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ARDINAL SIN

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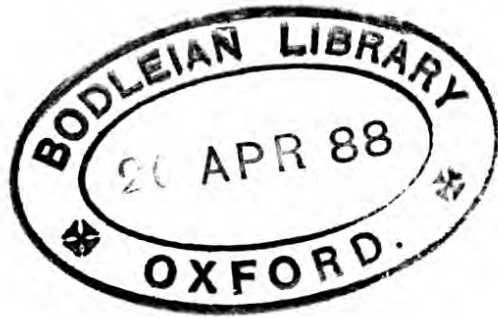
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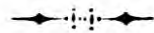
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# A CARDINAL SIN



## CHAPTER I

### 'UP AND DOWN'

WE have heard of men whose temperament is such that it enables them to receive intelligence of the severest reverses of fortune, of the defeat of most cherished hopes, without even the movement of a muscle betraying how the news affects them. As huge misfortunes often stun with their shocks, and as pride is a great sustainer, we may believe such men do exist; but I have yet to find the Stoic who can bear the petty injuries and grievances of every-day life without complaining. Such a character is more than mortal, and even when found I shall decline to believe in it until I have seen its behaviour when kept waiting on a winter's night at Sleaford Junction—that junction so comfortless that the very trains themselves appear to keep away from it as long as they can.

Sleaford Junction is in Westshire, and Westshire, as we know, is in the West of England. At first sight, the idea of Sleaford being a junction of any importance seems preposterous. The fast trains on the great main line dash through it scornfully. If you are waiting there at night, you see, miles away in the distance it seems, a red light—in another minute there is a roar, a rattle, a rush of wind; and, shrinking back as far as you can from the edge of the platform, you see for a second a confused blur of carriages

—then, looking along the line, you find the tail-light a mile away. Then you collect yourself, and try to imagine what collision with the express means.

Although the flying trains spurn Sleaford, there are plenty of slower ones which show it favour, because from the south of the main line runs a little offshoot of a railway which takes people to a fashionable and rising watering-place; whilst from the north runs another useful little line, which opens up a fertile valley, famous for all sorts of dairy produce, at the end of which valley is a good, old-fashioned, sleepy cathedral town—too large a place for railways to overlook. These are the substantial reasons pleaded by Sleaford for the necessity of its existence. It is just possible there may be a village from which the junction takes its name; but it is supposed to be miles away, and, as nobody knows anything about it, need not be considered.

Sleaford Junction is a terrible place. The trains never seem to fit in. You get out there hopefully, having puzzled out the time-table, and found your train should start at once. But it never does; and the man who knows the nature of the place makes up his mind to wait—trusting it may be only twenty minutes—praying it may not be an hour.

It is an uncovered junction, and the winds of heaven seem to imitate the railways and join issue there. They blow round every corner; they ignore the rights of leeward places; they drive you at last into the general waiting-room, whose whitewashed wall hurls a cheerful text of Scripture at you, and where, most likely, two or three persons give evidence of the efficacy of the sacred quotation by hiding the fire from you altogether, or push their chairs, with an injured scraping sound, back some three inches. In a very short time you begin to realise what waiting at Sleaford Junction means, and think it well, if you are a right-minded man, that there is no refreshment-room attached. The temptation to drown one's woes would be too great.

On a certain night in December, 187— there were not many complaining travellers waiting on the down, or north side of the junction. Except on those days which are market days in Blacktown, the large city where so much of the valley produce is disposed of, there is little traffic over the branch line. Often the last train takes back only one

or two passengers, and, on this particular occasion, there seemed to be but one who had any right to objurgate the railway management. The up train might bring some more ; and it was the up train that was waited for. You may be certain that at Sleaford Junction you were always kept waiting for the up or the down train.

It was a cold, clear, frosty night. The wind was not so scathing as usual, or the detained traveller was wrapped up well enough to defy it. At any rate, he seemed to prefer the open-air to the comforts of the waiting-room. He sat on the edge of a luggage truck, drumming his feet against the ground to keep them warm, and smoked like one who finds tobacco a friend and a comforter.

This man, as far as outward appearances went, might have been anything—except, perhaps, a duke or a pauper. His clothes were good, but not fashionable. They were of dark blue rough cloth, and, as his coat was of the kind which is called a pea-jacket, there was something seafaring in his look, although an ordinary felt round-topped hat neutralised this impression. He wore no gloves—his hands had no doubt been hardened by exposure, and, as he raised his fingers to his pipe, you might have seen that the shirt he wore was of dark flannel. Thick, strong boots and a woollen wrap round his throat completed his attire.

The light on the Sleaford platform is not very good, but it showed his face fairly well—a face with strongly-marked features, yet not an unkind face ; a shrewd face, but not the face of a rogue. He wore a thick closely-cut beard, here and there touched with grey ; although his age could not have been much over forty. If you had travelled in the same carriage with that man, and amused yourself, as I often do, by speculating as to the station and manner of life of your fellow-traveller, you would have decided he had spent his best years abroad, had worked hard at his calling, and, judging from his comfortable look, not unsuccessfully. If you had talked to him you would certainly have said something about the colonies.

He sat on the truck, kicking his heels with natural impatience ; then, his pipe going out, he drew out a knife and a plug of tobacco, cut a sufficient quantity of dark-looking fragments to refill the bowl, and, as a porter with a lantern happened to be passing, hailed him and asked for a light. There was a slight American twang in his speech

—a sort of acquired, not a natural flavour. The porter opened his lantern, and the down-train man puffed until his coarse tobacco was aglow.

‘Thank you, mate,’ he said, good-temperedly; ‘have a pipe yourself?’

‘’Gainst rules,’ answered the porter.

‘Put a piece in your pocket—you won’t get such stuff in England, I guess.’ He cut off a large piece of tobacco, which was gratefully accepted.

‘Now tell me,’ he said, ‘is this waiting about at this dog-hole of a place, a necessity; or is it pure cussedness?’

‘Up-train late. Start as soon as she comes in,’ answered the porter, employing the usual formula.

‘Nice one-horse kind of working,’ growled the traveller.

‘Know the country about here?’ he asked quickly.

‘Westshire man, sir—all my life, sir.’

‘Where’s Redhills? I want to get there.’

The porter gave him another look, and mentally deciding his condition in life could not be called that of gentleman, asked, ‘What do you want at Redhills?’

The traveller laughed—apparently at the man’s curiosity.

‘Perhaps I’ve got business there; perhaps I want to see the master; perhaps I intend to buy the estate. Now you’re answered, answer me.’

The inquisitive porter was puzzled. He knew that some gentlemen dress strangely; so he thought it well to atone for his rudeness by extra civility.

‘Lies midway between Brackley and Longmere, sir. Best go on to Longmere.’

‘That’s what I wanted to know. I suppose we shall get to Longmere some time to-night?’

‘Up-train signalled,’ said the porter, slipping over the side of the platform and crossing the line nimbly.

There were three or four passengers by the up-train, whose destination appeared to be the same as the man’s who was waiting. They crossed the bridge and reached the other side, where all save one plunged into the waiting-room. The exception was evidently a personage of some importance. Our friend the porter followed him obsequiously, bearing his rug and bag, and the station-master stepping out of his office, saluted him with the greatest respect. He was a tall man, of some fifty years, handsome and erect, with gentleman unmistakably stamped upon him.

No porter, however ignorant, would have presumed to answer his question with another. After all, one of the greatest gifts a man can have is a fine presence. It has taken more people to fortune than intellect has borne there.

The new-comer acknowledged the station-master's salute shortly.

‘Why don't you start the train, Jones?’ he demanded, imperiously.

‘Express must pass first, sir; and some trucks must be shunted.’

‘This place grows worse and worse. I shall myself appeal to the directors, and insist upon a change in the working.’

The way in which he pronounced the words ‘myself’ and ‘insist’ appeared to amuse the man who sat on the truck. He gave vent to a low chuckle, and, turning to his friend the porter, who was standing near him, said, in an undertone—

‘It does a fellow good to hear such an almighty swell as that. Now, who may he be?’

‘That's Philip Tremaine Bouchier, Esq., M.P.,’ answered the porter, with awe in his voice.

The man on the truck started slightly. He leant forward and scanned the features of the M.P. as well as he could in the dim light—scanned them with so much interest that the porter felt even greater pleasure in holding the luggage of such a distinguished person.

The down-train man continued to gaze at Mr Bouchier, who walked up and down the platform until the porter informed that gentleman the train was about to start, conducted him to his carriage, saw to his comfort, and, doubtless, retired gratified. The little knot of third-class passengers emerged from the waiting-room, and took their places. Then a sudden thought seemed to strike the down-train man. He jumped up quickly and ran to the ticket-office. Business was suspended, and the pigeon-hole barred by the little wooden slide. He knocked, but met with no response. In retracing his steps he met the porter.

‘I want to change my ticket,’ he said.

‘You've no time for changing tickets. Train's just moving. Look alive, or you'll be here all night.’

The porter was right—the train was in motion. The traveller caught up his little hand-bag, ran after the train,



opened the door of the first compartment he could, and sprang in, regardless of railway bye-laws. It was done in a second, but in that second he noticed that he had chosen the compartment adjoining the one occupied by Mr Bouchier. He threw himself on the seat and began tugging at his beard, as if to assist thought.

‘Just my luck,’ he said. ‘Why didn’t I think of changing my ticket at first? Why didn’t I get in the same carriage without a ticket? Then I suppose he’d have turned me out. I must see him to-night, somehow. I heard him tell the fellow at the station to take care of his bag, he was going off by train again early to-morrow. So I shall miss him, and have my journey for nothing. If I try and speak to him when he gets out of the train, he won’t be bothered with me.’

The man fidgeted about, and looked angrily at the partition which separated him from Mr Bouchier. He threw the window down, and saw by the light of the moon the various roadside objects flitting by.

‘I don’t see why I shouldn’t do it,’ he said. ‘This old train runs precious slow, and it’s but a step. Guess he’s not likely to shoot—Englishmen don’t without warning. It’s foolish, but I’ll do it. Let’s see everything is safe first.’

He opened his warm pea-coat and satisfied himself that a thick black pocket-book was safe in the breast of it. Then he buttoned it carefully, tucked the ends of his comforter in tightly, and opened the door of the carriage. He could see the foot-board plainly enough in the moonlight, and the large brass handles gleamed brightly. He was a hard-headed man, strong and confident—the danger in passing from one carriage door to another seemed trifling. He stepped out, and, clinging by the brasses, shut the door, even managing to turn the handle.

I imagine there can be nothing more startling to a traveller—a traveller sitting alone in one corner of a railway carriage—his rug round his knees, his cigar in his mouth, and his own thoughts miles away—than to hear a sudden tapping at the window, where, glancing around, he sees not the double of himself, who always rides side by side with him, but the face of another man. Mr Bouchier was not a timid man, but his start of horror may easily be understood. For a second or two he gazed helplessly at the

would-be intruder, but as the tapping continued he concluded there was some object at it, so throwing off his rug he rose and approached the window. Had anyone been with him he might have noticed that before doing so Mr Bouchier transferred something from the breast of his coat to the loose side pocket where it could be readily got at. Then he opened the window.

'What are you doing there?' he asked the man outside. 'If you mean robbery you have mistaken your man.'

The outsider laughed so pleasantly that Mr Bouchier's fears on that score were quite dispelled.

'Better let me get in,' he said, 'then I'll tell you how I got here.'

Although no man has a right to put himself in such a predicament, clinging outside a carriage window is supposed to be a position too perilous to admit of parley; so, without saying more, Mr Bouchier drew aside, whilst his visitor entered through the window in a most undignified way, and then seated himself, smiling triumphantly at the success which had attended his efforts.

Mr Bouchier was a man with whom few dared to take liberties. His frown was very unpleasant, his mouth was a hard one, and at times his light blue eyes could wear a merciless look. Tramps and poachers whose fate it was to stand before the magistrates, always, if they knew the district, congratulated themselves when he was absent from the bench. Therefore you may imagine the look he cast on the intruder was not a sweet one, nor was his voice the kindest.

'Now, sir,' he said, 'if you have recovered yourself, kindly explain the meaning of this intrusion—or, perhaps, you would prefer to make the explanation to the guard when next we stop.'

The intruder bent forward.

'Mr Bouchier,' he said, speaking without the slightest trace of levity, and with an earnestness which surprised his listener, 'Mr Bouchier, I learnt who you were at the junction. I heard you say you were going away again to-morrow. I have come many miles to see you on an important matter——'

'It must be an important matter indeed, when you risk your life to obtain an interview,' said Mr Bouchier with sarcasm.

‘It is important. Shall I tell you who I am?’

‘There is no necessity. People can’t act in the foolish way you have acted without justifying their conduct to the proper authorities. I shall learn your name in good time.’

The man’s face flushed—a hot retort seemed trembling on his lips, but he stifled it, and his voice was almost as calm as that of the sarcastic gentleman facing him.

‘Had you asked me twelve months ago my name, I should have told you I had no right to any name. To-day my name is John Bouchier, and I am the rightful owner of an estate known as Redhills, Westshire.’

Philip Tremaine Bouchier was a man who was glad to think that his complexion did not change with the temperature—growing alternately red and white like that of common people. There was seldom much colour in his face, but now, for the moment, it became absolutely bloodless. For some time he seemed deprived of speech. Then he made an effort and recovered himself, as was but due from a man of his position and station in the world. It may be a look, something like triumph, in his companion’s eyes hastened that recovery. He spoke with dignity.

‘Without disputing you are the person who thinks he is entitled to bear that name, I can only trust that for your own sake you are going to make no attempt to revive that preposterous claim.’

‘Mr Bouchier,’ said the other, ‘no doubt all former proceedings are family history to you. You know what, and what alone was wanting.’

Mr Bouchier bowed stiffly.

‘Then I have only to tell you it has been found. My poor old father’s life-long search was at last successful—I believe it was joy that killed him.’

His listener paled again.

‘Why come to me?’ he asked in a strange, hoarse voice. ‘Take your forgeries to some pettifogging solicitor; let him try and trade on them.’

‘I hate lawyers. I am a plain, rough fellow; my head was never turned by what my old father called his rights. I didn’t believe in them till a very short time ago. Besides, the thing is so simple—no lawyer’s advice is wanted. Look here, Mr Bouchier, you are a clever man; it needs little law to tell you that this slip of paper makes me the owner of Redhills.’

As he spoke he extracted a long narrow document from his pocket book, and handed it to Mr Bouchier. No sense of dignity could prevent that gentleman's hand from trembling as he stood up, and, holding the paper under the light, slowly deciphered it. His lips twitched, and only the fact of his remembering that the paper was but a copy prevented him from tearing it into fragments. He read it again and again, then returned it to its owner, and reseated himself without speaking.

His companion awaited Mr Bouchier's pleasure. He sat looking at him with an expression of curiosity, but not unkindness. Mr Bouchier seemed in no hurry to speak. He was thinking of many things, and his thoughts, whatever they were, lent his cold blue eyes an expression which few men had ever seen there. His right hand was in the pocket of his overcoat.

The self-styled John Bouchier had been in peril on many occasions, but he little suspected never in such dire peril as at the present moment. He little knew what the slackening of the train's speed, before Mr Bouchier had quite completed his round of thought, meant to him. He never dreamed that his silent companion was mentally weighing pros and cons, and endeavouring to decide whether an attempted forcible entry of a roughly-clad man into a first-class compartment, whilst the train was at full speed, would justify an extreme act. He thought it would; but time must be considered, and time was slipping away. Mr Bouchier's fingers moved uneasily in his pocket. Then there was another thing he wanted to know—a thing he must know—before he decided that his theory was tenable.

The question he would have asked was rising to his lips when the decreasing speed of the train told him it was too late.

He clenched his teeth for a moment, then removing his right hand from his pocket, commenced to fold up his railway rug.

'This is Brackley,' he said, coldly. 'I get out here.'

'Mr Bouchier,' said his companion, earnestly, 'you will see me in the morning, and talk this matter over?'

'I would rather not. I can see no use in it?'

'I don't want to be unfriendly, if I can help it, sir.'

