account; but hitherto not one had secured even a single bud. It was reserved for Eliza to commit that crime.

The blossom was streaked with the seven colours of the rainbow—hence its name—and as a further priceless qualification it emitted a distinct odour. Now as, with this exception, a scented camellia is absolutely unknown, it was only natural that the Foxtton horticulturists should set a high value on their ownership. I thought myself that their enthusiasm was exaggerated, as the prosperity of Foxtton did not entirely depend on the possession of that striped and scented flower; but then I am not a flower-fancier, and I cannot appreciate the passions of horticulturists. Those of Foxtton were quite offensive in their pride. If Eliza Drupp had stolen the Crown jewels the theft would have been a mere venial transgression; but that she should cull a single bud of the rainbow camellia placed her beyond the pale of ordinary sinners.

Eliza was tearful but voluble. She had been born within sound of Bow Bells, and talked with a strong cockney accent, which became more marked with increasing agitation. How this child of the London pavement had drifted to Foxtton I do not know, but she had served as housemaid in various houses for the last four years, and was accustomed when out of a situation, which happened frequently on account of her destructive propensities, to visit her parents at Hackney. Her town graces and brazen good looks—our cook said they were brazen—attracted many admiring swains. The vengeful George was one of these, but Eliza had jilted him in favour of the more opulent greengrocer. Nemesis in the person of the deserted gardener was now punishing her for such perfidy.

"'Ow 'e's treated me shaimful," said the tearful Eliza; "jest 'cause I wouldn't taik 'im 'e shows me up loike this."

"If you play with fire, Eliza, you burn your fingers as a natural consequence. But this is not the point. Have you any defence to this charge?"

"I should soigh so, sir. 'Tain't trew es I stole that measly kemmelliar. Whoy, it was my own."

"Come now, that's nonsense. The Foxton rainbow camellia is the only one of its kind in England."

"'Tain't the only one in the world anyhow, sir," retorted Eliza, with some heat. "I hev a rinebow kemmelliar et 'Ackney. If you don't b'li've me jest send up to my father an' see."

"Do you mean to say that you possess a plant of the same species?" I asked, rather astonished at this information.

"'Course I do, sir. My brother 'e's a steward 'e is; 'e goes to Chiner on the Three Star Loine, sir. 'E brought it to me fower years ago from furren parts 'e did."

"And the flower you wore was off your own bush?"

"Yuss. I kim 'ere yesterdaiy from 'Ackney, an' I brought it with me jest to see if moine was loike this 'un 'ere."

"Did you wear it when you entered the Gardens?"

"No, sir, I 'ed it in a paiper beg, an' when I was in the green'ouse I takes it hout. When I sawr it wure the saime, I pins it in moy dress. Then that bloomin' gonoph collared me. D'ye see, sir?"

"I see, but how is it that a blossom is missing from the tree?"

"I don'no, sir. 'Tworn't me as took it, sir. You jist telergrarf to moy father at 'Ackney an' arsk 'im to bring down moy kemmelliar, sir."

"Yes, I'll do that, but as he cannot be down in time for the case to-day, I'll ask for a remand, so that I may ascertain the truth of your story."

"Thank 'ee, sir. Em I to staiy 'ere, sir?"

"I hope not. I will be security for your bail myself."

"Thet is 'ensome on yer, sir. An' if yer sees thet there George Beanfield, sir, jist tell 'im as 'ow I'll scretch 'is eyes out of 'is 'ed."

There was no necessity for me to deliver this agreeable message. She did so herself when brought before the magistrate. Beanfield seemed to appreciate the situation, and to congratulate himself that Eliza was restrained from violence by two stout policemen. As long as possible he remained modestly in the background, and it was with manifest reluctance that he came forward when called upon to enter the witness-box. The lady in the dock glared at him with a mixture of scorn and rage, and again proclaimed her determination to "scretch 'is eyes out." When ordered to be silent she relapsed into tears and said she was being "put upon." I had heard her make this remark before when gently corrected for breaking three plates in succession.

The court was filled with infuriated members of the Horticultural Society, who wished Eliza to be forthwith hanged and quartered. It was commonly reported that my client had not only picked the flower but had also stolen a slip of the plant, which she designed to sell to a rival society. Believing that Eliza thus intended to rob Foxton of the glory of solely possessing the rainbow camellia, the horticulturists thought no punishment too severe for so abandoned a creature. I applied for a remand, which old Bendel (who was a rabid member of the society) was disposed to refuse. I pointed out that, in the interests of justice, the prisoner should be granted sufficient time to communicate with her friends, and prove herself innocent of the charge. Bendel did not believe she had a defence, and said as much, but after considerable argument I managed to obtain an adjournment for three days. In the matter of bail I was unsuccessful, as the magistrate declined

to allow Eliza to be at large until the matter had been legally threshed out. He was supported in this decision by his angered *confrères*, who had already judged and condemned the delinquent housemaid. The ultimate outcome of my application was the removal of Eliza to her former captivity.

When instructing the parental Drupp by letter as to the misfortune which had befallen his daughter, I suggested that, to clear her character, he should forthwith bring with him to Foxton the Hackney camellia. As to the existence of this plant I had my doubts, expecting that Eliza had mistaken the variegated scentless camellia for the unique plant of Foxton. But the bush brought by Drupp proved to be of the same genus. It was streaked with seven colours, it was scented, and, as a proof that Eliza was innocent, it still bore the stem whence the bud, alleged to have been stolen from the Foxton greenhouse, had been reft. Her story thus proved to be true, but I thought it strange that, at such a juncture, a blossom should also be missing from our local plant. The coincidence was peculiar, the inference doubtful.

“Moy daughter growed this 'ere,” explained Drupp, who was quite as cockney in speech as Eliza; “et was brought from Chiner by moy son Sam, es is a stewart on the *Mendeloy*. Ses Lizer t' me t'other doy, ‘‘Oi'll jest tike a flower t' Foxton an' see if thet kemmelliar es th' saime es moine.’ Which she did, an' now thi've put 'er in quod. Oi 'opes, sir, es 'ow thi'll let 'er orf.”

With so clear a defence I thought it extremely probable that they would let her off; but as old Bendel was on the Bench I knew the fight would be a tough one. Had Eliza worn the bud when she entered the Gardens, her innocence would have been proved beyond all doubt. Still as the matter stood I had every hope of clearing her character.

When Eliza was again placed in the dock the court was even more crowded than on the former occasion. A

rumour had originated—I know not how—that a plant similar to that owned by the society would be put in evidence by the defence. As in duty bound no horticulturist believed this fable. As well say there were two Queens of England, as two rainbow camellias. The Foxton plant was displayed in all its glory, and, lost in admiration, the onlookers exclaimed that there was none like unto it. This biblical exclamation is suitable to the scene, for the plant might have been the golden image of Nebuchadnezzar, so abjectly did its worshippers grovel before it. The mere sight of the missing bud roused them to wrathful denunciations against its ravisher.

When brought before the magistrate, Eliza wept loudly ; but on the appearance of George in the witness-box, she recovered her spirits, and called him names. Then she again relapsed into tears, and sniffed provokingly during the subsequent proceedings.

Beanfield deposed that Eliza was not wearing the flower when she entered the Gardens, but he admitted that she had carried a paper bag, which he feebly conjectured to contain biscuits. He had exchanged no words with her, as they were not on friendly terms, but he declared that she had made a face at him, and had derisively put out her tongue. When he saw her again, the bud—produced in court—was fastened in the bosom of her dress. He at once inspected the rainbow camellia, and found a blossom missing, upon which evidence he had given Eliza in charge for theft.

Another gardener proved that no buds were wanting when he saw the plant half-an-hour before Eliza's visit. He was followed by the President of the Horticultural Society, who stated that outside China, to which the species was indigenous, there was no rainbow camellia in existence. The bud produced in court could only have been taken from the Foxton greenhouse. His assertion of the uniqueness of the plant was received with great applause by his fellow-horticulturists.

Their jaws dropped when old Drupp brought forward Eliza's specimen. At first they insisted that the petals were painted, but when by direction of old Bendel the plant was handed round, and handled, and smelt, and thoroughly examined, they were reluctantly compelled to admit that it was a genuine rainbow camellia. The admission almost drew tears from their eyes, and they mourned Ichabod! Ichabod! The two plants placed on either side of the magistrate appeared to closely resemble one another, save that Eliza's was the smaller of the two. I forgot to mention that the Hackney plant had eight buds while the Foxton plant showed twelve. As a blossom had been plucked from each, these were respectively reduced to seven and eleven.

Drupp's evidence in conjunction with the production of the plant turned the scale in favour of Eliza. It was all plain sailing when he opened his mouth. The plant belonged to his daughter; it had been brought from China by her brother the steward; under her care it had grown and flowered; and she had plucked a bud to compare with the blooms of the Foxton bush. No link was wanting in the chain of evidence to prove the innocence of the prisoner, and Bendel was reluctantly compelled to discharge her without a stain on her character. I say reluctantly, because he could not forgive Eliza for owning a duplicate of the Foxton fetich, and, taking every possible advantage, he delivered a smart lecture to its iniquitous possessor. There was no applause when Eliza left the dock.