A grim smile flickered on Mr Bouchier's lips. A man who comes to turn you out of your home and possessions

can scarcely be friendly. The train was almost at a standstill—Mr Bouchier rose from his seat with a curious undefinable expression in his eyes. He spoke, and his voice was rather husky—his accents not so clearly cut as usual.

‘Then I will see you. Come early. Where do you stay to-night.’

‘I thought of going on to Longmere.’

‘You had better go to Redton. It is close to my place. There is a very good inn there.’

‘How far is it from here?’

‘Some six miles—I will drive you there if you like.’

‘Now that’s hearty! I call that very kind. I know we shall square this all right, Mr Bouchier’—the speaker held out his large hand in token of goodwill.

Philip Bouchier just placed the tips of his fingers in it, withdrawing them hastily as a railway official opened the carriage door, and bowed as the great man stepped out.

His fellow traveller followed. ‘Got in the wrong carriage,’ he said in answer to an inquiring look—‘here’s a shilling—keep the change.’ Then he went in search of his hand-bag, left behind him in his transit.

A smart groom with horse and dog-cart was waiting outside the station for Mr Bouchier. When driving at night the groom generally sat by his master—the cart ran easier.

‘Open the back seat and ride behind, William,’ said Mr Bouchier. ‘I have promised to give a man a lift to Redton,’ he added, although as a rule he did not volunteer any reason for his commands.

The man came out.

‘You can get up by me,’ said Mr Bouchier with that peculiar intonation in his voice which some people adopt when speaking to those greatly their inferiors.

The man did as he was told; William the groom let go the horse’s head, and the dog-cart rolled quickly along the road—the Redton road. The carriage lamps were lit, for although it was a moonlight night, the path in places was shaded and gloomy.

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## CHAPTER II

## FROM TWO POINTS OF VIEW

THE six miles of road between Brackley and Redton is delightfully picturesque, but terrible in its gradient. As you drive over it and pause now and again at some of its most elevated parts, you are filled with two feelings—admiration at the beautiful view you get over Westshire, and pity for your horse. He, poor creature, driven in blinkers is quite unable to understand your admiration, and can only hope your pity will allow him to take his own time up those hills.

It is a terrible road—you get a bit of level ground after leaving Brackley, then the up-and-down system begins. If you are not descending a hill you are ascending one, and the worst hill of the lot is the one about half way, called Steepsides, but better known by those who have to climb it often as 'Bellows-to-mend'—a very significant term, which needs no explanation. You go down a hill called Littlesteep—an ironical name which evidences Westshire wit—before you come to Steepsides, then the road skirts the bottom of the hill for some distance, rising gradually, until, tired of its tardy progress, it turns round at an acute angle and goes in an uncompromising Roman sort of a way straight on its errand, which errand appears to be that of going down the other face of Steepsides almost as quickly as it got up. Now, if you have the power of drawing mental landscapes, and provided my words are well chosen, you will see that the acute angle where the road begins to grow steep forms the apex of a gigantic triangle, the plane of which is Steepsides, and the base a line drawn from the bottom of Littlesteep to the upper line of road on the former hill.

Even a donkey knows that two sides of a triangle are greater than the third side. Westshire folks not being donkeys, from time immemorial a zigzag footpath had been cut or worn up the base line, and a pedestrian by taking a stiff pull up it could cut off the best part of a mile of the road; so most people under sixty, whose lungs were in working order, walked that way.

These descriptions are given with the accuracy of an ordnance survey, that you may be able to exactly realise

the position of the first witness of some curious events which occurred upon the night when Mr Bouchier, M.P., was kind enough to give a strange man a lift from Brackley to Redton. It is from William the groom's point of view we look first.

He was a stolid young man—irreproachable in appearance, as a gentleman's servant should be, and obedient, as Mr Bouchier's servants were bound to be. He knew his business well, and upon an emergency could show he was not a fool. He sprang up to the back seat, contentedly enough; wondered a little why his master had troubled to pick up the man, opined the man wasn't much of it, because master gave him such short sharp answers if he made a natural remark about the country they were passing through. But this was none of William's business, and as the occupants of the front seat lapsed into entire silence, William ceased to think of them, and occupied his mind with his own private concerns.

The horse picked his way down Littlesteep, at the bottom of which Mr Bouchier drew rein. 'You had better walk up the path, William,' he said; 'the horse seems rather tired.'

William touched his hat, and jumped down with an alacrity he did not feel. Grooms, as a rule, don't like walking—their legs have been educated to higher aims—moreover, it was a fad of the master's; the horse was strong and fresh enough to take an Easter Monday waggonette and contents up Steepsides without troubling. So William commenced his tortuous climb, feeling it was a work of supererogation.

Had Mr Bouchier not been so careful of his horse, and had William been left undisturbed on his back seat, he would have been surprised at hearing his master, for the first time on that drive, break silence voluntarily. He would have heard him say abruptly to his companion, 'Have you a son?' and would have heard the man by his side, who was, no doubt, chafing at Mr Bouchier's unmistakable assumption of superiority before his servant, reply with a curt 'No.'

William, of course, did not hear this. If he had he might have thought his master was taking a kindly interest in the stranger's belongings. He struggled manfully up the zigzag, rested for a moment at the top, and then walked

on up the road. Now he was afoot, he thought he might as well go on a bit and spare the horse. He looked back wistfully several times, and at last was rewarded by seeing the lights of the dogcart approaching. He gave a sigh of relief, and continued to walk on at the side of the road. Master would see him, stop, and pick him up. Soon he heard the sound of wheels, the ring of hoofs, and wondering what the doose master were up to tearing along at such a pace, he stopped to hail him, if necessary. It was only when the dogcart was close to him that the idea entered his head that there was no one in it.

It was too late to think of stopping the horse; and he stood struck stupid, he afterwards said, as the empty vehicle flashed past him. 'Men can take care of themselves—hosses can't,' was an unspoken axiom of William's; so, without more ado, he turned and pursued the retreating carriage. It was not such a foolish action as it seemed to be—he shrewdly suspected that any sensible horse would soon become aware of the folly of running away up 'Bellows-to-mend.' This horse, he knew, was a sensible one. William was quite right, for by the time he was nearly puffed, and his legs ready to drop off by reason of the improper use they had been put to, he came upon the dogcart, motionless, in the centre of the road; the horse in a condition very much like his own, just exercising sufficient force to prevent the dogcart taking its revenge, and running away down hill with him. Everything seemed intact, excepting that the whip was gone.

William gathered up the reins, mounted the box, and retraced his steps down the hill. No damage being done to horse or carriage, he did not think much could be amiss with the late occupants; but it was well to ascertain as quickly as possible. From force of habit he took up the rug, which lay under his feet, and drew it over his knees. Then a curious thing occurred—a thing which William has never yet been able to explain. He noticed the edge of the rug was wet, and, after raising it, his glove was also wet. So he leant forward and held his hand in front of the lamp, and his stolidity gave way when he saw that his dogskin glove was covered with blood. 'Tis an accident—an 'orrible accident! So help me!' said William, and, dreading the worst, he drove down Steepsides faster than he ever dared to drive before—blaming himself for not going



after the men before the horse, but also comforting himself by thinking how handy the trap would come in.

He kept a sharp look out, but saw nothing until he reached a point about a hundred yards from that acute angle where the steeper road commences. There, in the moonlight, he saw a tall, erect figure standing near a dark mass lying in the road, and William's heart rejoiced that master was all right, anyway. He stopped the horse, and in the light of the lamp, Mr Bouchier turned round with a pale, stern face. His hat appeared crushed out of shape, his dark coat covered with dust, his whole appearance dishevelled.

'Accident, sir?' asked William, in awe, but touching his hat, nevertheless.

'No, far worse,' said Mr Bouchier, in a grave, solemn voice. 'I have shot the man.'

You might, as William said, have knocked him off his seat with a feather.

'Shot him, sir!' he repeated, in amazement.

'He tried to rob—I believe to murder me,' said his master, in the same grave way. 'I was bound to do it in self-defence. If I have been too hasty, may Heaven forgive me!'

'Amen,' said William, who was not without religious feelings. 'Shall I drive to Redton for the constable, sir?' he continued.

'I am afraid it's not a case for a constable,' answered Mr Bouchier. 'The poor fellow is stone dead.'

William offered no further suggestion, but waited commands. His master took one of the lamps out of the socket, and, holding it in his hands, bent over the dead man. He placed his hand on his heart, felt his pulse, and then rose.

'He is quite dead. Turn round and back the wheels into the bank; then get down and help me—we can't leave him here.'

William obeyed, shuddering as he did so, yet admiring his master's nerve.

'Give me the rug,' said Mr Bouchier.

'It is all over blood, sir.'

Mr Bouchier started.

'Nonsense,' he said, sharply, 'if so it is mine—give me the rug.'

William took it up by the bottom hem, and gave it to his master, who threw it over the prostrate form.

‘Now raise him up,’ he said. ‘Place him in the cart, somehow. Find a piece of rope and lash him to the back.’

The ghastly office was done—Mr Bouchier’s hands were steady enough, but William’s trembled so that he was of little use.

‘Look about the road for an open knife,’ said his master. ‘You will find one somewhere.’

William obeyed, and soon found an open clasp knife—the same knife the man had used to cut his tobacco whilst sitting on the truck at Sleaford. He brought it to his master.

‘Put it just as it is under the box seat. Then get up and drive to Redton—knock up the constable—he will tell you what to do.’

Well trained as William was he felt inclined to rebel. To drive the remaining three miles with such a ghastly burden seemed more than duty demanded. It was only the sense of indignation which the discovery of that murderous looking knife had raised against the dead man which steeled him to undertake the task.

‘What will you do, sir?’ he asked.

‘I will walk,’ said Mr Bouchier, curtly. ‘You may come back and meet me—don’t go to the house and frighten them. Be as quick as you can. You can leave me one of the lamps.’

As he handed him the lamp William could not help remarking—

‘What a mercy you had your pistol, sir,’

‘Yes,’ replied his master. ‘Did you hear me fire? The horse ran away at the report.’

‘Wind was blowing down hill, sir, but I fancied I heard a shot—I didn’t give much heed—so many poachers about, sir.’

‘Well, be off—now—keep a look out for me as you come back.’

William took the broken whip which he had found in two pieces near the scene of the tragedy—drew the lash across the horse’s back and went off as fast as he could; eager to get rid of the terrible thing that weighed down the back of the dog-cart.

Mr Bouchier remained alone with the lamp in his hand.

He appeared to be in no hurry to leave the place. Perhaps the spot where one has taken human life—even in self-defence—has a strange fascination—or, what seemed more probable, Mr Bouchier had lost some article of value in the struggle. Lamp in hand he commenced making circles which gradually grew wider until the road no longer would hold them. He peered among the herbage at the side—he looked up into the trees, but, whatever he had lost, his search was unsuccessful. A muttered curse slipped out of his clenched teeth, and he turned his face towards home, breasting the hill with a firm brisk step. William returning from his dreary errand met him before he had gone three parts of the way, and drove him to his house, the inmates of which were entirely ignorant of the tragic event of the night, and how nearly Mr Bouchier had lost his life by the knife of an assassin. As he stepped from the carriage he said to William— ‘There will be an inquest—say as little as you can till then.’

William touched his hat and drove away to the stables, thinking of his strange experiences on that eventful night.

There was another man who also had strange experiences that night, who saw certain events from another point of view. This was a man who lived in an untidy hovel in the poorest part of Redton. Poor as his abode was, there were people who wondered how he managed to pay its miserable rent, for Jim Stokes was seldom seen doing work of any kind. He was one of those gentlemen who are generally associated with hairy caps with a turned-up flap at each of the four cardinal points, and with lurching dogs, ferrets, &c. In the daytime he loafed about smoking his pipe with a defiant as-good-as-you sort of look, but after nightfall when he strolled abroad he was of a peculiarly bashful disposition. On this particular night he was taking one of his little rambles, and was very near the acute angle of the Steep-sides Road, when he saw the lights of a carriage approaching. His natural timidity induced him to plunge headlong into the undergrowth which covers the hill—his humility threw him into a recumbent attitude, and his desire to be about his business made him watch for the carriage to pass. Then his experiences began.

They began with annoyance, for, the tall gentleman driving—the one who was furthest from him—drew rein exactly opposite to the spot where Mr Stokes lay upon his

stomach. Then he began talking to his companion, but Mr Stokes could not hear what he said; only he saw the man near him shake his head. Then the tall gentleman looked up the road, down the road, even on each side of the road, and Mr Stokes trembled as his eyes met the eyes of that dreaded magistrate, Mr Bouchier. But Mr Bouchier saw him not, and recovering from his uneasiness he heard the words, 'light a cigar,' and, although the horse was still stationary, saw the reins transferred to the short man's hands. Then a most curious thing happened—the tall gentleman put his hand into his pocket, for his cigar case it seemed—but there was a sudden flash—a report—and the shorter man was swaying about in his seat, making a horrible sound with his lips. In a moment, with a dull thud, he fell on the road, and, although Mr Stokes cared nothing for the piteous look in the eyes of a dying hare, the look on the fallen man's face, as he saw it in the moonlight, froze his blood. The perspiration rose under the poacher's fur cap—it seemed like a horrible dream. So stupefied he was, that he scarcely noticed that the fallen man, with the remnant of life left him, thrust his hand into his breast, and threw some dark object as far from him as he could. The whole thing was inexplicable to the hidden witness. But there were even more curious things to follow.

With a generous disregard of his own safety, he had crept serpent-like through the undergrowth until he was close to the bank—a few yards from the fallen man. There he saw more curious sights.

He saw Mr Bouchier take out a lamp from the socket, bend over the prostrate form, then rise with a look of grim satisfaction on his face, and replace the lamp. He saw him unbutton the dead man's coat, search his pockets, and draw out a knife, which he opened and threw on the road. He saw him search again the pockets, and saw also a convulsive movement of his lips, which personal experience told Mr Stokes meant strong language. He saw him take a bundle from the dogcart and carry it to where Mr Stokes' point of view ended, then return without it. He saw him take the whip out of the socket, lash the horse wildly until it sprang madly up the hill. He saw him break the whip in two, and throw the pieces on the road, and then he saw him do a thing, which, at another time,

would have appealed to Mr Stokes' sense of humour—he saw him take off his hat and crush it flat, and, to put a climax to the curious scene, lie down and roll in the road. This last proceeding was so eccentric that the looker-on scarcely noticed him pick up the knife again and do a little mysterious business with his coat before he threw it from him as before. Then he heard approaching wheels, and he bashfully withdrew in his serpentine way to a safer distance; but not so far away, but he could see all that William saw, and a little more that happened after William had left.

Then Mr Stokes was so upset altogether that he felt entirely unfit for pursuing his profession that night, and got back to his hovel at Redton, revolving many things in his mind or in that apology for a mind which dwells in a low, narrow forehead, generally covered by a fur cap.

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### CHAPTER III

#### FAMILY HISTORY AND EARLY PEOPLE

IN spite of Horace's advice—to plunge boldly into the middle of what things you may have to tell—there is much to be said in favour of the New Testament method of beginning with a genealogy. It is, undoubtedly, a great temptation to strike at once into the middle of a situation, hoping you may arrest your reader's attention and excite his curiosity, but unfortunately, sooner or later, events which led up to that particular situation must be disclosed, and, in nine cases out of ten, these events are embodied in family history—and all family history except one's own, is dull reading. Nevertheless, we must know something about the Bouchier family. This is indispensable, so the sooner the explanation is made the better.

We are not called upon to descend the family tree below a certain Robert Bouchier. As he himself could have said but little about his own father, and nothing at all about his grandfather, we may draw the line at him. After Robert Bouchier is history—before him fable and tradition. With these latter we have nothing to do.

This Robert Bouchier, who was probably of French descent, amassed a large fortune. His money was made by trade—in the principal seaport and town in the West of England—made by honourable mercantile transactions his descendants boast—by traffic in slaves the detractors of the family assert. But, however gained, his wealth must have been considerable, for in the year 1750 he retired from business, and acquired by purchase the large estate of Redhills, in Westshire. Robert Bouchier the first died in 1780.

He begat Robert Bouchier the second, and several other children. No doubt the latter were suitably provided for, as he left Redhills to his eldest son.

Robert the second lived the life of a prosperous country gentleman. The family got well established, the taint of trade gradually disappearing, so that before his death the second owner of Redhills and his belongings were looked upon as county people. He was fortunate in marrying a woman of good family. She was not an heiress, but that fact mattered little, as his income was a large one—so large that he could save, and always be ready to pounce upon any land near his estate which came into the market. In this way, Redhills, with the additions Robert the second made to it, grew into a very fine property.

Robert the second begat two sons, Digby and Stephen—also three daughters who married and went to their respective places, where we may leave them.

This Digby, the eldest son and presumptive heir, must, according to all accounts, have been a poor sort of a fellow; a weak, vacillating young man, easily led astray—one who gave his father much trouble. There are some interesting letters still existing in the family archives which show that before he was twenty he had been extricated, at considerable cost, from various scrapes. However, shortly after attaining that age he was engaged to be married to the daughter of a neighbouring landowner, and his father fondly hoped his eldest son's wild oats were all sown. But the marriage never took place. For some unknown reason the young lady cancelled the engagement. It cannot be said whether Digby took his disappointment to heart or not, but it appears he left home for a time. He was away for a couple of years; then he returned to Redhills, and shortly afterwards, at the opening meet of the season, was

thrown from his horse and was killed—perhaps the best thing that could have happened to him.

Robert Bouchier survived his eldest son ten years. Upon his death, in 1820, his will was found to be dated at the time when Digby's marriage seemed imminent. It gave Redhills to Digby for life, and after his death to his eldest son and his heirs ; and should Digby have no son, then to the testator's second son, Stephen. Digby having died unmarried, the old man had not troubled to make a fresh will, as this one fulfilled all he wanted to do—left Redhills to Stephen.

Stephen Bouchier's reign was a long one, lasting until 1853. He kept up family traditions, but distinguished himself in no marked way. Two events of note occurred during the thirty-three years he ruled. The first was, that underneath the red portion of the land, from which the estate took its name, iron had been found in large quantities, on every ton of which, when raised, a good royalty was paid to the owner of the land. The second event was that, about ten years after Stephen's accession, an absurd claim to the estate was brought forward. The claimant, a young man of two-and-twenty, in humble circumstances, stated that he was the lawfully begotten son of Digby Bouchier, and, under the will of Robert Bouchier the second, was entitled to Redhills and other landed property. The young man's tale was plausible, as far as it went. Digby, he asserted, secretly married his mother early in the year 1808, at the latter end of which he was born. He accounted for his long silence as to his claims by the fact that his mother had always been ignorant of her husband's true position ; also that shortly after his death her mind became unhinged, and for years she had been hopelessly mad. Whether Digby Bouchier, in the few moments which elapsed between the fall from his horse and his death, had managed to send her a message by some trusty hand, will never be known.

The claimant's story was scouted as preposterous—a clumsy attempt to extort money ; but if it was so, no covert overtures were made hinting that a compromise would be accepted. A writ of ejectment was served on Stephen Bouchier, and the case in due time came before the court. The way it collapsed was pitiable ; so weak was the documentary evidence tendered by the plaintiff. There

were plenty of people to swear that for nearly two years Digby Bouchier and the claimant's mother had lived as man and wife ; but no one could say when, where, or before whom the marriage ceremony had been performed. Indeed, so slight were the grounds for the action that, in nonsuiting the plaintiff, the judge made a few pointed remarks respecting solicitors who, apparently for the sake of costs, urged their clients to declare war with weapons so weak as these in their hands. So the claimant went back to obscurity, and Stephen sat unshaken in the seat of his fathers.

The lord of Redhills was not a bad hearted man. He had no doubt but that the claimant was Digby's son : so, when the excitement of the contest had subsided, he offered, through his lawyers, to make the young man a small yearly allowance, or to pay him down a sum of money to advance him in life. His lawyers—careful men—tacked on to this offer the condition that James Bouchier, as he called himself, should sign a document waiving his imaginary rights. The offer was respectfully declined, and the negotiation ended.

Fifteen years afterwards the claim was revived. Some fresh evidence was brought forward, which clearly showed that James Bouchier's mother believed she was legally married. Yet the one thing was wanting, and, without it, the case collapsed as before. On this occasion there seemed to be more money behind the claimant, and it transpired that he was now a fairly well-to-do tradesman in a small northern town ; one who might have done better, people said, had he kept his money in his business instead of spending it in fruitless searches for a record which did not exist, and in paying lawyers to conduct a hopeless case.

But that was his own concern. He was an inoffensive reticent man. He did not go about trumpeting his wrongs. The strength of his conviction, the steadiness of his purpose, was known only to himself. He was commonly known as Boucher. Probably, the friends who had brought him up had discarded the two other letters, as they Frenchified the name ; and in those days we hated the French and their works. So he answered to the name of Boucher, which was good enough to trade under, and would serve until he took his own, and ousted the younger branch of his family.



Except for the tenacity of his belief that his father and mother were married, James Boucher, or Bouchier, had nothing to distinguish him from the ordinary tradesman. He married one of his own class—a worthy woman, who sighed deeply and often at her husband's expensive monomania. She dared not attempt to dissuade him, for on one point he was adamant. His mother died in 1843—died without any lucid interval in which she might have cleared up all doubts.

James Boucher had but one child—a son. He was a high-spirited boy of a roving turn, who, although from his earliest years carefully impressed with the fact that he was the rightful heir to a large estate, troubled little about it, and at the age of eighteen, betook himself to America to carve out his own fortune.

Stephen Bouchier was disturbed no more by the preposterous claim. In 1853 he turned his face to the wall and died, outliving his wife by several years. An artistic monument was erected to him in Redton Church, and his son, Philip Tremaine Bouchier, reigned at Redhills in his stead. There were other sons and daughters, but the family tradition of leaving the estate intact to the eldest son, was preserved.

Yet, tradition notwithstanding, there were many people who believed that Stephen Bouchier would disinherit his eldest son. Philip had neither been the best of sons, nor had he led the cleanest of lives. His father had paid large sums of money for him; amounts he could pay without much trouble, but which he disliked having to pay: for he inherited some of the thrifty qualities of the founder of the family. Still, whatever he may have threatened or even intended to do, custom was too strong, and Redhills went the usual way.

Like Prince Hal, Philip, when he succeeded to his kingdom, left the follies of his youth behind him. He married suitably, played the part of a county magnate, made himself fairly popular, and manifested a new trait in the Bouchier character—he became ambitious—politically ambitious. So well-rooted had the family become in Westshire, that ten years after his father's death, he was elected, without opposition, one of the members for the division of the county in which Redhills is situate.

But that small tradesman, with a passion for litigation,

had not let him rest in peace. In 1862 the case was once more before the court—once more lost by the claimant. Fresh and important evidence was threatened; but little was forthcoming—so little that all James Boucher's friends marvelled at his folly. But the man knew what he was about. His object was gained by the resuscitation of the case, which prevented the case being barred by reason of time, and stopped the so-called younger branch of the Bouchier family being confirmed in the possession of Red-hills, by the fact of the estate having been held undisturbed for the period laid down by law as necessary to establish a good title.

Philip Bouchier paid what portion of costs he was called upon to pay, and cursed the base-born tradesman as he drew the cheque. He, like his father, was convinced that the claim was absurd; yet it annoyed him. Once he had to raise some money on the land, for he was not such a thrifty man as his predecessors, and Parliament meant increased expenditure. Then he found that lenders were rather shy, or wanted a very high rate of interest for their money. A gentleman's estate ought to be like Cæsar's wife—above suspicion. He had not been troubled by James Boucher since 1862, and some little time ago he heard of the old man's death, so trusted the annoyance and the bother had died with the claimant, for no one made any sign.

It was just after the happy news of James Boucher's decease that Philip Bouchier made a discovery which converted what had hitherto been nothing more than a recurring annoyance into a sword of Damocles. In looking through old family papers, in quest of autographs, for a friend who collected such things, he found a sealed letter addressed to Mrs Bouchier. It was dated on the very day his uncle lost his life; the writer's sudden death had, no doubt, prevented its being sent to its destination. It began, 'My dearest wife,' and was signed, 'Your affectionate husband, Digby.' These expressions of endearment alone would not have troubled Philip Bouchier much; the terms 'husband and wife' may be but words, but one paragraph spoke of the baby, and said how glad the writer was to think that neither father, mother, or child could ever incur the world's censure, or blush for anything left undone. As he read this paragraph he knew that James Boucher was as legitimate as he was; that if ever

he succeeded in finding out where the marriage had taken place, Redhills would pass from Philip Bouchier to the small tradesman.

And this discovery was fresh and weighing like lead on Philip Bouchier's mind on the night he drove a roughly clad man from Brackley to Redton ; when in defence of his own life he was compelled to shoot him on the road.

The master of a house cannot return home in such a knocked-about state as Mr Bouchier returned to Redhills that night, without creating considerable consternation in his family. Not only did he bear outward and visible traces of a severe struggle, but beneath his clothes was a slight stab in his left side, made by the assailant's knife. His wife, daughters, and a son, who was at home, stared with open eyes as he told the tale of his adventure, and no doubt thanked the Providence which had so mercifully saved the head of the house from death.

However self-possessed a man may be, he cannot be expected to be quite himself after such an encounter, so Mr Bouchier cannot be blamed if he answered the volley of questions poured upon him curtly, and soon expressed a wish to retire to rest. When alone with his wife, he begged her to say no more on the subject, at least for that night.

'I must be up by daybreak,' he said. 'I lost my pocket-book in the struggle—and could not find it afterwards.'

'Can't one of the servants go and look for it?' asked his wife.

'No, I must go myself. There is money in it and papers of value. Tell your maid to let them know that I want my horse at daybreak or a little before.'

Mr Bouchier was a man of iron nerve, and an invariably good sleeper. It was therefore somewhat startling for his wife to find herself awakened by her husband some hour or two after this conversation.

'I can't sleep,' he said in a hoarse whisper. 'Get me some chloral—laudanum—anything.'

There was chloral in the room. Mr Bouchier took a dose heavy for one unaccustomed to its use ; and his wife lay awake until she heard his breathing grow regular, and knew that he slept.

When she awoke in the morning, he was still sleeping heavily. For a long time she would not disturb him, until, remembering his commands of the night previous, she

dared not let him lie longer. She woke him, and in a few minutes he shook off the effects of the drug, and started up. It was daylight.

'The time—the time?' he asked, impatiently. His wife told him.

'And you have let me sleep!' he said, bitterly, dressing himself as he spoke. 'Is the horse there?' he continued, with the look on his face at which Mrs Bouchier always trembled.

The horse was waiting, in charge of a groom who was longing to be set free and get to his breakfast. Mr Bouchier completed his hasty toilet, and without bite or sup sprang into the saddle and went off at full speed.

The wind had chopped and changed during the night, and snow at one time had fallen. It was now lying about an inch thick on everything. Mr Bouchier was glad to see it—it would hide all traces of last night's struggle. He needed no assistance to find the exact spot. He remembered noticing that close by it was a young fir tree, which had died prematurely, and now stood up leafless amongst its green and living brethren. In tremendous moments a trivial outside thing often intrudes itself, and Mr Bouchier felt he should never see a withered tree again without thinking of the events of last night.

Although not so early as he wished to be, he was, he hoped, in time, and would be able to recover his lost pocket-book. There were no footprints on the snow on the Steepsides road, for, as the hill was wooded on both sides, no duties called the farm labourer that way. A fresh cart-track was the only thing that broke the integrity of the white surface. Mr Bouchier sent his horse along as fast as he could with safety. He soon reached the spot he remembered so well. The cart-track came up to it, and he noticed it continued as far beyond as eye could see; but the snow for many yards around the terrible centre was trodden down in every direction. As Philip Bouchier looked at it, in some ghastly jocose way the childish remembrance of Crusoe and the footprint on the sand flitted through his brain.

Yet he dismounted and looked about him, not the less carefully because he felt it was hopeless. He looked high and low, but saw nothing of his pocket-book. He could not even find something he had carefully deposited a little

way off, so, with his thin lips tightly shut, he mounted and rode back to Redhills, to face as best he could inquiries, congratulations and condolences. For a man, and, moreover, a Member of Parliament, who has shot a ruffian on the preceding night must expect plenty of such attentions.

Early as Mr Bouchier had been that morning, there had been an earlier bird. Jim Stokes had retired to rest with the same resolve as to visiting a certain spot on the Brackley Road by daybreak. But chloral in the gentleman's case and gin in the poacher's had acted similarly—Mr Stokes had not been quite as early as he intended. He, having no wife to wake him, had but himself to blame; and that men of his sort seldom do—they damn their luck instead. His bashfulness had made him shun the main road; but certain footways which cross Steepsides had brought him to his destination. He was luckier than Mr Bouchier, for he found what he went after; and walked by the way he came back to his hovel, to examine at his leisure a hand-bag he had picked up. It was the print of his feet which had made Mr Bouchier think of Crusoe.

There was an even earlier bird than these two. Farmer Davis, of Watercress Farm, the Redton side of Steepsides, a tenant of Mr Bouchier's, had business which took him to Blacktown, although that day was not market-day. He, never having heard of chloral, and being moderate as to gin, was up at the time he intended to be; and his cart-wheels were the first invaders of the pure white snow. Had you told Farmer Davis he was an unsuspecting admirer of nature, he would have assured you such a thing 'werdn't in his line.' Nor would he have been the wiser if you had told him that an innate love of the beautiful made him glance approvingly at the snow-covered fir-trees, as he drove his old horse down the hill, when that bright wintry morning broke. 'Pretty thing snow be,' said Farmer Davis. 'Trees all look as pretty as a scene of the staage'—for once or twice he had been to Blacktown Theatre, and had been greatly impressed by the scene-painter's skill. So he looked at the graceful white-decorated firs again and again, and, moreover, happened to look at one when he had nearly reached the bottom of the steep hill. Then he pulled up his horse.

'I've a zeed zum rum things in my time, but I never

zeed pocket-books a-growing on vur-trees,' said Farmer Davis.

For, on the lowest branch of the young tree he was looking at, hung a black pocket-book, as neatly as if placed there intentionally, not by chance.

Muttering sundry expressions of surprise, he drew as close to the bank as he could, and, standing up in the cart, flicked with his whip until the strange fruit of the fir-tree fell down. He picked it up, but did not stop to examine it then. Time was slipping by, and a Westshire farmer who has to catch a train, likes to be on the platform at least a quarter of an hour before the train is due—even at Sleaford Junction.

When Farmer Davis was safely ensconced in the train, he began to investigate his windfall. It was a large double pocket-book, or, rather, a letter-case. There were a good many papers in it, some of which appeared faded with age. The farmer was not a quick reader, so he postponed deciphering them. But among them was a paper, the purport of which he knew from experience—it was a five pound Bank of England note. The presence of this decided the fate of the pocket-book. Had its contents been valueless to all except the owner, Farmer Davis would have kept it until called for; but as there was money in it, back it must go to its owner, at once; and the owner's name was printed in gilt letters inside it—James Boucher, High Street, Newham.

He transacted his business in Blacktown, and before he returned home, went, according to custom, to smoke a pipe and drink a glass of deep-brown brandy and water at the Railway Inn. He was one of those men who, although they would be indignant if it was asserted that writing was a matter of difficulty to them, yet prefer that some one else should write their letters. So he asked the 'barmaid,' a respectable, motherly woman of about fifty, to do the pocket-book up in paper, and direct it to the address stamped inside it.

'What'll the stamps come to?' he asked, as she was directing the wrapper. She weighed it, and found that threepence would defray the cost.

Farmer Davis was a just man and an honest man, but very close.

'Thruppence is thruppence,' he said. 'Just write a line,

and put inside, un say, "Zur,—I've a vound your pocket-book. The stamps is thruppence, which please zend to A. Davis, Watercress Varm, Redton."'

So the pocket-book was packed up, directed, and sent to its supposed owner, with Farmer Davis's bill for expenses inside it.

James Boucher had been dead some months, but the postal clerks in Newham knew all about him, so, instead of the packet being opened and redirected to the sender, with 'Dead—no address,' written across it, someone took the trouble to go outside red-tapeism and inquire the address of his representative. This, with some difficulty, was ascertained; and in about three weeks' time the postman duly deposited the packet at No. 72 Gray Street, London, directed to John Boucher, the only son of the deceased.