Restored to freedom, she sought George Beanfield; but he, mindful of her threat, had departed long since. He left the town, he even left the country, for a letter addressed from the Continent was received by the president of the society, which cleared up the mystery of the missing Foxton bud. George stated that in attending to the plant he had accidentally knocked off a blossom and, fearful of a reprimand, had burnt it in the greenhouse fire. The

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appearance of Eliza with a similar bud to that destroyed had afforded him an opportunity of hiding his delinquency, by making her the scapegoat. He did not offer any opinion as to how he thought Eliza had become possessed of the blossom when the one missing from the bush had been destroyed by himself.

Thus was the innocence of Eliza proved beyond all doubt, and, angered by the unjust aspersions cast on her, she proceeded forthwith to turn the tables on her accusers. The morning following her acquittal, she appeared in my office with a wrathful countenance.

"Now, sir," said she viciously, "I'm agowin' to hev a action agin thim Gardins fur lockin' me up."

But the action never came off. The society, knowing it had no defence, owned that it was in the wrong, and offered to compromise. Moreover they feared lest Eliza should sell her plant to a rival society, and thus rob Foxton of the glory of solely possessing the rainbow camellia. After some correspondence, they agreed to settle the action for five hundred pounds, provided Eliza gave them her plant. This she did, and having received her damages, and paid my fees, she disappeared from Foxton.

A month afterwards my wife again brought up the subject of Eliza Drupp. As usual, the cook was her informant.

"Fred," said she; "Eliza Drupp?"

"Well, what has she been doing now? Stolen another camellia?"

"No. She has married George Beanfield."

"The fellow who gave evidence against her? Impossible."

"It is true. Cook has this morning received a piece of the wedding cake."

"Well, all I can say is, that Eliza is of a most forgiving disposition."

"I have no patience with her," replied my wife. "But

I think she is ashamed to return to Foxton. She and George have gone to South America."

"A very sensible step to take," said I, weary of the subject. "They can set up on the proceeds of the trial. At all events we have heard the last of Eliza Drupp."

The remark was premature, for in less than twelve months I was again discussing Eliza, and learning the reason of her eccentric behaviour.

It was on board the *Mandalay* that I heard the truth concerning the matrimonial alliance of our former housemaid. I was ordered to take a sea voyage for the benefit of my health, and as Nell refused to come on the plea of being a bad sailor, I was obliged to make the journey alone. One place was much the same as another to me, provided the instructions of my physician were carried out; so, taking the first chance that presented itself, I embarked for China on a Three Star Liner. The ship was comfortable, the passengers sociable, and the table excellent, so the voyage promised to be very pleasant. As a description thereof is not pertinent to the story, I proceed at once to the episode which brought up again the name of Eliza Drupp.

Among the stewards figured a red-haired creature, freckled and stumpy. He was neither my table nor berth attendant, yet he never failed, when by accident I caught his eye, to salute me with a knowing grin. This mark of recognition led me to examine him closely, in the expectation of finding a former client or servant. I could not recall his features, yet they seemed to be familiar to me. We were in the Bay of Biscay when I spoke to him. The ship was rolling heavily, and on my way to lie down in my cabin, I met with my red-polled friend. He smiled as usual, whereupon I asked him if he knew me.

"No, sir," said he with a grin, "but 'Lizer knows y', sir."

"'Lizer?"

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"M' sister, sir, 'Lizer Drupp es was."

"Ah, that accounts for the familiar look of your face. You are her brother Sam."

"Yessir. Shell I 'elp y' long t' y' bunk, sir?"

"If you please."

By this unexpected meeting the circumstances of the case recurred to my mind, and I was pleased to meet with Sam. It was he who had brought the camellia to Eliza, and I wished to learn where he procured it, and also why his sister had married her enemy. Sam was not unlike my former client, but, owing to his vocation, he had a less pronounced cockney accent. At times, however, the Londoner peeped out.

"How is Eliza?" I asked, when safely bestowed in my bunk. "And where is Eliza?"

"In Paraguay with 'er 'usband, sir. They're es 'eppy es th' doy es long."

"That is rather curious, Drupp, considering her husband was a witness in that case of——"

Sam interrupted me at this moment by laughing violently. I checked his untoward mirth with a frown, whereupon he wiped his eyes and apologized.

"'Scuse me, sir, but I ken't 'elp laufin' when I thenk of thet 'ere caise. Y' got 'Lizer foive 'un' red, y' did, sir. She an' George 'ave bowght a ranch in Paraguay an' are gitting on fine. Don Jorge 'e is now, sir, an' 'Lizer's quite t' laidy."

"Her bad luck was the cause of her good luck," said I epigrammatically; "it was a fortunate thing for Eliza that you brought her that rainbow camellia from China."

Sam grinned, and again apologized.

"Bless y', sir, I didn't bring no camelliar fro' Chiner, sir."

"Then how did Eliza become possessed of the second plant?"

"George, sir; 'e got 'er a slip off t' Foxton plant."

"George!" repeated I in amazement; "but he gave evidence against her. If he got her the slip he must have known that——"

"'Course 'e did, sir. It was all ploy-actin'. 'Lizer wrote 'ome an' told all about it."

"Then you can tell *me* all about it, Drupp. As I conducted the case I should like to hear the sequel. It may explain why Eliza married Beanfield."

"Thet it do, sir," said Sam, grinning. "It were this waiy, sir. 'Lizer 'ad no money, an' George 'adn't enough to marry on. Th'y wanted to git spliced, an' so 'it on a plan to git money. 'Lizer she was readin' about a cove es got a thousan' poun's fur bein' put in quod when 'e was innercent, so she ses t' George, 'Cawn't we try the saime gaim on an' git enough t' marry on?' An' George, sir, 'ad an idear—'e's a long-eaded chap, sir—fur bein' a gardiner to t' Foxtan Society 'e knew whot a lot th'y thought of thet blessed camelliar. So 'e steals a slip an' tells 'Lizer to mek it grow, an' to tell father es I brought it fro' Chiner. She arsked me t' soy so, an' not knowin' 'er gaim I sid so. But I never knowed anythin' about it, sir. Then 'Lizer meks it grow es George ses, tho' 'twas a long toime growin'. When t' flowers come, she taiks one t' Foxtan an' walks into th' green'ouse an'——"

"I see, it was all arranged between them so as to sue the society and get damages?"

"Yessir. George nipped off a bud an' burnt it, 'e did. Then 'Lizer, wearin' 'er own, comes out an' 'e puts 'er in quod."

"And between the two of them they clear £500?"

"Yessir, an' then 'e marries 'er. D'y' see, sir?"

"I see, Drupp, and I must say they are a nice pair."

"Thet th'y are, sir. I'd 'a spilt their gaim 'ad I know'd it."

After delivering this opinion Drupp departed and I was left to ruminate over his story. I quite believed that he

was ignorant of the plot, but I was satisfied that had he known he would only have held his tongue if well paid. It was useless to give the benefit of the doubt to one who was of the same stock as Eliza. That artful girl knew her family too well to entrust them with her secret, and, less legal expenses, she and her fellow-conspirator got the whole of the damages to themselves. Much as I condemned their rascality, I could not but admire the cleverness with which they had planned and carried out their scheme. They had deceived Drupp, they had deceived the society, they had deceived me. Their comedy was extremely well acted, and ended quite to their satisfaction. Therefore I say that country wits are at times equal to those of townbred folks, for though the idea was Eliza's, the conception and execution of the scheme emanated from the bucolic brain of George.

I told the whole story to my wife when I returned home, and she was very severe on her former housemaid. Naturally enough she could not keep it to herself, and in a short time the history of the deception soon became town talk. At first the members of the Horticultural Society were angered at being so treated, but as the delinquents were in South America, it was wisely concluded to let the matter drop. They possessed both rainbow camellias, and, warned by the trickery of George and Eliza, watched the plants with renewed vigilance. I do not think that any one else will have the chance of stealing a slip of the Foxton fetich, but should a third rainbow camellia make its appearance in the market, old Bendel is quite resolved not to be hoodwinked a second time. He often regrets that he did not give Eliza six months, but is too late now, as the conspirators are farming in Paraguay. They ought to rear a rainbow camellia, if only to remind them of their iniquity.

THE IVORY LEG AND THE TWENTY-FOUR DIAMONDS

MEMBERS of a family may be selfishly proud of their individual perfections, yet take a collective pride in some special attribute or possession of their race. The O'Gradys, for instance, flatter themselves on owning a genuine Banshee ; the Macsniffs think highly of the hoary tower built by Noah Macsniff to escape a second Flood ; and the Fitztudors are proud of their royal descent from a frail ancestress and a dissolute king. Such-like trifles give satisfaction to the most aristocratic families, and raise them (in their own estimation) above the commonalty. These do not recognize Adamic relationship otherwise than that they belong to the human race.

The Dreuxfields, having made money by army contracting during the Peninsular War, cast round for some fetich to boast of, to expatiate on, and to bore their friends with. They had no ancestors worth talking about ; their baronial halls were a recent purchase, and the family ghost of the former proprietors, not being a fixture, had passed away with the ancient stock. Ultimately they hit on jewels as the most respectable things to be proud of, and, in pursuance of the idea, they acquired twenty-four diamonds the like of which had never been seen since Aladdin looted the Cave of the Lamp.

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These were not all bought at once, or by one person. Such wholesale buying would have reduced the whole affair to the level of a Bond Street purchase. The collecting of these gems took time and money, and (possibly) the loss of immortal souls. For the last fifty years every member of the family who could beg, borrow, buy, or steal a particularly fine diamond, forthwith contributed the same to the Dreuxfield fetich. Each jewel, worth no end of money, had a history, reputable or otherwise, and, finally, four-and-twenty gems of the first water were brought together to constitute the heirloom of the Dreuxfields.