Farmer Davis little thought that his respected landlord would have willingly given him the fee simple of Watercress Farm in exchange for those papers in that black pocket-book.

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## CHAPTER IV

### FELLOW LODGERS

GRAY STREET is not a fashionable street of London. Even the house-agent who has an eligible house, in that particular part, to let, does not venture to call it more than a 'genteel' street. It is one of those many streets so much alike within a short distance of Regent Canal. The houses in it are respectable two-storey buildings with three steps up to the front door, and a small railed area which prevents passers-by from absolutely peeping into the ground floor window. If you knock at the front door of a house in Gray Street, the chances are that, before answering your summons, a servant reconnoitres you from the depths of the area to ascertain whether your station in life calls upon her to open the door to you, or if your errand can be performed in the open air. In fact, seven out of every ten houses in Gray Street are lodging-houses, and, as the neighbourhood is very accessible and not unpleasant, much frequented by young

gentlemen—bachelors generally—whose vocations call them to banks, merchants' offices, and other mills where they are commencing the grind of life.

The universal plan adopted by the Gray Street and other similar houses is this—the front ground floor room is furnished sombrely with mahogany and hair—old and substantial. This room, which is called a dining-room, opens by folding doors into a bedroom at the back. The first floor is exactly the same in size shape and accommodation. The front room of this is called the drawing-room, and is usually furnished with bright green, red or blue covered chairs and couches, with a cheerful carpet and curtains to match. Upstairs are other bedrooms, which are occupied by the landlady and her family—the landlady being always a widow—and, it may be, by one or two lodgers who share the same sitting-room.

Had the drawing-room of No. 72 been left to its own devices, it would have been no better than its neighbours. For all these drawing-rooms are alike. The furniture may be red, green, or other prismatic colours, but the effect is the same. The only difference there can be is whether you find the furniture in the lusty bloom of its youth or in the sadder hue of old age.

But in No. 72 some one with an idea of better things had covered the gaudy chairs with an inoffensive cretonne—had banished the vicious cut and coloured glass lustres and cheap china vases in favour of a few unpretending but harmless knick-knacks; and as you entered the room you could not help noticing that a large portion of it was occupied by a grand piano. If curiosity at seeing such an instrument there led you to open it, the name of one of the best makers in the world would stare you in the face.

This morning there is but one occupant of the room—a girl of about nineteen. She is seated at the piano, and trying the accompaniment of a most difficult song—now and again singing a few notes; but both singing and playing listlessly, as though her thoughts were elsewhere. Presently her hands fell on her lap, and she sat doing nothing. A knock came at the door. 'Come in,' said the girl, rising from the music-stool.

Now we can see her. She is tall, and it needs no second glance to learn that she is beautiful. Her features are straight and regular; her eyes dark, and the eye-brows



over are exquisite. Her thick, soft, brown hair grows low upon a forehead broad enough to show she is no fool. Her complexion is pale, but perfectly consistent with health—it is only some powerful emotion which changes the colour of her cheek. Her head is well and proudly set on a fair white neck, the outline of which sweeps away to a pair of shapely shoulders and a magnificent chest. With such a splendid frame tiny hands and feet would be deformities; but no fault can be found with the shape of her hands and feet. A queenly girl, stately and beautiful.

It was the servant of the house who knocked. Guiltily conscious of an unsavoury apron and dirty hands, her head only obeyed the girl's command to enter.

'Please, miss,' she said, 'Mr Manders' compliments, miss, and would you like to see him before he goes out?'

'Yes; ask him to come up.' And the tall girl walked over to the fire, and leaning one rounded arm on the mantelpiece, awaited her visitor.

She was clothed in some soft, dark stuff, closely fitting, and showing her splendid figure to great advantage. Who can wonder that on his entering, the visitor's eyes as they fell upon her showed unmistakable signs of admiration?

He was a tall young man, handsome enough—handsome, mind; not good-looking, which is another thing. He was well, even carefully dressed; but, from certain minor things a practised eye would have seen he was not quite the gentleman he wished to represent himself to be. A rope is only as strong as its weakest part, and in a would-be gentleman's attire there is usually some frayed strand which makes those who know distrust the whole.

He entered the room with the air of an old friend, and brought with him an unmistakable smell of tobacco. Taking the girl's hand in his, he held it until she gently, but firmly withdrew it.

'Any news?' he said.

'None,' she replied. 'No letter, and another day gone. Nearly three weeks since he left—and he promised to be back in two days at the outside. What shall I do?'

'Better wait and hope. He's all right. If any man knows how to take care of himself it's John Boucher.'

'But three weeks—to leave me alone without a word! He must be dead.'

'Not a bit of it!' said Manders, with a clumsy sort of

levity. 'Perhaps he wanted a bit of a change. Maybe he's run over to the States again.'

The girl glanced at him scornfully. 'You, who have known him all your lifetime, to suppose that!' She turned away as she spoke and looked at the fire.

'Something must be done,' she said presently; 'I must advertise, or go to the police. How can I continue in this anxiety? How can I go on living here alone, without a friend except you?'

'I should wait another week or so,' he said more gravely. 'You see, Frances, your father may have his own reasons for staying away; I shouldn't advertise or set the police on his track.'

Perhaps Mr Manders was not averse to acting as sole protector to this beautiful girl.

She said no more, but with bent brows gazed down into the fire. Her companion walked across to the piano, and struck a few chords with a firm, powerful touch. Then he opened his chest, and the notes of 'Sound an alarm' rang through the little room.

Both Frances Boucher and George Manders had that gift—that gift which may fall on rich or poor, gentle or simple—music. For the muse, in bestowing her favours, heeds not the condition of men. They both had voices, and music was the chief bond between them. Both were ambitious of gaining both fortune and fame as public singers; indeed, it was for this that George Manders had accompanied John Boucher and his daughter from America, and, as the girl said, having known them all his life, had taken up his abode on the ground floor of the house at which they lodged.

As he sang, she listened apparently with great interest; then a sad look crossed her face. The singer threw the last notes on the air, then looked up at her inquiringly.

'Oh, George!' she said, in answer to his look, and speaking more kindly than she had yet spoken, 'don't be angry with me, but there is something wanting—something that must be there to make a great artist.'

Angry or not, he closed the piano with a bang, then rose and came to her.

'The old fault, I suppose—feeling, expression, soul, as you call it, wanting?'

Her silence assented. He drew nearer, and his eyes looked very bright.

‘Frances, you know what would change everything for me—what would make a singer of me. Give me your love. Think again—give me what I ask.’

He needed no answer in words. The face he looked at so ardently told him his appeal was hopeless. There was no tremor in her voice as she said, ‘I cannot; why pain me and yourself by asking what is impossible?’

He said no more, but turned away with a black, vicious look on his handsome face. His hand was on the door when it opened, and the servant announced ‘The music-master.’ She meant no rudeness, but Herr Kaulitz was a name she could never pronounce to her satisfaction.

Herr Kaulitz, a thorough Teuton with long light hair and the inevitable spectacles, entered. Manders gave him a half nod and a scowl, and left the room.

‘Goot morning, mine dear Miss Bouzher,’ said the master, ‘what have been you to the young man doing? His face looked—ach, it looked like tunder.’

Miss Boucher greeted him, but did not answer his inquiry. ‘He thinks he shall zing, that young man; but he never shall zing. Ah, yes, you vill say he has voice. What is voice? Bah, nothing! But you, you vill zing. You shall the vorrrld zom day by storrrm take. Now to work.’

He seated himself at the piano, and for the next half hour the girl’s magnificent soprano voice filled the room; till the next door lodger—a refined young man at a bank, who was at home with a bad cold—glued his ear against the wall, and longed more and more to become acquainted with his gifted neighbour. Yes, Frances Boucher could sing.

But George Manders never would have made a singer. Besides the utter absence of expression in his style, Frances was sorry to have to think that even his voice was deteriorating since he had been in England. His mode of life may have had something to do with it; for a man who would rank as a great singer must live soberly and discreetly as a saint or an anchorite.

His manner of life was very far from that. We need not follow him when, in a whirlwind of passion, he left Miss Boucher’s room, or ask how he spent the day and night.

At any rate, it was half-past seven in the morning when he opened the door of No. 72 and re-entered.

He may have been drinking during his absence, but he was sober enough by this time, although a general look of dissipation pervaded him. The servant of the house was no doubt, up and about; but she had not yet visited the hall or collected the morning's letters which were lying in the little wire cage fixed to the door. Manders took them out, found one for himself, also a bulky packet for John Boucher. This, not knowing exactly why, he carried into his own room with him, and laying it on his bedroom mantelpiece, threw himself into the bed and slept for some hours.

He was young, with a good constitution; so he awoke not much the worse for the night's dissipation, and even ate a good breakfast. He intended afterwards to see Frances and give her the letter addressed to her absent father; but his curiosity was aroused by the size and the heaviness of the packet, which he examined and found bore the Newham postmark.

'Wonder what the deuce has become of Boucher?' he said. Then he thought of Frances, and her determined rejection of his handsome self; and he ground his teeth. Then he looked at the packet again, and grew more and more curious.

'I had better open it,' he said, 'it may be buisness—I am sure Boucher would wish me to do so in his absence.'

So he opened it—but probably not feeling quite justified in so doing, opened it by running a lead pencil under the gummed flap. By a little delicate manipulation he succeeded in detaching it without breakage, so that, if necessary, it might be sealed up again.

There was another envelope inside, and having once begun he had no hesitation in attacking this by the same successful means. There he was rewarded by the sight of the pocket-book before described.

He rang the bell, had the breakfast things cleared away, then sat down to investigate. The book was full of papers, which he pulled out one by one, the first being the note from Farmer Davis. This puzzled him greatly. How could John Boucher or James Boucher's pocket-book have been found at a place called Redton—a place he had never heard of? Then he unfolded other papers and began to puzzle out what they meant.

A half sheet of foolscap headed 'Extract from Will

of Robert Bouchier,' dated 1807. 'Mem. It is under this will we claim.' Then followed the words of the testator as to the disposition of Redhills, which I have before quoted. Next a copy of the will of James Bouchier, of Newham, which, in a few lines, left all his property, including the estate of Redhills, of which he was the rightful owner, to his son, John Bouchier, commonly called Boucher. Then a number of narrow strips of paper, certificates—of the marriage of James Bouchier and Mary Williams in 1831; of the birth of John Bouchier in 1833; of the marriage of John Bouchier and Frances Vincent in 1854; of the birth of a Digby Bouchier in 1855; of the birth of a Frances Bouchier in 1856; and of the death of the above-named Digby, infant son of John Bouchier and Frances, his wife, in 1856. The last four were of a different kind to the others, being certificates issued by the Bureau of Vital Statistics, New York. There was yet one more certificate—*that of the marriage of Digby Bouchier and Jane Dyer in 1808*. Well might John Boucher, as, with these papers in his possession, he entered the railway carriage that fatal night, have told Mr Philip Tremaine Bouchier that the matter was too simple to need a lawyer's advice upon.

For, in spite of some eccentricities, law and common sense are synonymous terms. Unless he was a fool, no one with those papers before him could have failed to understand their meaning—and George Manders was a long way from being a fool. But had his intelligence been too dense to comprehend the purport of the papers, the last one he drew out would have made it clear. This was a letter, dated August, in the present year, and signed James Bouchier.

'MY DEAR SON,

'I am writing this on what I fear is my death-bed. Joy, they say, kills as well as grief. You will guess what I mean—what I have found at last. I am too weak to tell you in what miraculous way my steps were turned in the right direction. I can only say that when you return and find me dead, my banker here will deliver to you a sealed packet, which now contains everything—the last paper I have placed there being the marriage certificate of my father and mother. Come home at once.

I am the undoubted owner of the estate. Oh, that your baby boy had lived! But you are young, my boy, and can marry again.'

There was a postscript in very feeble writing:—

'In case of accidents—they were married February 15, 1808, at W—— Church, Cornwall.'

The young man read the letter over and over again. He put the papers in chronological order, and, as far as was possible, made himself master of the situation. It was evident that John Boucher was entitled to some property, but whether much or little he had nothing to show him. It was strange that Boucher had never mentioned the matter to him; but, as we know, Boucher never believed in the claim. He sympathised with his father's desire to prove his legitimacy, but could not look with the same eyes of faith. Does Frances know? was Manders' next thought. If so, she had been as silent as her father on the subject. Then, where was Boucher? The idea crossed his mind that his absence might in some way be connected with this claim. Could he have met with foul play? If dead would whatever he was entitled to pass to his daughter?—and as George Manders thought of her beautiful face, so cold and calm to him, he cursed his inability to win her love—for, bad as the man was, he admired her and after his own fashion loved her.

It was a long time before he could make up his mind how to act. At last he took a sheet of paper, jotted down names and dates, then replaced the pocket-book in its covers, and resealing it locked it away. He rang the bell.

'Ask Miss Boucher if she would like to see me,' he said to the servant.

'Law, sir, miss went out an hour ago, didn't you hear her?' No, he had been too much immersed to hear anything.

'Can you get me a time-table?' he asked the servant, who did his bidding with alacrity: for he was a handsome young man and not 'stand-offish' with female servants.

'I am going out of town to-night; I may not be back for a few days. If Miss Boucher has not returned, I will leave a note for her.'

He caught the three o'clock express to the west. Blacktown was his destination—the postmark on the inner envelope guided him. When Frances returned she found his note. In it he told her he was called away for two or three days; regretted being compelled to leave her when she was so anxious as to her father's fate, and finished by begging her in a few passionate, but not badly chosen words, to reconsider the answer she had given him yesterday. Had he seen with what little emotion she read his appeal, George Manders would have given up all hope. She was sorry for him, but knew his character and its weaknesses so well that love between the two was an impossibility.

Manders slept at Blacktown that night. He readily ascertained where Redton was, and the next morning found him waiting, as John Boucher had waited, at Sleaford Junction.

The same porter was on duty, replying in the stereotyped way to querulous passengers, when Manders, who thought he might now commence closer and less general inquiries, accosted him.

'Where's Redhills about here?' he asked.

The man started as if shot.

'I say,' he answered with solemnity, 'don't you come asking me those fatal questions; I won't answer 'em.'

'What the — do you mean?' said Manders, whose vocabulary was American and forcible.

'I mean a chap came and asked me just that question three weeks ago, and he's dead and buried now.'

It was now Manders' turn to start. Who was the man who might have been asking the way to Redhills three weeks ago?

'What kind of chap?' he asked.

The porter removed his cap and rubbed up his hair.

'That's what floors me,' he said. 'I should have said a hearty, open sort of a chap. But it seems he wasn't. He sat here, just on this truck like, he laughed and talked to me and cut off a piece of baccy and gave me. Here's the very piece,' continued the porter, producing the relic with an air of pride.

Manders took it in his hand. It was the sort which he knew John Boucher always smoked.

'Go on,' he cried, with impatience.

‘Seems he werdn’t such a nice sort after all. Mr Bouchier, M.P., he gave him a lift from Brackley to Redton—then this chap tried to rob and murder Mr Bouchier, M.P., so he whips out his pistol and shoots him through the heart—shoots him dead.’

Manders could scarcely control his agitation. ‘Shot who dead—Mr Bouchier?’ he asked.

‘No, Mr Bouchier shot that poor chap who sat on this truck, dead.’ Manders’ hands were trembling, all sorts of strange thoughts were surging through his brain. ‘Who was he?’ he gasped in so altered a voice that the porter stared at him.

‘Not a soul knows—there were nothing to tell who he were. Not a scrap. There’s been an inquest, and there’s been the assizes—they’re just over. Mr Bouchier, M.P., he were tried for manslaughter and acquitted honourable.’

Manders scarcely heard him—the wildest thoughts, fancies, and embryo plans were darting about in his subtle brain.

‘Why, where have you been?’ continued the porter. ‘Every paper full of it—in the London papers, too, they tell me. “Attack on a M.P.” You must have seen it.’

‘I never read the papers,’ said Manders, shortly—then the up or the down train came in, and, shortly afterwards, he entered a carriage on the branch line—entered it like a man in a dream.

He got out at Brackley. By this time he was calm and collected—outwardly so, at least. He entered the Brackley Arms and made himself very agreeable to the landlady and her daughter who managed that excellent establishment. A few clever hints dropped gave a kind of reason for the advent of such a distinguished-looking stranger, and, as he smoked his cigar and sipped brandy and water, he heard again all that the porter had told him, and with considerable additions. He learnt the magnitude of the Redhills estate, and the important part its owner played in the county. He even learnt about the three lawsuits brought about by James Boucher, of Newham, and matters grew very, very clear to Mr Manders. He agreed with the landlady that it was a kindly act of Mr Bouchier to give instructions that the unidentified ruffian who had sought his life should be buried in a decent grave in Redton Churchyard, at his, Mr Bouchier’s, expense.



‘But you see, sir,’ said the landlady, ‘it must be an awful thing to have a fellow-creature’s blood on one’s hands—even if it were done in self-defence.’

‘It must indeed,’ said Manders, gravely. ‘What sort of a man is Mr Bouchier?’

‘A terrible stern man in some things, sir. People about here wonder at his being so kind as to have the poor man buried. ’Tain’t like his way.’

Manders did not wonder so much. He had learnt pretty well all he needed, so he ordered a horse and vehicle to convey him to Redton.

The driver was an intelligent lad, who could point out every object of interest on the road. He showed Manders where William the groom got out to walk up the short cut—he stopped at the very spot where the struggle took place; then, as they neared the village of Redton, he pointed out what a guide-book would call Redhills, the beautiful seat of Philip Tremaine Bouchier, M.P., and as Manders saw from the distance its size and importance, his heart throbbed within him. ‘Self-defence,’ he muttered, ‘of course it was self-defence. If you may shoot a man for picking your pocket, why not when he means to rob you of a place like this?’

You see George Manders’ ideas of morality and the sanctity of human life were not of the highest class.

He asked the boy cautiously about Farmer Davis, to whom the sum of threepence was so clearly due, but after mature consideration decided not to call and discharge that liability. He had no wish to see more people than was necessary. It was this reason that made him change his mind as to stopping at Redton and instruct the driver, if his horse could do it, to go straight on to Longmere. Driver, if not horse, was willing enough, and from Longmere Mr Manders took the next train to Blacktown. There he dined, and after dinner paid a visit to a newspaper office, and, with some trouble, managed to obtain the back numbers of the paper which contained a report of the attack on Mr Bouchier, the inquest on his assailant, and of the county assizes where he had just been acquitted of manslaughter after a very brief matter-of-form trial. He took the mail to town, and on the journey perused all these interesting accounts, and with the aid of those documents

lying in his desk at Gray Street saw things in a light very different from that of coroner, judge, or jury.

Late as it was when he reached No. 72, he had no thought of resting himself. He brought out the pocket-book once more, spread the papers on the table before him, read and re-read, all the while talking to himself. Had you known Mr Manders personally, you will understand the disturbed state of his mind when I tell you that in his excitement he forgot even tobacco and strong drink.

Strange to say, the certificate which interested him most was the American one which certified the birth of John Boucher's son Digby, the child whose early death was recorded by the following certificate. He kept on repeating to himself, 'Digby Bouchier, born 1855,' and he remembered well that it was a resemblance they fancied their infant son would have borne to him had he lived that first made John Boucher and his wife take such a kindly interest in a boy of ten years old, a bright, clever, musical boy named George Manders. So ever and again he returned to this one certificate—ever and again repeating, 'Digby Bouchier, born 1855.'

But his conversation with himself was at times varied by other sentences. 'Does Frances know?' 'Will it all come to her?' 'Will she marry me?' These were the other phrases which broke the monotony of the repetition.

At last he rose, collected the papers, which being now so precious, he placed under his pillow. 'I can decide nothing,' was his last remark to himself, as, wearied, he sank into bed. 'Nothing until I see her to-morrow. Whether I live as an honest man or what people call a villain depends upon the answer she gives me.'

A cynical, bad smile was playing on his lips, even as thoughts merged into dreams, and George Manders slept.

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## CHAPTER V

### UNDERPLAY AND MYSTERY

THE notes of the grand piano, second in power and sweetness only to the voice they accompanied, seemed to pervade the house when George Manders awoke. His

head was clear and fit for work, and he ate his breakfast with a healthy appetite. He bade the servant leave the door open, that he might hear Frances Boucher's singing to better advantage. He had lain in bed very late—so late that Herr Kaulitz's morning visit had been paid, and he knew that Frances was alone. He sat listening to what of the music forced its way down through the closed door overhead, listening rather sadly, and wondering when he should hear that voice again.

'Anyway,' he said, 'her fortune is secure. In three years she will sing better than any one in England.' Manders had a way which is common to most young men, of excusing or palliating to themselves any wrong action they intend doing.

As his last night's meditations had quite decided the line of action he meant to pursue—barring the highly improbable contingency that Frances had changed her resolute mind in the course of the last few hours—he commenced his preparations. The first of these was very prosaic, for it consisted of sending for Mrs Stacey, his landlady, and discharging her demands upon him up to the end of the current week. The landlady, who was at that moment threatened with a summons for unpaid taxes, was grateful, and wished all lodgers were as prompt as Mr Manders. Then he returned to his bedroom, and packed the most portable and valuable of his possessions into two portmanteaux. All the time he was so engaged he heard the rich melodies proceeding from the floor above. Having finished his packing he dressed himself with great care, and sent the servant to announce an impending visit to the drawing-room.

The girl was in much the same attitude as that in which he found her last time—but now she advanced to meet him.

'Back so soon,' she said, eagerly; 'have you heard anything, George? That was what took you away, was it not?'

Manders was not a bad actor; as I have said, his imitation of a gentleman, although not perfect, was good. He opened his eyes.

'No, I went on my own business. I hoped to get a good professional engagement, but I failed of course. Have you no news?'

‘None—I shall go mad if this lasts. I must do something.’

‘It is very strange,’ he said, gravely. ‘I am more frightened than I like to own. I really fear that death can only account for his silence.’

She covered her eyes and shuddered. In his next sentence he threw all the sympathy he could muster.

‘Frances, you will not take the question amiss from me—have you any money to go on with?’

‘Plenty,’ she answered, ‘and there is plenty more in his desk.’

She thought this question was prompted by a kindly feeling; the next seemed impertinent.

‘What do you call plenty?’ he asked.

‘Oh, hundreds of pounds,’ she answered, shortly.

He paused a moment, then ventured to take her hand.

‘If we hear nothing soon, something must be done,’ he said. ‘I believe your father is dead. Tell me if you think he has made his will.’

She looked at him surprised; his eyes were full of feeling.

‘Why do ask such questions? Tell me all you know—is he dead?’

‘I told you I know no more than you. But some steps must be taken soon. Please answer my question.’

Frances saw he was in earnest. ‘My father told me once, laughing, that if he died I should find a paper he had just signed in his desk, leaving me everything.’

George Manders learned two things he was anxious to learn—that Frances had money to go on with—plenty of money—and that John Boucher had made a will. His future would be decided in the next five minutes. If Frances Boucher would only consent to be his wife—what a future it would be!

There was true passion in his face when he spoke again.

‘Let us sing one duet together,’ he begged. It was a strange request at that moment, but seeing he was in earnest she consented. He led her to the piano.

In that duet the young man sang as he had never sung before—as he never sang afterwards. Frances Boucher even wondered, as his voice blended with hers, whether she had not under-estimated his powers. She little knew under what excitement he brought forth those notes. As the last

vibration ceased she turned to praise him with true friendly praise.

Then he seized her hand—then he asked once more for her love, pleading for it with a passion she had never supposed him capable of feeling. It was his last throw, and let us think, in his favour, that as he entreated her, for a moment, he forgot all save love and desire to win her. For Frances was a prize well worth any man's winning. At that moment George Manders would have thrown his schemes to the wind and have taken her penniless, if needs be, without a moment's hesitation.

It was not to be—as gently as she could she told him there never was, never could be, any hope for him. Friends let them be, and friends they would be, if once and for ever he would leave this subject. Then Manders recovered his composure and knew that as far as Frances was concerned his fate was settled.

'So be it,' he said, 'but whatever happens to you or to me in the future, remember I have begged you to be my wife to-day.'

There was a threat conveyed—more by accent than by word—which she could not understand.

All trace of passion had vanished from his voice as he spoke again.

'I will say good-bye, for a while. I am going out of town again to-morrow.'

There was such a significant inflection in his voice that Frances started.

'Oh,' she cried, 'you know something, in spite of your denial. I can see you do. You have some clue. Tell me, at once! Why do you keep me in ignorance?' She stamped her foot and spoke like a queen.

Weak in character as she knew the man to be, from several things which had come to her knowledge, Frances did not know that he had been weak from choice—that he had yielded to the temptations which beset young men because he had no wish to resist them. She did not know that his craft and subtlety were a match for her strong will—that, if he hesitated and appeared troubled at her question, it was for his own ends.

'Tell me—tell me all,' she said imperiously.

He wanted to make one more point sure.

'Do you think,' he asked doubtfully, 'it could be possible

that your father had any enemy in England? Any one that his death would benefit—any one he had a claim on.

Frances could not understand the question.

‘How could there be?’ she said. ‘He knows no one in England. He left when a boy of eighteen, and never visited it again until now. But tell me all you have found out—all you suspect—without any more of these mysteries.’

Manders was certain as she spoke that Frances knew nothing of the claim to Redhills.

‘I will tell you all I can,’ he answered slowly. ‘Yes, I have a clue—in a few days I will tell you more. I may be wrong in my conjectures, but, my poor girl, I am afraid you must prepare for the worst.’

In spite of commands, even entreaties, he would say no more—and shortly afterwards he left her. She heard a cab draw up at the door, and, from the window, saw George Manders enter it with his luggage and drive away. For four or five days she waited, a prey to the greatest agitation—longing for, yet fearing his return and the tidings he would bring her. So much upset was she that even Herr Kaulitz was not admitted. Music in her present state of uncertainty had lost its usual charm.

At last a letter came in Manders’ handwriting. She tore it open and read the contents. It was dated from Liverpool.

‘MY POOR FRANCES,

‘It is as I feared. Your father is dead. I have ascertained that fact beyond the shadow of a doubt. You will of course ask me how and where he died. This I cannot and will not tell you. The whole thing is too terrible. You must be satisfied in knowing that he is dead. I do not expect you to understand my reasons for not telling you all, but when I say that to-day I return to the States—that I throw up my chance of a career in England—simply to avoid seeing you again, and explaining what you would force me to explain, you will know that the reason is a weighty one, and, I hope, think I am acting in your best interest. What will you do? Let me advise you first of all to put your affairs in a respectable lawyer’s hands—then with the money you have to go to Italy and study for three

years. The certain success which awaits you will, I am sure, conquer grief.

‘ Good-bye, we may meet no more.

‘ Yours sincerely,

‘ GEORGE MANDERS.

‘ P.S.—Let me urge you not to inquire as to your father’s fate. It will only lead to distress.’

Frances read this extraordinary letter with a bewildered brain. She had no reason to mistrust the writer—she had no clue to his schemes. The papers were with him, and she had never heard of Redhills. Not for a moment did she doubt but Manders had ascertained what had become of her father ; but she blamed him bitterly and angrily for daring to decide that it would be better for his daughter to remain in ignorance as to how he met his death, than to learn the particulars, however terrible they might be. Had she known where to look for him she would have started then and there for Liverpool, and insisted upon his giving her full particulars. But the statement that he sailed for America the day the letter was posted made the idea an absurd one. The poor girl grieved with a mighty grief for the loss of her father—she shuddered at the nameless death he had met with—too horrible for Manders to disclose. Could she only have learned the spot where strange hands had laid him it would have been some sorry consolation—at least she could have thrown herself on the grave and wept until tears failed her. Now she knew not what to do or where to turn. Her utter loneliness in the world appalled her. Save Manders, who had deserted her in her need, she had no friend in England. It was but a few weeks since her father brought her to London, and the time had been too short to make new friends, whilst the few old ones were across the Atlantic. Relatives she knew of none. The grandfather she had never seen, and who had so recently died, was the only one she had ever heard her father mention. What was she to do ?

Till the next day she did nothing but sorrow. She read and re-read that strange letter, and wondered more and more what could have made Manders write so mysteriously—why he should prefer to leave England rather than to meet her. Then her brows contracted and her eyes grew stern as Frances Boucher vowed that some day she would seek him

across the world if needful, and force the truth from the poor weak wretch.

Perhaps it was this feeling of indignation which aided her to recover from her first grief, and at last resolve to act. The prosaic advice given her as to consulting a solicitor was the best to follow ; but she must find a trustworthy one. Mrs Stacey, the landlady, was asked to recommend one. The good widow's experience of lawyers and their ways was not encouraging.

'Do I know a respectable solicitor, miss? No, and very few people do, I fancy—I know *a* solicitor; who put the law to work against a young man who owed me seven pounds four shillings, and he charged me six pounds for getting the money. But, perhaps, you don't mind that. If so his name is——'

'Never mind,' said Frances, with a faint smile. 'I don't think that kind of man will do.'

'There's my eldest son—a smart lad in an auctioneer's office. If he could be of use——'

'No, thank you,' answered the girl, feeling more and more lonely and helpless.

After a few well-meant attempts at consolation, Mrs Stacey left; then Frances thought of her only other acquaintance in London, the gifted composer and sometimes singing master, Herr Kaulitz. She wrote and asked him to call. He obeyed her summons with alacrity.

'Mine goot Miss Bouzher, I rejoice myself to again come to you.' Then seeing the grief on her face, 'Lieb Herr Gott!' he cried; 'you weep. Ach! let the tears be in the voice—as zomebody zays—but in those beautiful eyes not.'

He was a kind-hearted Teuton, and old enough to treat her in a fatherly way. He sat beside her, took her hand, and in broken but well-meaning English begged for an explanation of her trouble.

She told him of her father's disappearance—told him she had received intelligence of his death—then asked him to recommend a solicitor, if he knew one worthy of confidence.

'Oh yes, I know a zolizitor—a very good zolizitor. He laughed at me, that man, when I was a fool and would go to the law. But he would not me allow to go to law, and he was right. Oh yes, he is a goot man.'

This was more promising. At Frances' request, Herr Kaulitz, glad of an opportunity of paying a debt of gra-



titude, sent this solicitor to her. He was a middle-aged man, with a kind, clever face. Frances trusted him at first sight, told him how she was situated, and at last showed him Manders' curious letter. Mr Trenfield saw he had a remarkable case to deal with. He, being a man of the world, did not for a moment believe in Manders' alleged reason for quitting England so hastily. He grew interested in the case; perhaps the personal appearance of his new client made him unusually interested, and set to work at once to solve the mystery. Yet a lawyer is bound to be cautious; and even though a new client be a charming, stately young woman, he is bound to ascertain her solvency before he acts on her behalf.

'You have money to spare for these inquiries?' he asked, kindly, not doubtfully.

Frances reassured him on this point.

'Very well. Now, what kind of a man is your correspondent?'

She told him all she knew about him, and on what close terms of friendship he had been with them since he was a boy. Mr Trenfield was puzzled, and unable to construct any theory which accounted for the man's conduct.

'Did he sail, I wonder?' he said. 'That must be ascertained. I shall send to Liverpool to-night and find out what boats left on Wednesday, and if a man answering to his description went in either. Now, as you feel sure your father is dead, we must examine his papers and look for a clue among them.'

It seemed like sacrilege to Frances; indeed, it was only Mr Trenfield's last words which induced her to consent. The hope which would linger—that Manders had been mistaken, or had spoken falsely—seemed finally chased as Mr Trenfield prized open desk, drawers, and boxes, of which the daughter had no key.