The fetich ever consisted of these twenty-four diamonds, but the stones varied in the setting according to the taste of the Mrs. Dreuxfield then in possession. They glittered a tiara for display at St. James's, or flamed a jewelled belt for a waist. Sometimes they separated into bracelets of twelve gems each, or again collected into a necklace shooting twenty-four sparks of fire. In this latter form they were now, as the present Mrs. Dreuxfield's fine neck and shoulders formed an admirable background for the display of their splendour.

Experts valued the necklace at twenty thousand pounds, and it fully justified in worth and appearance the pride of its possessors. All the thieves in London had seen those diamonds going to Court on the fair neck of Mrs. Dreuxfield, and had calculated the chances of getting them into their clutches. They never found an opportunity of stealing them, however, as when not in use they reposed in the strong-room of Dreuxfield Hall, Malvern, the key of which was attached to the Squire's watch-chain. Yet, notwithstanding the impossibility of a successful raid, one famous cracksman swore loudly that he would yet steal the jewels. So far he had not succeeded. His name was Cracky Bill, of Whitechapel, and he was wanted by the police. Cecil Dreuxfield, who had lately succeeded to the property, was a young man of thirty, whose parents dying within a year

of each other had left him and his wife in possession of the Hall and the diamonds. With them lived Cecil's sister Kate and Mrs. Dreuxfield's uncle, Josiah Onslow. The young couple were handsome and agreeable, the sister was



“ Since Aladdin looted the Cave of the Lamp.”

a pretty girl fond of the Curate, and the uncle a bad-tempered ancient who owned an ivory leg. This latter curiosity deserves special mention.

It is not every man who possesses an artificial limb made

of ivory, and the Major (he had retired from service of the H.E.I.C. with that rank) was as proud of it as was Pelops of his ivory shoulder. Not born a Dreuxfield, he took no especial interest in the necklace, and bestowed all superfluous pride on his ivory leg. Onslow had imagination, and should have been a novelist. As it was, he told stories about that leg which outvied the "Arabian Nights." There were fifty distinct narratives as to how he had lost his limb and gained the artificial understanding. He never repeated himself, and lied like a journalist short of news. The leg was turned like that of a pianoforte, and carved out of all smoothness. If any one asked him if it was vegetable ivory he threw everything handy at the head of the inquirer.

"Vegetable ivory, you qualified fool!" he would roar, "no! genuine ivory—elephants' tusks, bless me! The Rajah of Dum-Dum gave me the leg for losing my own in killing a heavenly elephant that blessed nearly killed him."

The adjectives in this speech must be read contrariwise.

Onslow was not a nice man, and no great favourite with the young trio. He drank sherry, which was bad for his liver, and played cards for stakes ruinous to his meagre purse. Only the love Dreuxfield had for his wife prevented him turning her relation out of doors. By dint of much self-control they put up fairly well with his tantrums, and were glad when he visited London (which he did twice or thrice a month) to lose money at his favourite pastime.

No one loved the old reprobate. Not even his servant, whom he bullied unmercifully. Perhaps the present valet had not been long enough in his situation to love the Major, for he was a new importation. Onslow rarely kept his men longer than a month. The incessant exercise of dodging missiles wore them thin. The new valet fared better, as he was deferential, and had been an attendant in a lunatic asylum. Moreover, he took a great interest in the

Major's ivory leg, and, when it was unstrapped at night, he always carried it to his own room to polish up for the morning. These little attentions pleased the crusty old man.

One evening in April the Curate came to dinner. He



“Cracky Bill.”

was a handsome, earnest young fellow, much in love with Kate Dreuxfield. His affection was returned, and it seemed probable that there would be a match. Every one favoured the idea, save Major Onslow, who hated the Curate like poison. All the scandal he could gather about

the parson he repeated to Cecil, but as he had discounted his veracity by ivory leg stories, this gossip merely provoked distrust. After dinner the Curate followed Kate into the drawing-room, where he made love, with the consent and in the presence of Mrs. Dreuxfield. Cecil, left alone with Onslow, drank his wine, smoked his cigar, and listened to the Major raging. He was particularly offensive this evening, and his speeches need expurgation.

"I hate that sneaking parson," he began without preamble. Dreuxfield interrupted him smartly.

"You are in the minority then. Jenny, Kate, and myself think no end of him."

"Particularly Kate," sneered the Major. "I suppose she will marry the fellow."

"If by the fellow you mean Clarence Newall, I have no doubt she will," retorted Cecil, pointedly. "I know of no man to whom I would so willingly give my sister."

"I thought you didn't like parsons."

"Then you thought wrong, sir. I am not aware of having manifested any particular dislike to the Church. Besides, I was at college with Newall, and I know him to be a good, honest fellow."

"I've heard different stories," said Onslow, enraged by these contradictions; "it is said that Newall was in a fast set."

"Mayhe; but he was not fast himself. You are thinking of his cousin, Clive Newall—the initials are the same, the natures are not."

"You believe in him, I see," said the Major, huffily, making for the door, "but, mark my words, he'll sell you yet. I never knew a parson that didn't."

"Newall is quite sound, Major—as sound as that ivory leg you——"

His speech was interrupted by the banging of the door. Onslow did not like his leg being made a jest of, and, moreover, finding he was getting the worst of it, he retired

to bed. By no means sorry to see the back of this cantankerous elder, Cecil finished his claret, and went to the drawing-room. Here he found the two ladies and Newall in eager conversation.

"The Major has gone to bed, Jenny," he said to his wife. "Lost his temper, as usual."



"What a cross old man he is," said Mrs. Dreuxfield, shrugging her shoulders. "Cecil dear, I hope he has not vexed you. I really think we ought to take away his ivory leg until he promises to behave better."

"Never mind, Jenny," whispered Kate, "he is going to town to-morrow, and will be away some days."

"You look tired, Newall," said Dreuxfield, patting his friend on the shoulder.

"I have been busy to-day," answered the Curate, "and, besides, I'm rather worried over a family matter."

"That scamp Clive again?" asked Cecil in a low voice.

Newall nodded, and would have continued speaking but that Kate interposed.

"What are you two talking about?" she said; then, without waiting for an answer, added, "Oh, Cecil, I want you to show Mr. Newall the necklace. He has never seen it, and you promised me this morning at breakfast to bring it out."

"Come to the next Drawing-room, Mr. Newall," said Mrs. Dreuxfield, amiably, "and you shall see it on my neck."

"I think he would like a closer inspection," laughed Cecil. "I'll fetch it down here."

"Do," said Newall, eagerly, "you have no idea how anxious I am to see the Dreuxfield diamonds."

"What a curious odour," observed Dreuxfield, sniffing; "you haven't any drugs in your pockets, have you, Newall?"

"Not that I know of," replied the Curate, smiling, "but I was taking some medicine to a parishioner to-day, and the cork came out of the bottle. No doubt some of the contents were spilt."

"Oh, that is it! You ought to be more careful. I declare you scent the room like a—perambulating drug shop. Sweet! heavy! sickly—ah! ah! Chloroform!" finished Cecil, and departed for the strong room.

It seemed to Kate, who was watching his face, that her lover paled a trifle at this last remark. The momentary emotion passed, but she thought it strange. Then they fell to talking of the necklace and its worth.

"I declare," said Mrs. Dreuxfield, with a pretty shudder,

“that I am always nervous when going to the Drawing-room. To sit in a carriage with hundreds of curious eyes fastened on those diamonds is enough to shake stronger nerves than mine.”

“I don’t see why you should fear, Jenny. No one can steal that necklace! It is too well guarded.”

“Let us hope no one will attempt so daring a theft. Ah! here comes Dreuxfield with the jewels.”

Cecil placed the morocco box on the table and lifted the



“That sneaking parson!”

lid. In the lamplight a glory streamed from the twenty-four gems. Even the two women, well accustomed to the sight, could not restrain a little cry of delighted surprise. Newall drew a long breath and gazed steadfastly at the glitter before him. The stones, but slightly set and connected, flashed a circle of sunbeams.

“A king’s ransom!” he said, and turned away as if to shut out the too fascinating sight. They amused themselves with the necklace for some time and then closed the box. It was left on the table. Shortly afterwards the ladies

retired to bed, and Newall went up to the smoking-room with Dreuxfield. Hardly were they outside the drawing-room door when Cecil uttered an ejaculation of annoyance.

"What a fool I am!" said he, "I quite forgot the necklace. You know where the smoking-room is, Newall. Just go to it while I replace the diamonds in the strong room."

Newall assented and moved away, while Dreuxfield went back for the necklace. The box was still on the table, and a glance inside assured him that the jewels were safe. Blaming himself for his inconceivable rashness in leaving the treasure even for a moment, he went to the strong-room. It was on the ground-floor, and approached by a long and somewhat dark passage. With the case under his arm Dreuxfield fumbled at the lock of the door, when suddenly an arm was thrown round his neck, choking the cry on his lips. A cloth saturated with chloroform was clapped over his mouth, and he heard the morocco box clatter to the floor as he lost his senses.

Mrs. Dreuxfield in her dressing-room chattered with Kate about the Curate, and playfully bantered her on her chances of becoming a clergyman's wife. Then Kate retired, and Mrs. Dreuxfield prepared for bed. Somewhat astonished at the unusual absence of her husband, she was about to seek the smoking-room and reprove him when she heard a loud cry. In a few minutes she was down-stairs, and found Newall in the hall bending over the unconscious body of Cecil.

"What is the matter?" she cried, alarmed by this spectacle.

"I don't know," gasped Newall, with a remarkably pale face; "he left me to put away the jewels. I waited his return in the smoking-room. He did not appear, and I went in search of him. He was lying unconscious by the strong-room door."

By the time this breathless explanation came to an end,

the whole household thronged the hall. Last of all the Major, followed by his valet Jenkins, stumped down the stairs, loudly excusing himself for so late an arrival.

"Jenkins took my ivory leg to his room to clean," he explained. "I came down the instant it was strapped on. Now what is all this?"

Explanations were made, a doctor appeared on the scene,



“A king's ransom!”

and Cecil sat up confusedly to give his version of the episode.

“Chloroform!” exclaimed the doctor.

“The diamonds!” said Dreuxfield. “I have been robbed.”

This explanation did not mend matters. The moment before they had been concerned for the safety of their master, now each and all wondered what was the penalty

for robbery. Pale servants looked askance at one another, and the female domestics shrieked themselves into hysterics. Kate kept her head and bore Mrs. Dreuxfield to her room, leaving the men to deal with the matter. Unfortunately, at so late an hour, little could be done, so there was nothing left for it but to wait till dawn opened the telegraph office. Newall, finding himself useless in advising and doing, went home in company with the doctor. Cecil and the Major retired to bed, but not to sleep. Few eyes were closed at Dreuxfield Hall that night, and the air was charged with terror and suspicion. The diamond necklace was gone, but no one, least of all its owner, knew who had thieved it so dexterously.

The next morning Dreuxfield wired for detectives and called in the local police. I (who tell the story) was deputed to look after the case, and on arriving at Malvern I was put in possession of the facts. From such statements I could not guess who was the thief, and proceeded to examine the servants. The result was unsatisfactory, and I tackled the gentry. Dreuxfield, his wife, and sister could tell me nothing, and altogether the loss of that necklace was as deep a mystery as ever I had to do with.

It rather added to my perplexity when I found that Major Onslow and his valet had that morning gone to London. He had explained that he knew a man who would elucidate any mystery better than a professional detective, and was going to fetch him down. Then I inquired after the Curate, and Miss Kate produced a hastily-scribbled note.

"He went to town this morning," she explained, not without embarrassment.

"Do you know on what business, Miss Dreuxfield?"

"Something connected with a relative," said she, glancing at the note.

I must say the conduct of the Curate appeared suspicious. Dreuxfield very unwillingly told me of the chloroform

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episode in the drawing-room. This did not tend to exculpate Newall, so I examined the position of the smoking-room relative to the strong-room. Both were on the ground-floor, and it was easy to get from one to the other. I suppose my suspicions showed themselves in my face, for Dreuxfield took me sharply to task.

"I know what you are thinking of," said he—"that Mr. Newall did not go to the smoking-room, but when I returned for the jewels hid himself in the strong-room passage. You are wrong. It is absolutely impossible that he should be the thief."

"Yet his clothes were scented with chloroform, and by that drug you were rendered senseless."

"Yes," admitted Dreuxfield reluctantly, "but that proves nothing."

"Nothing! Save that he must have had chloroform on him yesterday. Rather a curious drug for a person to carry. Then he went to London this morning. That looks suspicious."

"I suppose you'll say he took the necklace with him?"

"It's not impossible."

"I have known Newall for many years," said Dreuxfield earnestly, "and I assure you that he is incapable of such an act."

His sister, who had overheard our conversation, withered me with a glance.

"Mr. Newall is a gentleman and a clergyman," she declared indignantly. "I would as soon think of suspecting my brother as him. To-morrow he returns, and he will face the charge you have brought against him."

"I have brought no charge against him—yet," I answered, and so closed the discussion.

Notwithstanding all my efforts I could discover nothing likely to lead to the arrest of the thief. The servants all asserted their innocence, and supported one another strongly after the fashion of their kind. In my own heart I sus-

pected the Curate, and waited with some impatience for his arrival. A personal interview would simplify matters. Rather to the dismay of Kate Dreuxfield, he did not return next day, thereby confirming my suspicions. The last train brought the Major, full of stories about the Curate, none of which redounded to the young man's credit.

"Do you know why I went to town, Cecil?" he asked Mr. Dreuxfield in my presence.

"To fetch some special detective of your own."

"That was merely an excuse to keep Kate quiet. No! I followed Newall to town."

"That is the Curate, Major?" said I.

"Yes, sir," he answered triumphantly, "that sneaking parson. I suspected he had something to do with the robbery, and I am right."

"Do you mean to say Newall stole the necklace?" asked Dreuxfield, looking very pale.

"Yes, I do! I have no positive proof, but strong suspicions."

"Those go for nothing."

"Wait a moment, Mr. Dreuxfield," I whispered. "Let Major Onslow tell his story."

"After the robbery," said the ivory-leg gentleman, "I thought the parson might have had something to do with it, as I neither liked nor trusted him. If my suspicions were correct, I fancied he would go to town next day, so at dawn I sent out to learn his movements. Sure enough Newall was going to town by the ten o'clock train, so without saying anything I followed him. Strange to say, he drove from Waterloo to my own lawyers. I waited till his interview was finished, and then I saw my solicitor. He of course refused to reveal anything, but he hinted sufficient for me to know that Newall intended to pay him a large sum of money on that day. I then had no doubt that Newall had stolen the necklace, and was about to raise money on it."

"But I don't see——"

"Of course you don't," interrupted Onslow, cutting short Dreuxfield's remark, "you believe in the fellow. I don't. I know, and you know, that he hasn't a sixpence, and yet he traffics with lawyers over large sums of money. After that discovery I left the office and hung about all day——"

"Most respectable employment," sneered Dreuxfield.

"It was in your interest," reproved the Major with dignity. "In the afternoon I saw this wolf in sheep's clothing coming back. While he was with the senior partner a clerk left the office and took a hansom. I followed in another. He went to the bank and presented a cheque for three thousand pounds. I saw the cheque, it was signed by Newall. Now then," concluded Onslow triumphantly, "where did Newall get that money if not by pledging the necklace?"

Dreuxfield and I made no immediate comment. Things looked fishy for the Curate, and his actions fitted in neatly with the suspicion that he was the thief. Meantime I left Onslow to gloat over his perspicuity, and took Dreuxfield aside.

"Excuse me, sir," said I, "but I am about to say something rude."

"Say away," he answered, looking rather pale, "I won't be offended."

"I have examined all the servants, sir, and I am pretty certain that not one of them is clever enough to have carried out this robbery. Suspicions point towards Mr. Newall, yet for the moment let us give him the benefit of the doubt and see who else could have stolen the jewels. Now if——"

Seeing I hesitated, Dreuxfield anticipated my speech.

"You are thinking of Major Onslow?"

"Well, yes! I hear a good deal of club gossip, and, to tell the honest truth, Major Onslow does not bear a good character."

"I know all that," said Dreuxfield bitterly; "he is an old rogue who would sell his soul—if he has one—to gratify his vices. Yet I don't think he is the thief. He retired early to bed, and his valet took his ivory leg away. Without that leg he could do nothing."

"Suppose his valet didn't take away his master's ivory leg?"

"Ah! you think the two of them are in it?"

"I can't say! Wait till I see the Curate. It seems to me that Major Onslow is suspiciously active in getting evidence against him. At present I should like to see the valet."

"Uncle," said Dreuxfield, returning to the old man, "can we see Jenkins?"

"He didn't come back with me," replied Onslow gruffly. "I gave him permission to see his relatives."

"When do you expect him back?"

"In a week! You don't think he stole the necklace, do you?" finished the Major defiantly.

"No," said I, shirking the answer, "but I have examined all the servants except your man. It is only fair that he should have his turn."

"Wait here for a week and you'll see him," replied the Major ungraciously, "or go to my London club. He calls there every morning for my letters and sends them on. I don't trust club servants."

"Oh, I shan't trouble so much about him," I said, so our party of three broke up.

It was too late that evening to wire, but in the morning I sent a telegram to a brother detective containing instructions to see Jenkins at the club. By noon I received a reply, with which I went in search of the Major. On the way Miss Dreuxfield stopped me.

"Mr. Newall is coming down this afternoon," she said, showing me a letter; "he will be here at four o'clock. Then your suspicions will be explained away."

"I hope so with all my heart. But I may mention, Miss Dreuxfield, that I brought no specific charge against Mr. Newall."

I spoke to the empty air, for by this time she was out of hearing. My hintings had offended her mortally, but



"I spoke to the empty air."

no one could have held the Curate guiltless in the face of the evidence against him. Next I found the Major in the drawing-room, and opened fire at once.

"Your servant is coming down by this afternoon's train, Major."

"Who sent for him?"

"I did! It is as well that I should hear what he has to say."

"He has nothing to say," growled the Major sulkily; "he put me to bed and took my ivory leg to his room. He wasn't near the strong-room, or even down-stairs."

"His assurance of that will be quite sufficient, so I am glad he is coming. Mr. Newall is also on his way."

"I hope he won't have the face to show here."