The lawyer found little to guide them, although any doubts as to his client's solvency must have been set at rest by the discovery of a banker's pass-book showing a credit of several thousands of pounds to John Boucher. This money was partly the proceeds of his business in New York, which he had realised before obeying his father's summons to return to England. Doubtless it was waiting at the banker's for a good opportunity of investing it to arise. There was also an American bond of £500, payable

to bearer, and about a hundred pounds in Bank of England notes. Mr Trenfield also found a will bequeathing everything to Frances. There were also plenty of business papers, but all related to American affairs. There was one letter from a firm of solicitors in Newham, stating that according to his instructions all James Boucher's effects had been disposed of, and the amount paid to the credit of John Boucher at the before-named bank in London. But there was absolutely nothing to throw any light on the missing man's whereabouts.

'He did not say a word as to where he was going?' asked Mr Trenfield, stroking his clean-shaven chin. 'Not a word?'

'No; he went away laughing—said he was going on business,' and Frances' eyes were dim as she recalled the last time she saw him.

'Nothing else—nothing about the kind of business, or how long he would be away?'

Frances was striving to remember his last words. She remembered his kissing her, then his getting into the cab whilst she stood at the open door—yes, she remembered his very last words.

'Good-bye, my little girl, and be prepared for a great surprise when I return.'

A great surprise—it might mean a new dress, a locket, a bracelet, anything—but Mr Trenfield, a man not without imagination, fancied it might hold a deeper meaning.

'His only business, as far as we can see, must have been at Newham,' he said. 'I will send there and inquire. At present we can do no more.' He jotted down dates and description, and prepared to depart. Now that something was to be done, Frances was more herself.

'This money,' she asked, 'may I use it?'

'If you ask me as a lawyer,' replied her adviser, 'I must say no; but if you ask me as a friend, I should say put it aside. Even if your father is dead, it will be a long, long time before you will be empowered to claim his money, especially if we cannot find the only man who is able to prove his death. So, I should say, use the money first, then sell the bond, and live on the proceeds till things are settled. You must take no notice of this advice, as it is not law.'

'Will you take charge of it?'

‘No; I am going to forget that I have seen it. Besides, I was a stranger to you a few hours ago—why should you trust me?’

‘Whom have I to trust?’ said Frances, sadly. ‘I am utterly alone. Oh, Mr Trenfield! I may trust you entirely, may I not?’

Mr Trenfield was growing very much interested in his client. He took her hand.

‘My dear girl,’ he said, ‘you may trust me, not only as a lawyer, but, if you will allow it, as a friend.’

She thanked him. His manner had been very kind, and it was a relief to feel she had some one to turn to.

‘You shall hear as soon as I have learnt anything,’ said Mr Trenfield as they parted.

What he could learn was learnt in a few days. George Manders had sailed for America as he expressed his intention of doing—he was entered in the list of passengers under his true name. Thereupon a telegram was sent under the Atlantic to await him on his arrival, requesting him to send all particulars of J. B. to Mr Trenfield, the latter gentleman thinking he would pay more attention if asked to communicate direct with him. But Manders took no notice of the request. Frances insisted that no money should be spared in endeavouring to trace him, so inquiries were instituted, and it was ascertained that he had sold a remnant of property which still belonged to him—his mother, a widow, having died before he came to England—and then had disappeared, no one knew in what direction.

The intelligence gleaned by the agent who went to Newham was more to the point. It was found that John Boucher had been there—that he had taken a packet, supposed to contain valuables, from the bank—that with this packet in his possession he had left Newham. Detective skill even traced him, or said it traced him, back to London, and there was an end of it. It was clear that he must have been murdered for the sake of the articles of value about him. Murdered and made away with—that was the opinion of those who ought to know best. This theory appeared logical. A sealed packet supposed to be of great value, claimed in due course by the owner—and afterwards the mysterious disappearance of the owner. It was quite tenable, and the detectives employed peered into every hole and corner for a clue. That a ruffian shot by a

member of parliament a month ago should be the owner of the valuable property, whatever it might have been, never entered a person's head. Had any one by chance fancied that the packet left by the late James Boucher at his banker's contained what it did, he might have gone on the right track. But it was some thirteen years since James Boucher had made a claim on Redhills, so the matter was fading from people's memory.

So certain it seemed that her father had been robbed and murdered that Frances acquiesced when Mr Trenfield suggested further inquiries were useless. Although she wondered how George Manders could have learnt what had baffled the detectives, she was at times doubtful whether his reason for concealing the truth from her was not really from a mistaken kindness that wished to save her pain.

In those days of grief and anxiety Mr Trenfield kept his promise, and acted as a true friend to her. He enlisted his wife's sympathies for his fair client, and an acquaintance sprang up which ended in Frances leaving Gray Street and sojourning at Mr Trenfield's charming suburban residence at Twickenham—until matters were settled.

As soon as the girl half resigned herself to the fact that in the absence of Manders her father's death must remain a mystery—as soon as she became convinced that although the details were wanting, vulgar robbery and murder caused it, youth and ambition re-asserted themselves. Herr Kaulitz, now a friend as well as a tutor, raved in English and German about the great things his pupil would do, and by a supreme act of self-sacrifice, warmly applauded her resolution to go abroad and study her art in Milan for the next three years, under that renowned master Lamperti.

'And then,' said Herr Kaulitz, clutching his long light hair in his excitement, 'then you zall zee—mine lofely Miss Bouzher, she take the vorr'ld by sthorrrm—Bah—by sthorrrm! by *ein Wilberwind*—a tornado, as you call him.'

So, in three months' time from her first interview with Mr Trenfield, Frances Boucher, with hope springing up in her heart as grief faded gradually away—with proper confidence as to what with three years' correct training that grand voice of hers might accomplish—with everything for her safety and happiness at Milan carefully arranged by

Mr Trenfield—left England without any intention of returning for three years.

A week after her departure one of those men who earn a precarious livelihood by holding horses or running errands, called at No. 72 Gray Street, and asked for her. It was Mrs Stacey herself who answered the door.

‘Miss Boucher,’ said the good lady, ‘she left here some two months ago.’

‘I was to ask for her address,’ said the man.

‘I don’t know it. She’s gone to Italy to learn singing—what she wanted to go for I can’t tell—for she sings now better than any bird. She came and wished me good-bye before she went.’

‘Thank’ee ma’am,’ said the man touching his cap.

‘Who wants to know about her?’ asked Mrs Stacey, sharply, realising the man’s condition in life, and thinking she had been too communicative to a stranger.

‘A Mr Smith, ma’am,’ said the fellow, touching his hat again and decamping.

Mr Smith is a general term—but the person to whom the cadger made his report was a tall, well-dressed young man who was waiting at a public-house some way off. The news must have been welcome to him, as he rewarded his messenger munificently. Then he drew himself up and walked out of the public house in a bolder manner than he had entered it.

‘Out of the way for at least three years,’ he said cheerfully. ‘What a lot a clever man can do in three years!’

The speaker looked very handsome, and to him the world seemed prosperous as he entered his hotel, packed his portmanteau, paid his bill, and ordered a cab to take him to the western train.

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## CHAPTER VI

### THE FIRST ATTACK—DEFEAT

It was the middle of April—an April of such sunny smiles and such coaxing tears that the country in general, and Westshire in particular, were attiring themselves in the

gayest green, and ceasing to look with suspicion on the spring which had so often deceived them. The House was sitting, but Mr Bouchier had not been to town since the Easter holidays. There were no burning party questions at present under discussion; and as he had been for some time feeling rather out of sorts, he had followed his doctor's advice—to stay at Redhills and keep quiet as long as he could; and Redhills in such a spring as this had attractions enough to make one quite willing to follow such advice. The pleasant woods at the back of the house were joyous with the song of birds; the grass on the many acres of rich pasture land around was just beginning to grow thick and long, and further away the tender green of the young corn on the arable fields harmonised with the deeper hue of the meadows. The clumps of old elm trees, scattered about, were in fresh leaf; and from the hedges sprang up many a tall poplar, which shone like a golden spire as the sun played on tawny buds which covered it. Moreover, as every Westshire man knows that the air in that particular district is the freshest and most invigorating in the whole county, Mr Bouchier could not do better than stay at home to recover his health.

He was not absolutely ill; in fact, it was only at his wife's pressing request that he had consulted a doctor at all. He complained that he did not sleep quite as well as usual, often being obliged to have recourse to narcotics to win sleep—that he felt nervous—in one word, not quite himself. He attributed it to the excitement and worry he had undergone, for when, in England, one man shoots another he is compelled to show why he did so, to the satisfaction of the powers that be.

At the inquest on the unknown man—for he was never identified, nor was there found on him anything to tell his name or where he came from—at the inquest, the jury, by direction of the coroner, returned a verdict of manslaughter against Philip Tremaine Bouchier. The coroner had some difficulty in persuading it to do so, as nearly every man of the twelve was a tenant of Mr Bouchier's; indeed, the coroner only gained his point by saying such a verdict must undoubtedly be in accordance with their landlord's wish that full investigation should be made. So the verdict was returned, although several of the jury desired to add a sort

of apology to it, regretting they were compelled to put Mr Bouchier to any trouble.

Then Mr Bouchier was brought before the magistrates, committed for trial, admitted to bail, and after the proceedings went home to dine with Sir Baker Ridley, one of the magistrates who committed him. He had not long to wait for his trial. The assizes were opened in about a week's time, and without leaving the box the jury returned a verdict of not guilty. The judge told them most clearly that he had never met with a case where homicide was more justifiable. Mr Bouchier, it was plain, had shot the man to save his own life. Although his lordship strongly disapproved of the practice of carrying arms, it was well for Mr Bouchier that his pistol was in his pocket. The whole conduct of the dead man showed a premeditated attack; the entering into Mr Bouchier's carriage should have warned him against his companion, and he could scarcely understand how a gentleman of such experience in the world could have put credence in the plausible tale told by the intruder, and trusted himself alone with him afterwards. All the evidence tended to show that the unidentified man was a dangerous character; and, to the learned judge, the fact of several sovereigns being found upon him indicated that he was not driven by want or desperation to make the criminal attempt, but was a man who robbed whenever he could find the opportunity.

There were no witnesses for the defence. Mr Bouchier's counsel made a short speech, and gave in it his client's version of the attack. Poor John Boucher's clasp-knife was exhibited, and Mr Bouchier's coat with the cut in it. The case was quickly over, and, as the railway porter said, the accused was 'acquitted honourable.'

William the groom gave his evidence in a stolid manner. He answered all he was asked to answer, and as no one thought of asking him about the moisture he found on the carriage rug, he said nothing about it. When everything was over his master complimented William upon the way he had given his evidence. It was a rare thing for Mr Bouchier to praise his servant; so William felt it a great honour, and wondered if his wages would be raised. Stolid as he was, he thought it rather a hardship that some few weeks afterwards his master should find he was unsuitable for the place he filled in the stable department. William

thought he was meted out hard measure, but he was a steady lad, and soon obtained a better situation a long way off. Strange to say, after dismissing him, Mr Bouchier gave him the very highest recommendations to his new master.

After all, what with coroner's inquests, magisterial inquiries, and trial by jury, it can scarcely be wondered at that Mr Bouchier had felt much vexed and worried of late; at least, that was what all his friends said.

The afternoon was pleasant. April was doing her best to tempt people out of doors by her brightness, but reserving the right of trying to spoil with her showers any finery they might put on. Mr Bouchier was not inclined to go out. He sat in his library—a large, well-proportioned room, the walls of which were absolutely covered with valuable books. He read, apparently without much interest, one of the month's reviews. Presently a servant entered and informed him that a gentleman wished to speak to him.

'What is his name?' asked Mr Bouchier, who was not in the humour to entertain visitors.

'He preferred not to send in any name, sir.'

'Go back and ask him for his name—his card, if he has one.'

The man bowed, and went as commanded. In a few minutes he returned. 'The gentleman's compliments, sir. He would rather give no name until he sees you. Particular business, he says, sir.'

'Tell him, if he can't give his name to go away,' said Mr Bouchier decisively. 'I won't be troubled with men without names.'

The servant went back with the message, and Mr Bouchier resumed his review. Presently the man returned and handed a visiting card to his master. 'Gentleman's apologies, sir. Thought it better to see you first; but has no reason to be ashamed of his name.'

Mr Bouchier frowned and took the card. On it was engraved 'Mr Digby Bouchier;' and as the edge of the card was black, it looked as if the owner of that name was in mourning for some one.

A common man might have appeared startled at the advent of a stranger bearing a name of such ominous import to himself as that name was to Mr Bouchier. But Mr Bouchier was not a common man. His mind leapt



rapidly to conclusions, and the conclusion it leapt to at once was fraud—for had not John Boucher told him in clear terms that he had no son? The impulse to tear the card to pieces, toss it into the fire, and bid the fellow begone, was but a momentary one. He resolved to see him and hear his tale. He smiled grimly as he thought how soon he would show the imposter the folly of attempting to palm himself off as a Bouchier; for Philip Bouchier, after the discovery of his late uncle's letter, had not disdained to inquire as to what members constituted the other branch of the family, and had learnt that unless John Boucher had a son, the stock was at an end. John Boucher having no son, this man must be an imposter. Mr Bouchier's spirits quite revived at the thought of the coming combat of skill, and the ease with which he would crush this false Digby Bouchier. He seated himself in a convenient position and gave orders for the gentleman to be shown in.

He was a tall young man of about twenty-one. He was faultlessly and fashionably dressed—so much so that his glossy hat and thin shining boots looked almost out of place in the heart of the country. He bowed politely to Mr Bouchier, who returned his salutation coldly and without rising—then, not without some curiosity in the look of each, the two men's eyes met. After a short pause the visitor commenced to speak. Mr Bouchier cut him short—

'Excuse me,' he said, 'will you kindly be seated? Here if you please, where I can see you plainly.'

Mr Digby Bouchier obeyed, and took a chair at the side of the table facing the window. Mr Bouchier looked at him with a cynical, half-amused smile on his lips, and with an expression of pitying superiority which must have been peculiarly disconcerting and exasperating to any young man. This one certainly felt it so. He grew very uncomfortable as the elder man's hard blue eyes gazed full into his face. He reddened a little, and shifted uneasily in his seat. Doubtless he did not feel inclined to commence the conversation under such disadvantages.

At last Mr Bouchier withdrew his gaze; turning his eyes upon the card he held between his fingers—

'Mr Digby Bouchier,' he read, with a little inflection in his voice—'Digby Bouchier. Digby is one of our family names. Have I the honour of being in any way connected with you?'

His visitor was recovering himself. He had rehearsed this scene many times, with only one actor. Now that there were two, it appeared a more difficult piece to play.

‘I am afraid you will be surprised, Mr Bouchier, when I tell you what relationship does exist between us.’

‘Yes,’ answered Mr Bouchier, quietly, ‘I shall be surprised at any relationship which may exist between us ; but not at what you are going to assert does exist.’

‘Shall I tell you why I have come, Mr Bouchier ?’

The speaker was growing angry.

‘If you think it worth while. But I know exactly what you will say : that you are the son of John Boucher, and that he is the rightful owner of my estate. You will probably add you were born in America,’ continued Mr Bouchier, who had caught a suppressed twang which Digby Bouchier could not, try as he would, completely get rid of.

‘I will tell you something more,’ said the visitor, theatrically, ‘I will tell you that I have every paper needful to prove my grandfather’s legitimacy. Does that move you at all, Mr Bouchier ?’

Not at all—at least, outwardly. Mr Bouchier shrugged his shoulders.

‘We have heard this stated so often that we get used to it. I can only say, before I wish you good-day, that I am sincerely pleased to see a member of the illegitimate branch of my family appear in such prosperous worldly circumstances.’

As he spoke he looked the well-dressed young man up and down.

‘I can afford to dress well,’ said Digby Bouchier. ‘A few months will put me in your place. You know, of course, that my father is dead ?’ he added, quickly.

Mr Bouchier was equal to the occasion.

‘Indeed ; I am sorry to hear it. Your father, from what I have heard, was too sensible a man to spend his money in futile law suits. I knew your grandfather was dead—but I had not heard of your father’s death.’

He spoke so calmly and naturally that for a moment his listener was puzzled, and felt the disadvantages of youth and inexperience acutely. Yet his cards were the best, after all, for he knew Mr Bouchier’s hand, although that

gentleman never suspected it. This thought gave him courage.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘he died—some little while ago. I am now the owner of Redhills.’

Mr Bouchier bowed politely.