"Indeed, he is coming down for the purpose. Miss Dreuxfield has advised him of your accusations, and he desires to clear his character."

"He won't be able to. I'm certain he stole the necklace."

I had my own opinion about the robbery, and held my tongue. If the Major was mixed up in the business with the valet, he had received due warning that justice was on his track. Contrary to my expectations, he was by no means startled. The man puzzled me.

At five o'clock the train arrived, and with it Jenkins. My brother detective was with him, and the three of us had a conversation. Then we went to Dreuxfield Hall to see how Mr. Newall was getting on. He had come down by the same train, and had at once gone off to look after his character. It was about time, seeing the Major had done his best to spoil it.

When we arrived I left Jenkins and his escort outside in the entrance-hall, as I was anxious to hear Newall's defence before producing the valet as a witness. All the gentry concerned in the matter were assembled in the drawing-room—Dreuxfield and his wife near the door opening on to the conservatory, Onslow standing in the conservatory itself, Newall, with Kate clinging to his arm, facing the three. He was quite pale, and looked savage.

"I absolutely deny the accusations of Major Onslow," he was saying when I entered; "no one knows less about the matter than I do."

"What about the chloroform?" sneered Onslow, "and your hurried departure to town, and the cheque for three thousand?"

"All that I can explain except the chloroform. That is a mystery to me as to you. I did spill some medicine in the afternoon, and I fancied that was the odour to which



"Kissed her lover before them all."

Dreuxfield alluded. When he mentioned chloroform I was startled."

"I've no doubt of it."

"Because," added Newall, gazing defiantly at the Major, "I had that day received a letter from my wretched cousin Clive saying he had embezzled some money, and threatening to poison himself with chloroform unless I saved him."

"That was why you turned so pale?" said Kate breathlessly.

"Yes! and that was why I went to town next day. It had nothing to do with the loss of the diamonds. I drove to your lawyers and arranged to settle the matter by paying the money. Fortunately, two months ago I inherited five thousand pounds, on which I had hoped to have married."

"And shall marry," murmured Kate under her breath.

"I sold out some stock and got the money—paid it to my lawyer, who settled the matter for my wretched cousin. I was arranging for his departure to the colonies when I heard through Kate of Major Onslow's shameless accusations. I came down here to refute them, and I have done so."

"Not to my mind," growled Onslow.

"I think otherwise," said Dreuxfield, taking Newall by the hand. "My dear fellow, you are as innocent as I. Forgive me for having doubted you."

Mrs. Dreuxfield said words to the same effect, and Kate boldly kissed her lover before them all. It was a pleasant sight save to the Major, who swore loudly.

"This doesn't show who stole the necklace. If it wasn't Newall, who was it?"

"What about yourself, Major?" said I, coming forward. The four people turned round in astonishment, and the Major, purple with rage, started forward.

"What do you mean, sir?" he cried, with a few adjectives which I suppress. I went to the door and led in the respectable Jenkins—handcuffed.

"I mean this, Major, that your valet is about the biggest thief in London. He has been long wanted for several jobs, but he managed to evade the police. Thanks to your information, he was captured at your club and brought down to give evidence—against you."

“Against me!” said Onslow, growing grey. “I swear I had nothing to do with the theft of the necklace.”

There was a dead silence, and all waited for the next remark. It came from Jenkins—from the respectable Jenkins, *alias* Cracky Bill.

“Ladies and gentlemen,” he said, bowing collectively, “I told the police I would give evidence against the Major



“The leg smashed.”

in order to be brought down here. But it is a lie. My master is quite innocent, and,” he added impudently, “so am I.”

“That won’t save you, my man,” said I sternly; “your other pranks mean a lifer, so you may as well confess your share in this.”

“Well, the Major’s innocent, at all events,” said the rogue.

"Thank you, my man," muttered Onslow thickly. "I'll—I'll"—here he swayed to and fro, then fell down in an apoplectic fit. There was a snap as he fell, and lo! a marvel. The butt of the ivory leg had caught in an interstice of the conservatory floor, and when he fell the leg smashed. Dreuxfield uttered a cry of astonishment, and pointed to the ivory stump. From it fell a rain of diamonds. The next moment Newall and Dreuxfield were picking up the jewels, and the women were loosening the neckcloth of the old man. I gripped Jenkins by the arm and indicated the scattered jewels.

"You lied! He is guilty!"

"Not a bit of it," said the scamp coolly; "don't you run your head against a stone, sir. Major Onslow hasn't been a bad master as masters go, and I'm not going to get him into trouble. He is quite innocent."

"Then how did the diamonds get into the ivory leg?"

"I put them there. It was this way. I wanted to steal those diamonds, and by means of a forged character I entered the Major's service. Then I watched for a chance to steal the jewels. I thought there would be no opportunity of getting out of the house during the first alarm if they were stolen, so I looked about for some safe place in which to hide them till I could take them to London at my leisure. As I cleaned the Major's ivory leg every night, it gave me an idea. I bored a hole half-way down the leg and dropped the diamonds in one by one. They just filled the hollow nicely."

"How did you steal them?"

"I heard Miss Dreuxfield say at breakfast that the master was going to show them to Mr. Newall, so I watched. All my plans were made, and I waited by the strong-room door with a chloroformed handkerchief. When he came along I used it, and stole the jewels. In my own room I separated them one from the other, and dropped them into the hollow of the ivory leg. Then I plugged up

the end with cotton wool and a round of ivory. The alarm was given, the Major called for his leg, and I took it to him. He went down to the hall with the diamonds safe in his ivory leg."



"When he came along I used it."

"Ah!" cried Newall at this moment, "you helped me off with my coat. Now I understand the smell of chloroform."

"I sprinkled you with a little," replied Jenkins. "You see, parson, I wanted to get suspicion to fall on you. But for the smashing of the leg I wouldn't tell all this. But I've lost the diamonds and my liberty, so it doesn't matter."

The Major had by this time revived somewhat, and sat up to swear at his quondam servant.

"You villain!" he said, "oh, you villain!"

"And this," said Jenkins, as we marched him out, "this is gratitude."

Jenkins received the reward of his ingenuity, and passed the rest of his life in gaol for this and other offences. He always regretted not having pulled off the Dreuxfield fetich. The Major took himself away from Malvern, and declined to have further dealings with the Dreuxfields. They were by no means sorry, and, indeed, had no time to be, for shortly afterwards Kate Dreuxfield married Newall, to the delight of all. I can imagine the Major's language when he heard of the marriage. He wears a wooden leg now.

The twenty-four diamonds were at the last Drawing-room on the neck of their owner. I have no doubt that, sooner or later, another attempt will be made to steal them, but it is questionable whether any thief will be as ingenious as Cracky Bill, *alias* Jenkins. But then, it isn't every valet and thief who chances on a master with an ivory leg.

MY COUSIN FROM FRANCE

CHAPTER I

IT has been stated—I know not on whose authority—that every one is more or less mad in one special direction. When such particular insanity takes a form likely to be injurious to individual existence, or to the well-being of the community at large, the person so afflicted is forthwith placed under restraint in the interests of law and order. Nevertheless, if a man be but reasonably unreasonable (and the contiguity of these words is not so incongruous as may appear) he is permitted to be at large, and to indulge in such freaks as please him. Among such harmless weaknesses may be classed stamp-acquiring, picture-buying, first-edition-hunting, china-gathering, and gem-collecting.

Since many men have many minds, and many minds have many predilections, the list can be indefinitely prolonged ; but as the tag-end of the above catalogue reveals my crotchet there is no necessity to multiply examples. To confess my hobby is requisite, as it begins and continues and ends this story. I am a gem-collector.

Women are enthusiasts in collecting jewels for the adornment of their beauty ; but my weakness does not consent to such vanity. I wear neither ring, nor stud, nor breast-pin, nor jewelled sleeve-link.

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It is true that, for the gratification of my whim, I purchase precious stones, but, instead of glittering on my person, they repose on white cotton wool in glass-covered trays. To each gem is appended a ticket inscribed with its history and value, but this information is for the enlightenment of strangers. I know my collection so well that, if needs be, I can, in the dark, lay my hand on any particular stone. I experiment occasionally with my wits in this way.

The possession of these valuables inspired me with a wholesome dread of burglars. My mother and I dwelt in a lonely house some distance from Lewes, and, mindful of our isolation, we took every precaution for the preservation of the collection. We had spring guns, electric alarms, patent locks, and various other contrivances for the baffling of the thieving fraternity. I kept the key of the strong-room on my watch-chain, and never slept without a revolver under my pillow. Our house was defended and sentinelled like a fortress, but, as it proved in the end, all to no purpose. I possess no collection of jewels now.

After such preamble I may as well confess that I am a bachelor. My father died while I was forming the nucleus of the collection, and when I came of age my mother urged me to marry. Being then bent solely on filling my treasury, I had no time to affect the society of the other sex, and I refused to commit myself rashly to matrimony; and, although my mother, disapproving of celibacy, talked matrimony to me for quite ten years, I still held to my freedom. If she was obstinate, I was more so, and at thirty-five years of age I was still single. Candour compels me to confess that selfishness was at the bottom of such persistent refusal.

Often did I point out to my mother the difficulty of obtaining a partner who would fall in with our views. I might marry a woman who did not care for collecting gems, or who might insist upon wearing those I possessed. She might even grudge the expenditure of further money in

adding to the hoard. To these objections my mother turned a deaf ear, and still reiterated her request. Her pertinacity was praiseworthy but wearisome. Twenty years of the cuckoo-cry "Marry, marry, marry" is calculated to irritate the most good-natured of men. It was the sole point on which we disagreed.

"There is my niece, Oswald," said my mother one morning, hot on her favourite topic. "Your cousin, Mathilde Barbot—you know all about her."

"Let me see," said I, polishing a newly-acquired cameo. "Do I know all about her, mother? H'm, your sister, my aunt, married M. Barbot, who is a merchant at Cairo. He——"

"Who *was* a merchant at Cairo," corrected my mother. "You forget, Oswald, he died six months ago."

"So he did, and sorry was I to hear it. He sent me that large turquoise yonder, and very cheap it was. Well, mother?"

"She is an orphan, Oswald."

"I know that, mother. And a very rich orphan, too, as I have heard you say."

"She is certainly well off. But money does not make up for love."

"So they say. Well?"

"How indifferent you are, Oswald. I wish you to particularly note what I say. Mathilde, finding herself lonely in Cairo, has written to ask if she can come to us."

"To come here! To this house?"

"And why not, Oswald? She is your cousin and my niece."

"I don't deny the relationship, mother. But reflect. We have never seen her. She may be an undesirable addition to our household. You are happy, mother, in——"

"I shall be still happier when you are married to a woman of whom I approve, Oswald."

"Ho, ho," I chuckled, now seeing her aim. "And you approve of your niece as a possible Mrs. Danefield?"

"I think she will make you a good wife, Oswald. You need not laugh. For all you know, she may be an angel."

"True; and for all *you* know, she may be the reverse. I should like to have some idea of what she is like. Why does not she send her portrait?"

"She did, but it was lost on the way. You know how careless those foreign officials are. But we shall soon be able to judge of her for ourselves. She is at Marseilles."

"Indeed. I understood you to say she was at Cairo."

"You have not been listening, Oswald," said my mother reprovingly. "I mentioned some time ago that she had left Cairo for Marseilles. Thence she goes to Paris to stay a few days with her school-friend, Madame Charette. I am to write to her at that address. Now, what am I to say?"

"Ask her to come, by all means. If she takes after your family, mother, she is sure to be delightful."

"Foolish, foolish boy," said my mother, beaming at the compliment; "but to tell you the truth, Oswald, I do not know whom she takes after. M. Barbot and I did not get on well, and, influenced by her husband, my sister corresponded but rarely with me. After her death M. Barbot was not very friendly."

"He sent me the turquoise, however. But how much do you know of Mathilde?"

"Only that she was educated at the *Pension des Anglais*, and is a quiet little creature. Thanks to her mother, she writes and speaks English pretty well. This letter is admirably written for a foreigner."

"How old is she?"

"Twenty-five, I believe. Ten years younger than you, Oswald. I always think," added my mother artfully, "that a wife should be ten years younger than her husband."

"Oh, mother, mother. You are driving me to the altar. I trust I shall like Cousin Mathilde, but I cannot promise to fall in love with her."

“Oswald,” hinted my mother impressively, “she is fond of gems.”

“All women are, for that matter, mother. I dare say she’ll ask leave to wear the cream of my collection before she’s been a week in the house. Does she know about my treasures?”

“Of course she does. Did not her father send you that turquoise? He doubtless told Mathilde, for she used to write to me from school asking after her English cousin and his jewels.”

“Very kind of her, mother. No doubt she thinks I own a gem-encrusted Aladdin’s cave. Do you wish me to cross over to Paris and escort her?”

“No; M. Charette is probably coming to London on business; so you can meet her at Newhaven.”

“Very good. Ask her to send a portrait, so that I may be able to distinguish her in the crowd.”

But no portrait arrived. Probably it was never asked for, as my mother’s memory is not what it used to be. However, she duly wrote and invited Cousin Mathilde to make her home with us. In due time a letter arrived, stating that the young lady was staying in Paris with her friends, the Charettes, and would come over to England, viâ Dieppe, under the protection of the husband. A post-script stated that she was anxious to salute her cousin Oswald, and to view his collection. From this I argued an artful nature.

Perhaps it is hardly fair to say this, as her letters, written in fair English, conveyed to my mind a timid, homely personality of no great beauty and much common-sense. I talked so much about our French relative to my mother that she assumed quite a concrete form in my mind. Small, delicately made, with gentle ways and a low voice to match her downcast eyes—this was the imaginary portrait I had drawn, and which had created an impression upon me. I actually considered the possibility of a marriage in

the near future, and pictured this trustful creature winning her way into our hearts and creeping about the house like a bright-eyed mouse. Strange to say, now that there was a probability of her wishes being gratified, my mother warned me against being too sanguine. She swung round like a weather-cock, and hinted at disappointment the very morning I left to meet Mathilde at Newhaven.

"I trust she will prove as delightful as you think, Oswald," said my inconsistent parent; "but we must not hope for too much. Remember we have never seen her, and she may be quite the reverse of what we expect."

"Just what I remarked a fortnight ago, mother. You then answered——"

"Now go, Oswald, or you will be late. I shall expect you home to dinner with Mathilde."

Thus did my mother evade being worsted. Before I could further denounce her change of front, she had me out of the house, and I drove off to Lewes greatly amused at her inconsistency.

Her main objection was based on our ignorance of Mathilde's looks, nature, and behaviour. I was extremely curious to see this bone of contention—if one dared speak so disrespectfully of a young lady—and as the Dieppe packet swung into its berth, I carefully examined the passengers' faces.

Not a glimpse could I catch of the homely personality I expected to see, and I began to think that Mathilde had not come. Indeed, convinced of her non-arrival, I was about to repair to the telegraph office, when a tall young lady, accompanied by a gentleman, planted herself before me, and held out her hand.

"My cousin!" she exclaimed in French, then, noting my bewilderment, she added: "Are you not M. Danefield?"

"Yes! I am Oswald Danefield, and you——?"

"I am Mathilde Barbot, your cousin. I recognized you by the portrait sent by your good mother. Ah! it is good

of you to welcome me. But I have been well guarded since leaving Paris. Permit me—my cousin, M. Charette, the husband of my dear friend Adèle.”

The smart-looking Frenchman grinned and bowed, and took off his hat with a flourish. Although rather amazed by the difference between the real and the ideal Mathilde, I was sufficiently self-controlled to return his greeting. After a short conversation about the fatigues of travelling and the embarrassment of luggage, we boarded the express. At Lewes M. Charette took a polite farewell of me, an effusive one of Mathilde, and then proceeded on his way to London. The carriage was waiting for us at the station, and having seen to Mathilde's trunk, we drove home. On the steps my mother awaited our arrival.

“I am delighted to see you, my dear,” said she to Mathilde.

Our guest looked puzzled for a moment, then replied in the most execrable English, “I haf no Inglis—I speak it bad.”

Remembering how my mother had boasted of Mathilde's linguistic acquirements I thought this extremely strange.

CHAPTER II

I HAVE not yet mentioned that my cousin was a beautiful woman. Such omission must be set down to the bewilderment caused by my finding Mathilde so different from what I had expected her to be. When our intercourse became more familiar, I had time to examine her looks, to watch her behaviour; and by noting both, I strove to arrive at a conclusion as to her character. All this took some weeks, and over a month elapsed before I learned to accept her as a member of our circle.

That I am of a retiring disposition I put down to the

quietness of my daily life, the lack of feminine society, and to my absorption in my hobby. He who is habituated to a placid existence is apt to feel nervous in the society of one acquainted with the great world. I know not where Mathilde, whose existence had been passed between school and Cairo, learned her airs and graces and *aplomb*, but she was certainly better instructed in life than either my mother or myself. We were both a trifle afraid of this stately woman, and noting this, she did her best to remove the impression. No daughter could have been more devoted to my mother; no sister could have been kinder to me.

Yet my mother—lenient as were her judgments—confessed to a certain distrust of Mathilde. Despite the kindly disposition of the one and the deference of the other, they did not get on well together.

Probably the absence of sympathy on the part of Mathilde had something to do with this, but whatever it was, the result was decidedly unsatisfactory. The elder woman actually went the length of lamenting the lack of confidence between them.

“I don’t know how it is, Oswald,” she said, after an unusually trying day with Mathilde, “but I cannot get on with her. She might be a stranger instead of my sister’s child.”

“Difference of nationality, perhaps.”

“But she is half English. Yet there is not a drop of her poor dear mother’s blood in her.”

“Takes after M. Barbot, no doubt, mother; I can’t say I’m altogether pleased with her myself. But you must make some allowance. Lewes after Cairo is rather a change. It is our duty to make her comfortable——”

“Which I’m sure we do,” said my mother in parenthesis.

“——and to love her as much as possible. That is,” I added hastily, for my mother looked oddly at me, “to love her as a relation.”

"I hope you don't love her in any other way, Oswald."

"I don't; yet three months ago you——"

"Times are changed, Oswald. I would not like Mathilde as a daughter-in-law."

"Well, certainly I would not care for her as my wife."

My mother, finding the conversation unsatisfactory, went off to harry the servants, who were never up to her standard of excellence. I retired to the strong-room, busied myself with my jewels, and wondered if I could be brought to love Mathilde. She was beautiful and graceful, no doubt, but there was something feline about her that frequently inspired me with a distaste for her mere presence. I fancy the dislike was mutual. In unguarded moments a glance oftentimes revealed the feeling she so carefully kept hidden. Love, indeed! There was but little chance of that between two who were the antithesis of one another.