‘If you like,’ continued the young man, ‘I will show you the papers, which establish that fact beyond doubt.’

‘Quite unnecessary, I assure you,’ said Mr Bouchier; ‘your word will be ample for their contents.’

The other took no notice of the sneer.

‘I have in my pocket the certificate of marriage between my grandfather and grandmother, and certificates of birth and marriage of all other members of our family, finishing with that of my own birth.’

Mr Bouchier rose. His smile was not a pleasant one; his polite manner gave way to sternness.

‘You may have a waggon-load of certificates for all I care,’ he said; ‘but as you assert that John Boucher is dead, they are waste paper—for I happen to know, beyond dispute, that your adopted father never had a son.’

Here Mr Bouchier rang the bell. His decided manner impressed the visitor.

‘Mr Bouchier,’ he said, earnestly, ‘you are quite in error; let me convince you.’

‘Not a word, sir. If you attempt to continue this fraud, you shall go to prison for trying to extort money under false pretences. Go at once. Steel,’ to the servant who entered, ‘show this young man out.’

‘Mr Bouchier, send your servant away, and listen to me.’

‘Steel, show this person out—off the grounds, mind.’

‘You are ruining yourself, Mr Bouchier, by making an enemy of me.’

‘Go to the stable and get two men. Turn this fellow out, if he won’t go quietly.’

He thought it better to go quietly. He vowed to have a bitter revenge as the door closed behind him; but he did not show any emotion before the servant, to whom he gave half-a-sovereign for his civility, he said.

Mr Bouchier had borne himself bravely, but, strange to say, his mental ejaculation, as he resumed his review, was the same as that of the young man he had dismissed so unceremoniously. ‘What does he know?’ was the first unuttered thought of each. Mr Bouchier wondered what

the pretender knew concerning John Boucher's death—how he knew it at all ; and George Manders wondered what Mr Bouchier knew about the dead man's family affairs. Had he said that he was aware that John Boucher's son had died in infancy, as far as his own pretended interests were concerned, Manders would have thrown up the game at once. If Manders had shown any definite knowledge as to the fate of his asserted father, Mr Bouchier might not have been so bold in his defiance or so contemptuous in his dismissal. The first encounter between the two men left in the mind of each an impression of a certain amount of distrust as to his resources, but the victory was undoubtedly with Mr Bouchier.

The little battle did him good. He felt more himself after it than he had felt for many days. He had no fear as to the self-christened Digby troubling him by aid of the law. The man was an impostor—John Boucher's words, that he had no son, being too plain to be mistaken. All he wished was that he had questioned the fellow as to the particulars of John Boucher's death, and learnt whether his identity with the man he had shot was known to his visitor.

Digby Bouchier, or more properly, George Manders, was duly shown out of the lodge-gate. He gave a lingering glance, as he departed, at Redhills and the glories thereof : then, when alone, he gritted his teeth and swore pleasantly to himself. His first essay in villainy had been much like a failure, almost bad enough to make a novice believe that after all honesty is the best policy. However, he was not so utterly cast down as to adopt that theory yet ; he had other cards to play. There was the knowledge of how his pretended father died—a strong trump. If that failed to score, there was Frances in the background ; she was evidently ignorant of what she was entitled to. He could either enlighten her, or, for the sake of a subsidy from Mr Bouchier, keep her in the dark. The thing was to serve George Manders first.

He walked on and on, considering how to act. Having left his portmanteau at Brackley, he took that road. He had walked to Redton in the morning, and felt quite equal to walking back again. The pull up Steepsides, from the Redton face, is a hard one, and having reached the highest point of the road he sat down to rest before commencing the descent. As he stayed at Brackley to

night, he was indifferent as to time. The sun was bright and high, so, with the carelessness of youth, he sat down on the damp bank, and leaning back, pulled his hat over his eyes. By-and-bye the gentle rustle of branches, the twittering birds, and his own varied thoughts seemed to get mixed, and he dozed off on the roadside. He may have slept twenty minutes, when a light touch on his waistcoat fob awoke him. He sprang up, and as he did so one end of his watch-chain fell loose, and a few yards away he saw a man running from him at full speed. Mr Manders, being young and unphilosophical, obeyed the natural impulse of giving chase. Fast as the would-be pilferer fled, his pursuer's long legs gained on him; so much so, that casting a hasty glance behind him, and seeing the uselessness of a straightforward flight, he sprang suddenly into the underwood, hoping in its intricacies to baffle pursuit. Justly indignant at the attempted crime, Manders, heedless of his attire, followed him. Whether he would have overtaken him is a matter of doubt, but unfortunately for the fugitive, his foot caught in some obstacle, and he fell forward on his face. Before he could rise Manders was on him, and delighted to find some object on which he could wreak vengeance, pummelled him to his heart's content. The fallen man took his punishment silently, covering the back of his neck with his hands, but not otherwise objecting. His assailant, who was out of breath, and found the man was very hard hitting, paused in his exercise.

'Now, get up,' he said giving his victim a final kick—'get up and let me look at you.'

The man, a stoutly built rascal in a fur cap, got up into a sitting posture. 'I say,' he said, 'don't let's have no more of this. What's beating I for, I want to know?'

Manders laughed at his question. 'You impudent black-guard! after just trying to rob me. Get up; I'll take you to the nearest magistrate.'

'Rob you!' said the culprit, 'so you say, if you like, but you can't prove it. My word's as good as yourn. I knows the law; you can't convict me on your own evidence—not you.'

'Get up,' said Manders, amused; 'get up; I'll try at any rate.'

'You see,' said the man, 'you can't; you'll have a lot of

trouble for nothing. I shall have something to say about 'sault and battery, too.'

'Come along,' said Manders, to amuse himself, although he had no intention of trying to punish the man further. 'We'll see what my friend Mr Bouchier says to-morrow.'

He used Mr Bouchier's name, for he had learnt he was a terror to evil-doers in that district.

The fellow pricked up his ears at the name. 'Be he a friend of yours?' he asked.

Manders nodded.

'Well, Mr Bouchier, he wouldn't commit me, not he.'

'Why not, you rascal?'

'He won't, not he. I shall just speak to him in private, and he'll let me go soon enough.'

Manders' perception was very quick; there was something in the man's manner that made his heart beat.

'Well, perhaps I'll let you go,' he said; 'but tell me what you would say to Mr Bouchier?'

'Never you mind what I'd say. 'Tain't your business.'

Manders reflected how he could get what he wanted from his new acquaintance; the latter also seemed to be turning something over in his narrow brain.

'Be you a friend of Mr Bouchier's?' he asked.

'I told you I was.'

'And a stranger down here, I'm thinking?'

'Quite—never been near the place before, my man.' The speaker was getting very hopeful.

'I tried to speak to Mr Bouchier, but he wouldn't stop to hearken. Now, look here, if you wants to do your friend Mr Bouchier a kindness like, you take him a message from me.'

'All right,' said Manders, with apparent indifference. 'First you try to rob me, then want me to take your messages. Never mind, let's hear it.'

'You tell Mr Bouchier that the man who found the bundle he lost a while ago will give it to him for a reward of ten pounds—no, say twenty pounds, not a penny less.'

Excited as Manders felt he betrayed no emotion.

'It's valuable then?' he said, carelessly.

'Mebbe 'tis, mebbe 'tisn't; he knows.'

'What's your name then?' I must let him know that?

'My name's Jim Stokes, of Redton.'

'How do you get your living, I wonder?' asked Manders,

for the sake of saying something, while he decided on a course of action.

‘Sometimes I earn it by the sweat of my brow, and sometimes I don’t,’ answered Mr Stokes.

‘Well, you get off now and think yourself lucky. I’m going back to the house and will tell Mr Bouchier what you say. If the property is really valuable, I daresay he’ll send the money for it this evening.’

The poacher rose and forced his way out from the undergrowth. Manders followed him leisurely, taking care that Mr Stokes was not on the watch to see whether he returned to Redhills or not. Then feeling certain that his enemy was delivered into his hand, the young man went to the little inn, and ordered as good a dinner as Redton could give him.

When it grew dark he set off in search of James Stokes. He ascertained the place of his dwelling from one of the stable boys at the inn, stating as his reason for inquiry after such a disreputable character that he heard he had a clever dog for sale. Men like Mr Stokes are seldom without a dog to sell, so the excuse seemed quite natural, and Manders was duly directed to the hovel. He found it after some trouble, and about half-past eight rapped at the rickety door. Stokes opened it and his visitor stepped into the room. There was a fire burning on the hearth; glowing not blazing; and as this was the only light in the room little could be seen. The outline of a bottle was visible on an old table near the fire, showing that Mr Stokes was not without a solace in his solitude. He did not try to prevent Manders from entering his castle, but without removing his pipe from his mouth, growled out—

‘What, you here again? What be wanting with me again?’

‘Shut the door and get a light,’ said Manders.

Stokes shut and bolted the door. He then rummaged up a candle end and lit it, thereby revealing in full distinctness his squalid surroundings.

‘I’ve seen Mr Bouchier,’ said Manders. ‘He has asked me to come and settle this matter for him.’

‘I thought he’d a-come himself,’ said Stokes, surlily; ‘not send a messenger.’

‘I could do as well,’ he said.

‘Have you brought the coin?’ asked the poacher.

‘I have brought *some* money,’ replied Manders, cautiously. ‘But before I hand you any, Mr Bouchier told me to ask if it was the parcel which must have fallen out of the dog-cart on the night he had the struggle with the man?’

Stokes put on a cunning grin and glanced up with his small sharp eyes at the questioner. ‘All right,’ he said, ‘that be the parcel, sure enough, as dropped out of the dog-cart on the Brackley Road—Mr Bouchier he’ll know it soon enough.’

Manders would have given five times twenty pounds for the parcel—all the money he had left now was devoted to the game he was playing—and the poacher’s demand was only a fair incidental expense. But it was as well to get off as cheaply as possible.

‘Then what shall I give you for it? Twenty pounds is absurd.’

Stokes brought his hard hand down with an emphatic thump on the table, and said, prefacing his words with a strong and highly esteemed oath—

‘Twenty pounds, I said—not a farden less. If you’ve got twenty pounds to pay me, out with it—if not, go back and get it if you want the thing.’

Manders thought he had better pay what was asked—the man evidently was quite determined—so he said no more, but drawing out four five-pound notes, laid them on the table, near to the candle, taking the precaution to keep his hand upon them. Mr Stokes’ eyes glistened at the sight.

‘Now,’ said Manders, ‘go and get what you have to sell.’

With his eyes ever and again turning to the money, as if in fear it might vanish, the poacher, from some locker or recess in one corner of his den, drew forth the bag which John Boucher had carried with him on the night he was shot. He placed it in front of Manders, keeping his hands upon it as carefully as if it was the notes. Then the exchange was duly effected, and as the poacher began to examine the notes jealously, Manders not less eagerly opened the bag.

He had been right in buying it, as it proved beyond a doubt that the dead man was John Boucher. It contained only a few personal articles, but several of them were well known to Manders. The poacher, having pocketed his money, eyed him curiously.



‘Doesn’t seem much value here,’ said Manders, with affected contempt.

‘Value or not, Mr Bouchier won’t like your looking at it,’ said Stokes, in his paymaster’s interest.

‘Suppose you mind your own business, my friend,’ said Manders, shutting the handbag. ‘You’ve sold, I’ve bought—there’s an end of it.’

Somehow, although twenty pounds to Mr Stokes’ imagination had seemed a large sum—a fabulous sum—now that it was his own it appeared far less than he was entitled to, and a most unpleasant feeling stole over him that he had cheated himself in the transaction. He grew very sulky at the thought.

‘Yes, I have sold,’ he growled, ‘sold, like a fool I be, for twenty pounds—Damme!’ continued Mr Stokes, angrily and regretfully, ‘I believe I could a got forty, aye fifty pound for that thing.’

Manders, who hoped to buy a great deal more than he had bought, was pleased to see this growing cupidity. He laughed, but did not deny that the seller had made a bad bargain. Stokes began to lose his head. He had acted very cautiously until the present time. He had kept his findings and the curious events he had witnessed a secret from every one, even his boon companions. He had waited patiently until his harvest came—then he had reaped it—to the extent of twenty pounds. The grain had been garnered so easily that he felt he had not put the sickle in deep enough.

‘I say, young man,’ he remarked, with a meaning in his voice which made Manders’ ears tingle, ‘you tell your master that mebbe as I’ve got something else to sell him besides this—but not such a bargain.’

Now was the time for George Manders to play a bold card. Being a young man, he was fond of rash play and stage effect. He laughed quietly.

‘Mr Bouchier isn’t my master, and I may as well tell you that as yet you’ve sold him nothing. What you had to sell you sold to me—he knows nothing about it.’

Stokes’ face was a picture. The earlier events of the day had shown him the strength of Manders’ arm—indeed his ribs were yet aching from his drubbing—or else he would have tried a hand-to-hand conclusion with him. He did not so much blame himself for the mistake. The crisp

white credentials which Manders had shown and given him seemed unimpeachable, as he could not have imagined any one except the principal being willing to give twenty pounds for a few things not worth ten shillings. His only comfort was that he had the money safe enough in his pocket.

‘Come,’ said Manders, ‘what else have you to sell? I’ve more money to spare, so, perhaps, we can have another deal.’

Mr Stokes indulged in a few peonies of speech—fine, full blown ones. Then he turned savagely to his visitor.

‘You get out of this; I don’t know who or what you be. Get out of my house, or I’ll try and murder you.’

‘No you won’t, my friend. I’ll get out just when I choose, and when I know all I want to know. Shall I tell you who I am?’

Mr Stokes was understood to say he didn’t care a dash, &c., who he was, and to reiterate his request to be left to his undoubted right—solitude. Manders drew himself to his full height and looked his surly companion full in the face. His mocking manner quite vanished; he spoke sternly and impressively.

‘You fool, I will tell you who I am. Do you think I was going about buying up your rubbish for my own pleasure. I am a London detective, down here on this business. I know nearly all I want to know, and unless you explain a few matters clearly, you go with me to Longmere Gaol to-night, and when you come out you’ll come out to swing. Now, what have you got to say?’

Nothing apparently. Mr Stokes, who had a proper awe of that mysterious creature, a London detective, collapsed entirely; he sank, with trembling lips, back into his only chair.

‘What have you to say?’ cried Manders, savagely, catching hold of his shoulder and shaking him.

‘I didn’t, s’help me!’ stammered the poacher. ‘I was in the hedge all the time. I only picked up the bundle.’

‘Sit up,’ said Manders, ‘and listen. This is your only chance. You tell me everything you know—don’t you hide a single thing; if you do, I shall find it out. I don’t want to be hard on you, and if you tell me the exact truth you shall have another twenty pounds; if you don’t, Longmere Gaol—and the rest.’

‘Let a chap think a bit,’ pleaded Stokes. The mention

of twenty pounds to be gained was not unheeded ; indeed, he thought his prospects were growing brighter.

Manders pulled out his watch.

‘I’ll give you five minutes,’ he said. ‘Then, if you don’t tell all, on go the hand-cuffs, and you will sleep at Longmere.’

The poacher commenced his deliberations with a long pull at the bottle, then he rumped up his hair, and did his best to think himself out of his strait. He would not have been so uncomfortable had he known that his antagonist was in quite as uneasy a state of mind, and was casting about for a fresh move to make if Mr Stokes eventually resolved to defy him. Outwardly he was the picture of indifference. It was a curious sight. The wretched hovel, lit up by a flaring candle end, the sullen ruffian crouching in his chair, and ever and anon casting furtive glances at his apathetic tormentor, who sat on the rickety table, and in his elegant clothes seemed utterly out of place with his surroundings.

‘Time’s up,’ said Manders at last. Stokes looked up.

‘I say, you’ll pay the money down honourable if I splits.’

‘Of course I will ; it costs me nothing. Look here, see it,’ and the speaker shook the notes before him.

‘Well, then,’ said Stokes, ‘I’ll tell you all I knows.’

‘All, mind,’ said Manders sternly.

‘If I say all, I means all,’ answered the poacher.

‘Very well ; get another candle and begin.’

Stokes obeyed. He found another candle, which he lit at the remnants of the first one ; then, after another pull at his bottle, he began his tale, to which the self-called detective listened with befitting gravity.