While I was thus musing, Mathilde made her appearance, and with characteristic cunning, she saluted me with a smile.

"Pardon me, my cousin, but you promised to show me the new jewel."

She spoke in French, as was her custom. Often did we ask her to speak English; but she always excused herself on the plea of an imperfect acquaintance with the language. The early death of her mother and the habit of M. Barbot to converse in French with his daughter, doubtless accounted for her deficiency in this respect. Yet for one who wrote such excellent English letters, I thought it strange.

"Come in, Mathilde," said I, picking up a gem. "Here is the chrysoprase. Very fine, is it not?"

"Oh, but it is charming," she exclaimed, clasping her hands; "and so rare a stone. I never saw one before."

"The chrysoprase is little known. But you will find it mentioned in the Book of Revelation—I forgot—you are a Catholic, Mathilde, and, no doubt, prefer breviary to Bible."

"Do you care for either, my cousin?" said she, rather

wickedly, whereat I affected to examine the beauties of the gem. She had nothing to do with my religious convictions. But, after a few minutes spent in looking at the collection, she picked up the thread of conversation where it had dropped.

"If I do not read my Bible," said she, looking round the room, "I, at least, know something of the 'Thousand and One Nights.' Oh, yes. I have read the translation of M. Galland. There is a story called 'The Wonderful Lamp,' my cousin. You have this lamp, no doubt, to possess such wonderful treasures."

"Unfortunately, I have no attendant genie, Mathilde. All these jewels are bought and paid for."

"There is money here."

"About ten thousand pounds, I should say."

"Ah," said she, drawing a long breath, "and in francs?"

"Two hundred and fifty thousand francs."

"My cousin, you are a Monte Cristo! I wonder you are not afraid of thieves."

"I *am* afraid of thieves, my cousin, and I take every precaution against them. The walls and roof and door of this room are of sheet-iron. As you see, the window is strongly barred; and I carry the sole key which gives admittance on my watch-chain. No burglar could enter here."

"But thieves are so clever," she said wisely.

"Will you take the jewels, Mathilde," said I jokingly, "and relieve me of the responsibility?"

"Do not tempt me. Had I those jewels, I should wear them, and not waste their beauty in this cell."

"I fear you have not the soul of a gem-collector, Mathilde."

"That goes without saying, my cousin. I am a woman."

And she was truly a woman in her vanity and love of display. Yet, despite these defects, many would have yielded to the influence of those dark eyes and to the

invitation of those smiling lips. But I was as ice under the fire of her glances. Perhaps my faculty of love had died from sheer inanition ; or, perhaps, the feeling of antipathy neutralized it ; but I certainly did not care for Mathilde. My mother was pleased at my attitude, for she liked Mathilde as little as I did. There was a reason for this, but we did not find it out till long afterwards. Then it was too late.

CHAPTER III

TWO months of this life proved unsatisfactory. It jarred. I cannot honestly blame Mathilde, for she tried her best to be agreeable, but her efforts proved futile. Our domestic machine, that used to run smoothly as on oiled wheels, was now out of gear and jolted horribly. I felt it, my mother felt it, and I think Mathilde felt it also, though she said nothing about it. Her transplantation experiment was a distinct failure. She recognized that. The best thing she could do was to leave us to relapse into our old ways, and go back to her alien life. In the end that is what she did.

"My good aunt," she said, in the unemotional voice which was her greatest defect. "You are very good to me, and my cousin also is most amiable. But I must go away."

"I hope there is nothing wrong, Mathilde," faltered my mother, feeling guilty.

"Nothing that you or I can change, dear one. It is that my ways are not your ways. I am of a different nature. I have been trained in a different fashion. Every moment I do things which are not according to your English ideas. Your life is quiet and charming and full of sweetness, but it is not my life."

"You find it dull?"

"Not dull; I find it impossible. See you, my aunt? I cannot explain. Perhaps my cousin can?"

"I am afraid not, Mathilde."

"Oh, I know, I know," she said, nodding her head. "It is hard to explain, but easy to feel. I thank you both for your kindness, but next week I will return to Adèle Charette, at Paris. What say you, my aunt?"

"I do not wish you to stay if you would rather go, my love; but if you think——"

"Then it is settled," said Mathilde, in what I thought was a tone of relief. "I shall write for M. Charette to come over for me."

I offered to save M. Charette the trouble—it was the least I could do—but my services were declined by Mathilde. She wrote to Paris, and in due time received an answer that M. Charette was coming over on business, and he would call at Lewes on his way back to escort her, as requested.

When the evening of her departure was settled—for she elected to go by the night mail to convenience M. Charette—my mother became quite tearful. In the tenderness of her heart she blamed herself for the girl's decision.

"But, indeed, it is not my fault, Oswald. I have done my best."

"My dear mother, you are hospitality itself. For my part, I am pleased she is going."

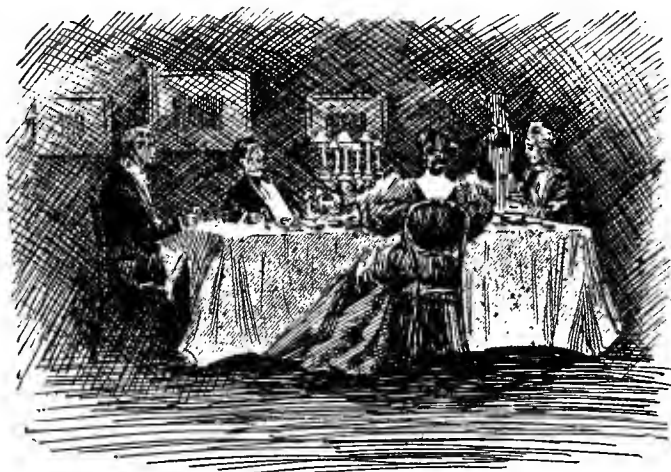
"Our quiet life does not suit her."

"Evidently not. She prefers the society of Madame Charette and the gay city."

During that week we were constant in our attentions to Mathilde, and, recognizing our efforts to please her, she made herself extraordinarily agreeable. But the result was a failure, and the old distrust still continued. We all three felt that we were acting a comedy, and would be glad when it was over. The curtain fell on a Wednesday, and on a situation that was as unexpected as it was disagreeable.

M. Charette arrived shortly before dinner, and was made

welcome. I cannot say that I liked him. He was a slender man of the Negroid type, which offended my racial prejudices. It was no news to me to learn that he came from Martinique. Frizzly hair, opal-tinted nails, and thick lips betrayed his African blood. However, we overcame our distaste for his society, and made his three hours' stay as pleasant as possible. All was prepared for the departure of my cousin. Her large black trunk had been brought down-stairs, and deposited near the strong-room. I ordered



“ We sat down to dinner.”

the brougham to be at the door at half-past nine, to take them to Lewes, as they were to catch the ten-seventeen express for Newhaven. These arrangements having been made, we sat down to dinner.

Long before the meal was over my mother was forced to seek her room. She complained of feeling ill, and, with many excuses, retired to lie down. I was thus left to entertain our guests, and cannot say I found much difficulty

in doing so. The two were capital company. Mathilde threw off her reserve in the presence of a compatriot, and was quite brilliant in talk and speech. Being of an observant nature, I noted the glances she exchanged with Charette, and began to pity the absent wife.

I had a vague idea that all was not right—that Mathilde had not read her native novelists for nothing; and that the Frenchman with the bold eyes and sniggering laugh was a consummate scoundrel. I was glad my mother had left the table; I was glad Mathilde was going; and I caught myself saying something about mixed races and double faces.

Dinner over, Mathilde went to take leave of my mother, and we two men retired to the smoking-room. Frankly speaking, I should have preferred that my cousin came with us, as her conduct had so revolted me that I felt her mere presence to be an insult to my mother. We had entertained the opposite of an angel unawares, and I was glad she was going away.

During her absence Charette talked of himself, and in a hundred little ways betrayed his low moral tone. I allow considerable latitude to some men in consideration of their upbringing and natural instincts, but I object to rake their minds for concentrated vice. My guest was an iniquitous scoundrel, and respectable as was the room and employment, I felt as though I were assisting at some low orgy. Some men have the faculty of poisoning the air by looks and words.

I was relieved when Mathilde made her appearance with the coffee, as it put an end to the conversation of Charette. My cousin handed me a cup with her own hands, mentioning that it was the last service she would be able to do me. Then she accepted a cigarette from the Frenchman. I do not approve of women smoking, but her doing so seemed in keeping with the tainted atmosphere of the room.

“I have bidden my aunt adieu,” said Mathilde, “and all

is ready to go. But we have yet an hour. Could you not show M. Charette your jewels, my cousin?"

"Not to-night; it is too dark to see them properly."

This was untrue, as the strong-room was lighted by electricity; but I could not bring myself to show such a mark of friendship to Charette. He seemed the kind of man who would knock one on the head, if he had the chance, and go off with the whole collection. Of course, such an idea is absurd, and I merely mention it as a proof of the disagreeable way in which Charette affected me. The scowl with which he greeted my refusal strongly accentuated his Negroid traits, but he possessed sufficient tact to pass the matter over lightly.

"On some other occasion, Monsieur may favour me," he said, smiling.

I was resolved that such other occasion should never arrive. The way in which Charette and Mathilde looked at one another made me again pity the wife in Paris. But at this moment I began to grow drowsy. Instead of tending to wakefulness, the coffee induced me to sleep. It was most remarkable. I struggled vainly against the lethargic feeling; but my head fell on my breast and my eyes closed. The last thing I remember was Charette and Mathilde whispering eagerly together. The next moment I was sound asleep.

CHAPTER IV

I AWOKE next morning to find myself seated before the fireless grate. Bewildered by the novelty of the situation, it was some time before I could collect my thoughts sufficiently to account for my position. It was entirely opposed to my usual habits. With some misgivings, I recollected the strange behaviour of Mathilde, and rang the bell.

When the butler appeared he looked astonished at seeing me still in evening dress, and even more so when I questioned him on the events which had taken place the previous night.

"I must have fallen to sleep in my chair, Bates. Why did you not wake me before going to bed?"

"Beg pardon, sir, but Mademoiselle Barbot told me not to disturb you."

"Is Mademoiselle gone?"

"Yes, sir. She went with the French gentleman to catch the ten-seventeen express. I hope, sir, that nothing is wrong?"

"No, Bates; nothing is wrong. That will do."

I went up to my bedroom, took a cold bath, and dressed myself for the day. All the time my thoughts were busy with the unaccountable fact that I had slept in the smoking-room. It seemed strange that Mathilde should be so solicitous for my comfort. However, I had no reason to think anything was wrong; so, dismissing the subject, I paid my usual morning visit to my mother, whom I found much better. Afterwards I repaired to the strong-room. As usual, I opened the door with the key attached to my watch-chain. Then I received a shock. The cases were shattered; the jewels were gone; the place was as bare as the palm of my hand. It was quite five minutes before I could force my brain to work, my will to act. The loss of ten thousand pounds is apt to disarrange one's faculties.

Mathilde! Charette! I kept repeating these names in a stupefied fashion, as though I expected their owners to appear and restore the stolen jewels. Stolen? Certainly. But by my cousin and her friend? Impossible! The mere idea was terrible; yet she might have been coerced by Charette. With a brain as clear as crystal—after the fashion of brains at such moments—I rapidly constructed a theory to account for existent facts. Here it is:—

Charette had designed the theft, and had carried out the plans with the assistance of Mathilde. She had drugged my coffee, and, while I slept, had stolen the key of the strong-room from my watch-chain. The rest was easy. They had packed the jewels in Mathilde's trunk, closed the strong-room door, replaced the key, and had made off with their plunder. By this time they were in Paris.

I made no outcry, for as one of the culprits was my cousin, I deemed it advisable to keep the matter quiet, at all events for the present. Locking the now empty strong-room, I interrogated the butler.

"At what time did Mademoiselle Barbot leave?"

"About half-past nine, sir."

"Exactly one hour to clear the place," I thought, remembering Mathilde's remark; then added aloud, "Mademoiselle took her trunk with her?"

"Yes, sir. It was placed on the brougham, according to your orders."

That was the irony of the thing. By my orders the means had been provided for their flight. I have no doubt that the trunk was filled with my collection, but it was useless to ask further questions; I made up my mind to a course and acted. Ordering a portmanteau to be packed, I repaired to my mother's room. She was on the point of descending to the breakfast-room.

"Are you better this morning, mother?"

"Much better, thank you, Oswald; but I have a slight headache still."

"So have I. We have both been drugged."

"Oswald!"

"It is true, mother. Your wine and my coffee were drugged, and while we were asleep, Mathilde and her precious friend, Charette, have carried off all my jewels."

"Mathilde rob you! Are you mad?"

"Not I. Come down to the strong-room, if you don't

believe me, mother. It is quite empty ; she stole the key from my watch-chain, put the jewels in her trunk, and drove off with it to the station in our brougham."

"My own niece ! Oswald, what is to be done ?"

"I am going to Paris this morning, and will call at the Charettes'. I do not suppose I shall find Monsieur at home but I shall put the police——"

"The police, Oswald ! Your cousin ?"

"I'll do what I can to save her, mother, but I cannot afford to lose ten thousand pounds without making an effort to regain it. Hush, mother ; do not cry."

"My own niece, Oswald !"

"We are well rid of her, mother. I think myself she is a bad lot."

I pass over my mother's lamentations and the futile theories she put forward to prove the innocence of Mathilde. By noon I was on my way to Paris with Mathilde's letter, written from the Charettes' address to accept our invitation. She little thought when she penned that letter that it would some day prove a trap to catch her. By such trifles do we weave nets for our own snaring.

There is no need to describe the journey. I duly arrived at my destination, left my portmanteau at the nearest hotel, and then, notwithstanding the lateness of the hour, drove at once to the Charettes'.

There I received a shock.

"Both Monsieur and Madame Charette were away," explained the concierge. "They had been gone some days, but the mad Mademoiselle Barbot was still within."

This information pleased me. I should at least be able to reproach Mathilde with her wickedness. But why did the concierge call her mad ? The epithet was inapplicable to so ingenious a schemer.

However, I wasted no time in vain inquiries, but mounted the stairs and rang at the door of the Charettes'. A pretty little maid, who looked as though she had been crying, made

her appearance. I saw at a glance that she was no servant, and shaped my speech accordingly.

"Pardon me, but is Mademoiselle Barbot within?"

"I am Mademoiselle Barbot, monsieur."

The announcement took away my breath. I looked at her in astonishment, and in that brief glance felt satisfied that she had spoken the truth. There was a far-off resemblance to my mother in her face, and in all respects she was the bright-eyed little mouse of whom I had dreamed. But if this were the real Mathilde, who was the false one? I lost no time in learning that fact.

"I am Oswald Danefield."

"My cousin?" she cried in English, which, by the way, she spoke excellently well. "Oh, how thankful I am to see you! Come in, Oswald; I have so much to tell you."

She led me into an untidy room, and, giving me a chair, sat down near me. Then, for the first time, I saw that she looked ill and worn. The remark of the concierge occurred to my mind.

"Why do they call you mad, Mathilde?"

"Ah! why, indeed, Oswald?" she said sadly. "I am not mad. I came here to stay with Adèle Charette and her husband; but when I wanted to leave, on receiving your dear mother's letter, they said I was mad and shut me up in a little room. I have been there for two months, watched by old Madame Charette. Not once did I see Adèle or her husband."

"Could you not have escaped?"

"No, Oswald. The old woman kept the door locked, and, when I cried out, she told the tenants I was mad and was shortly to be removed to an asylum."

"Where is the old woman now?"

"I don't know. She went away this morning. I found the door of my room open and came out. To-night I was going to write to you, but now there is no need. Oh, Oswald, how I have suffered! What does it mean?"

"It means robbery, Mathilde. Was Adèle a tall, dark, handsome woman?"

"Yes. She was my friend at school, and I loved her so. To think she should be so cruel! But you talk of robbery, Oswald?"

"I do. You spoke of my jewels to your friend?"

"Yes. Was it wrong?"

"Very wrong, as it turns out," said I grimly. "Adèle Charette impersonated you, and has been staying with us for the last two months. Last night her husband joined her. They drugged me and went off with ten thousand pounds' worth of jewels."

"But how could she impersonate me?" cried Mathilde, astonished at this recital. "She knew no English."

"Oh! she accounted for that in a very ingenious way. Besides, we had never seen you, nor had we your portrait. There was no reason to think that Adèle was not the real Mathilde."

"Oh! how wicked. But M. Charette was a terrible man, and made Adèle as evil as himself. She was not so at school."

"I trust not, for the credit of the school. But now I know that you are not the thief, I shall set the police on the track of the three Charettes."

"I, a thief?" said Mathilde indignantly.

"Under the name of Adèle Charette only. I thought it was my cousin who stole the jewels."

"It is terrible. And now, Oswald——"

"Now I shall take you back to England, my dear. It was a pity you spoke about the jewels, else they might never have conceived and carried out their clever plot. No wonder my mother and I did not like Adèle. However, we may yet catch and punish them."

Brave talk, indeed: but we never did catch them. The three baffled the French police, escaped to Spain, and thence sailed for South America. In those lawless lands south of

the Line they were safe from pursuit, and now, I have no doubt, they are living on the proceeds of their nefarious scheme. It was cleverly conceived and cleverly carried out. They learned all necessary details from the unsuspecting Mathilde, and framed their plans accordingly. I now understood the glances which passed between my so-called cousin from France and M. Charette. Also how we had failed to



“ I turned my thoughts to matrimony.”

love her. She was as evil as was her husband. They were a well-matched pair, and no doubt the mother (whom I learned was a quadroon from Martinique) was as bad as either. However, it was no use lamenting ; the game was played out, and I had lost my collection.

I have never had the heart to begin another. The risk is too great. I took my real cousin back to Lewes, and

she became a member of our household. Great was the indignation of my mother when she learned how we had been deceived.

"No wonder I could not love her, Oswald. It was instinct."

We found no difficulty in loving the second Mathilde Barbot. In fact, out of evil came good. Deprived of my collection, I turned my thoughts to matrimony, and, much to my mother's delight, I married Mathilde. She became my hobby, and I have no fear of her being stolen. However, as I miss my jewels and I am unable to form another collection, I propose to devote myself to stamps. There is just as much interest and less risk.

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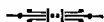
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