Not only once was the tale told. Over and over again his listener heard it. He cross-questioned the narrator on every possible point until he was fully convinced that the man was telling the truth and telling also all he knew. He impressed every incident upon his mind—time, spot, words that passed, and action that took place. He was particular as to the order in which Mr Bouchier did those eccentric things, after the man fell from the dog-cart. In fact, he might have sat with Mr Stokes until morning dawned, getting at every item of evidence he could give, but at last, either from the severe and unaccustomed strain laid on his brain by the questions he was called upon to answer, or from the recurring sips from the bottle, the

witness began to grow so bewildered that Manders found he was of no further use. He rose, and paying him his easily earned money, assumed his former severe air.

'Now look here, Stokes ; you keep quiet, not a word of this to any one until I send for you. There may be more money yet for you, if you can keep a silent tongue in your head.'

Stokes promised obedience with drunken emphasis, he bade his visitor an effusive and grateful good-night, for after all the transaction had been a very profitable one to him.

It may be as well to mention here that the possession of forty pounds to Mr Stokes meant the power of buying forty pounds' worth of drink. He shut up his hovel the next day, and removing to Blacktown, set steadily to work to enjoy his riches in his own fashion. Having found a peculiarly fiery tap which suited his palate exactly, by the time he had finished an equivalent to thirty sovereigns, he saw unmentionable horrors—such horrors that life became a burden to him, and in a delirious frenzy he threw himself from a four storey window, and that was the end of him. His acquaintances at Redton did not hear of this termination to his career. They neither missed nor inquired for him, but next autumn, in his absence, the stock of pheasants and other game on the neighbouring preserves was greater than it had been for some years.

Manders walked back to the inn in high spirits, humming his favourite tunes and commending his own wit. He explained that he had been detained, and must stay the night at Redton—perhaps longer. He ordered a messenger to be sent off by daybreak to fetch his bag from Brackley ; then he went to rest, feeling like a general who, although defeated in a recent engagement, has been able to bring up such reinforcements, to devise such irresistible strategic moves, since his reverse, that the battle which is imminent to-morrow is certain to be a victory for him, the only doubtful matter being the amount of booty to be acquired.

## CHAPTER VII

## THE SECOND ATTACK—VICTORY

MR BOURCHIER was dawdling over a late breakfast. Latterly he had not appeared at that meal until long after the other members of his family had finished, his bad nights being the excuse for his late appearance. He sat at the table alone, but his wife was in the bay window, with some fancy work in her hands. After the manner of good wives, she glanced across from time to time to see that her husband was in want of nothing, and felt quite unhappy at noticing how little he required to satisfy his appetite. Now and again she addressed a remark to him, which he answered courteously enough, but in an abstracted way. Presently she asked—

‘Who was the man who came to see you yesterday?’

‘A young fellow pestering me about a troublesome personal piece of business,’ answered her husband.

‘You had to order him out, my maid tells me.’

‘Yes; I was not inclined to listen to him any longer. He would not take a hint, so I was obliged to speak plainly.’

‘His name was Bouchier, was it not?’ Mrs Bouchier had learnt this from her maid—Steel, the footman, having, of course, read the card he brought in.

Mr Bouchier looked annoyed. His wife evidently expected an explanation.

‘He calls himself so. Says he is one of my Uncle Digby’s illegitimate descendants. I hoped all that bother was at an end.’

‘He won’t go to law with you again, I hope. These matters all read so unpleasantly in the papers.’

‘He seems to threaten it; but I don’t think he will.’

‘Would it not be better to pay a thousand or two, and settle the affair for ever? You know best, of course, Philip; but I don’t want the old scandal raked up again.’

‘Neither do I. I would pay any reasonable sum to avoid law. Perhaps I was too hasty yesterday, and should have suggested it. I will try and see him again soon.’

Mr Bouchier was speaking the truth—he would have paid a very considerable sum to settle the matter.

Just then the door opened and two girls entered. One of them was about twenty, the other about eighteen years

of age. Each was dressed in a well-fitting riding habit, and wore a coquettish hat and tanned gloves. They ran over to Mr Bouchier and kissed him lovingly. He returned the salutes, and his eyes grew softer and his face looked kinder than we have seen it look as yet; for, stern and hard as the man was to outsiders, he was proud of and passionately fond of his children. Who can say it was not the thought of his children, and the difference a slip of paper made to them, that turned the scale on a certain occasion, and nerved him to do an act of such subtle cruelty?

His daughters were fair English girls. Mr Bouchier was a handsome man, and his wife had possessed great beauty. Mabel, the elder girl, inherited the stately form of the father; Josephine, the younger, the shorter stature, but sweeter features of the mother. Mabel was intellectual, Josephine frivolous—moreover, her pretty head was full of romance; full of heroes of the usual three-volume novel type—dear, darling, handsome, and rather naughty creatures, usually in the Guards. The education of both sisters was completed—Mabel had been presented; Josephine was looking forward to that ceremony this season. Mr Bouchier thought the most highly of his elder daughter's capacities and qualities, but it was the younger he loved the most. There was no one in the world—not even Allan, his eldest son and heir—who dared to say such things, dared to do such things, to Philip Tremain Bouchier as his daughter Josephine could say and do with impunity.

Mabel kissed her father calmly but affectionately; Josephine threw her arms round him and was effusive in her greeting.

'Come,' she cried, 'we are going to ride to Longmere; you must come with us. No denial, if you please.'

She shook her riding whip at him, and pouted as she saw by his face he was going to make an excuse.

'Letters,' she continued; 'let them wait. People to see—let them wait. The day is lovely, and next month we shall all be shut up in London, and you so busy we shall see nothing of you. Come, now, do—do—do!'

'Your papa is tired, my dear,' interposed Mrs Bouchier. 'I daresay he would rather be left in peace.'

'It is this moping indoors makes the poor man ill,' said Josephine. 'After a good trot on a morning like this he will be much better.'

‘I wonder if it would do you good, Philip?’ said Mrs Bouchier, inclined to agree with Josephine.

‘It may,’ said her husband. ‘Any way I must obey my tyrant. Finey, dear, ring the bell, and order my horse.’

The girl clapped her hands, kissed her father again, and the horse was ordered at once.

A handsome and happier-looking trio could scarcely have been found in England than Philip Bouchier and his two daughters as they rode along the winding drive to the lodge; the father sitting his horse as only an English gentleman accustomed to riding from his childhood can sit a horse; the daughters, at his side, with their graceful figures showing to the best advantage as they sat in the saddles in a way that showed their education in horsemanship was perfect. If Mr Bouchier looked rather pale and thin, he was smiling as he listened to the talk of his companions. The soft spring wind was pleasant, the sun was shining, but everything looked fresh and bright from recent showers—all clean and new, not a spec of dust on leaf, flower, or grass. It was a lovely morning, as Josephine had averred, and Mr Bouchier could not help yielding to its charm, and hoped for a while to leave care and annoyance behind him, and enjoy this ride with his children.

But his ride was destined to be a very short one. The lodge-keeper’s wife opened the gate, and, bidding Mr Bouchier a respectful and his daughters a cheerful good-morning, closed it again behind them. The girls reined in their horses for a moment to say a few words to the old woman, so that Mr Bouchier rode out alone on to the main road. Then a tall young man, who appeared to rise from the opposite bank, approached, and, laying a firm hand on the horse’s rein, compelled him to stop. The rider at once recognised the self-styled Digby Bouchier, his visitor of yesterday.

But there was something different in the man’s appearance; something not accounted for by an entire change in his dress—for now he was clad in garments more fitted to the country—there was a gravity, a solemnity in the expression of his face which made Mr Bouchier wonder, even fear. As the horse stopped, he came round to the off side, still keeping his right hand lightly on the rein, as though he feared the rider would endeavour to escape him.

‘I must see you—speak to you alone,’ he said.

‘Let go my horse!’ said Mr Bouchier, fiercely, but in an undertone, his daughters being within earshot.

‘Never, until you promise to return to your house with me. I have much to say.’

There was command—menace even—in his voice. Although totally unaccustomed to being ordered what to do, Mr Bouchier felt he must obey. He could not risk a struggle in the highway before his daughters, and, in truth, he longed, although he feared, to know what this man had to reveal. Let it be the worst, it would be better than uncertainty as to the extent of his knowledge.

The girls came up at this moment, laughing at some quaint remark they had extracted from the old retainer at the lodge. They looked with surprise at the stranger talking to their father. He raised his hat mechanically, and appeared to be waiting anxiously for Mr Bouchier to answer some question.

‘If your business is so pressing,’ they heard the latter say in his clear, incisive tones, ‘so pressing that you can take no denial, I must return to the house with you, I suppose.’

‘It is of the utmost importance,’ said the unknown, impressively.

‘Very well; I will come back. My dear girls, I am afraid I must disappoint you. I must go back and speak with this—gentleman.’

Josephine turned her head away and made an ugly face at the trees on the other side of the road. Mabel said—

‘Very well, papa; but we are very sorry. Can’t we wait for you?’

‘My business, I fear, will take some time,’ said the unknown, with a significance which did not escape Mr Bouchier.

‘I think you had better ride on slowly,’ he said; ‘I will tell a groom to follow you at once. Now, sir, be good enough to come with me.’

He turned his horse’s head, and Manders, again raising his hat in the same preoccupied way, followed him through the lodge gate. Mabel and Josephine exchanged looks of wonder, and walked their horses slowly along the road towards Longmere.

‘How strange,’ said Mabel. ‘I wonder who he can be.’



‘Yes,’ answered her sister. ‘But wasn’t he beautiful?’

‘I didn’t notice him much. I was too cross with him, bothering poor papa just at that moment.’

‘Oh, he was a lovely looking young man. Just the sort of creature you read about—with a pale face, large dark eyes and straight features, and quite unhappy looking.’

‘My dear, don’t talk such rubbish.’

‘He didn’t seem a bit afraid of papa, although papa spoke so sharply to him—you know his way, Mabel—“If your business is so pressing,” etc.’

Josephine mimicked her dignified father very well—it was the result of long and audacious practice.

‘I wonder if we shall meet him coming back? I am dying to see papa, and hear who the distinguished stranger is,’ she continued.

‘Finey, you are an idiot,’ said Mabel, laughing. ‘I believe the first romantic-looking young man you meet, with a pale face, a straight nose, and dark eyes, may run off with you if he chooses.’

‘Any way,’ retorted her sister, ‘I shan’t run off with a red face and no nose to speak of, like the Honourable John.’

The Honourable John was a gentleman, son of Lord Coverton, and was hopelessly in love with Mabel. Had Mabel returned his passion Josephine would not have disparaged him, for the girls were true sisters.

Then the groom appeared in the distance behind, so the girls quickened their pace, and trotted merrily along the road to Longmere.

Mr Bouchier, with his unexpected and unwelcome visitor beside him, walked his horse up the long drive to the house; there he gave it in charge of a groom, whom he told to follow the ladies as soon as possible. He then conducted his visitor round the house until they arrived at the library window, which was a French casement, reaching to the ground. Drawing a key from his pocket, he opened the sash, and the two gentlemen entered. Motioning the young man to seat himself, Mr Bouchier sank into his customary chair, and tried to prepare himself for what was to come. Let it be the very worst, he must show no fear—let this Digby Bouchier, or whoever he was, state that he had learned the identity of his father with the man Philip Bouchier shot—let him accuse him of having done so, not

in self-defence, but to try and keep the inheritance he claimed, he must meet his accusations calmly and scornfully, and not even by a change of colour show that he moved; and Mr Bouchier, as he sat there waiting the onslaught of his young antagonist, felt he was fully equal to the task—fully prepared and able to put on a bold yet tranquil front. But if ever a man was utterly routed and defeated by unforeseen, undreamt of occurrences and revelations, it was Philip Bouchier, in that struggle about to commence.

To rightly understand the reason for the manner in which Manders commenced his second attack, you must bear in mind that he was intensely theatrical. His stage effect of the preceding night had given him great confidence in his powers as an actor; indeed, the greatest interest he now felt in his deep laid scheme was the sensation he might be able to produce by striking some unsuspected stroke, revealing the existence of some unthought-of mine under his antagonist's feet, and having done so, enjoy his discomfiture. The way of transgressors may be hard, but at times the excitement of the journey makes the criminal forget the pointed stones he treads on. The schemer had arranged the programme of this encounter in a manner which was so original that his only feeling was delight at the ingenious device. He knew he had material different from Mr Stokes to work upon, but his tools, he thought, were equal to the occasion.

He did not accept his host's invitation to be seated, but he was not at all desirous of shunning his eyes. He stood erect in the full light of the window, and when Mr Bouchier, after waiting with apparent indifference for him to commence his business, glanced up at him with a look of well-bred impatience on his face, he saw what certainly startled him.

Manders' whole appearance was altered. His loose coat was now open, his linen looked crumpled and disarranged, his hair dishevelled and uncared-for. His face was pale and full of passion; his lips quivered and his dark eyes glared at Mr Bouchier. He appeared striving to utter some words which the intensity of his palpable agitation hindered from leaving his lips. He seemed powerless for the time to do more than lift his hand and point at his companion.

He was, indeed, a good actor—so good that he did what only great actors can do—carried his audience away—so good that Mr Bouchier for the time forgot that it was not the son of the dead man standing before him, and by his gestures calling down the wrath of Heaven on his father's murderer—so good that, in spite of every effort, the guilty man felt his forehead grow clammy, and did what he cursed himself for doing, shrank and quailed before the avenger. It was but for a second, yet long enough to show the actor that his art would triumph.

'Murderer!' he hissed out, approaching nearer to Philip Bouchier, 'murderer of an innocent man!'

Mr Bouchier recovered. The sound of the man's voice recalled him to himself.

'You are mad, or drunk,' he said, in a voice almost steady.

'I am neither mad nor drunk, and you know it. Listen—I saw my father—I saw John Boucher last night. Was I dreaming? Yes, I may have been dreaming, although I was awake. This, then, was my dream.' Then, fixing his eyes full on Mr Bouchier's face, yet throwing into them an expression as though he saw nothing except mental visions, the speaker, with all the modulations of his beautiful voice, brought in proper play, proceeded, and the listener's horror grew and grew as the pretended vision was revealed to him.

'It was a moonlight night—nearly a full moon. The road was light as day. It was a hill—the bottom of a steep hill—young fir-trees and undergrowth covering each side of it. As I stood there I saw a dog-cart coming to me. It halted just where I stood. Two men were in it, and the moonlight showed me the face of each, and one was the face of my father. The man driving stopped the horse—both men seemed to talk for a short time—then the man driving gave my father the reins to hold. I saw a flash, heard a shot, and my father fell from the seat to the road dying, and his eyes met mine, but I was spell-bound and could not move. The other man sprang down, took a carriage lamp, gazed into his victim's face, and rifled his pockets, the moon the while shining brighter than ever I had seen it.'

\* \* \* \* \*

So on and on, warming to his work as he got in full swing—describing with painful accuracy every action,

every detail of that fatal night—still with his eyes fixed on Mr Bouchier's face, his clear voice still ringing in his ears like a knell for dying honour. On and on he went with merciless exactness, till as a climax, he hurled at the listener—'And the face of the man I saw in the moonlight was the face I am looking at now.'

Latent superstition is natural in a greater or less degree to every man. Some may at last get rid of it, but many who scoff at visions and supernatural appearances have yet the lingering doubt whether, after all, there may not be something in them. The involuntary creeping of the flesh and bristling of the hair which happens even to the most sceptical in situations which bring the thought of something uncanny to the mind, testifies to the truth of the assertion I make, that all men, more or less, have superstition—the extent of which can only be known, even to themselves, under peculiar circumstances.

It was so with the listener—his horror grew and grew, as every act of his, every trifling act, which was so branded upon his memory, was by word and gesture, reproduced by the man who stated he learnt them in a vision—who stood near him and thrilled him through and through with his accusing voice. Can we wonder that Mr Bouchier fell into the trap, and in spite of scepticism as to things supernatural was bound to feel that, unless it was revealed by some higher power than human, no one could have depicted the scene? Can we wonder that, as his horror culminated with the last sentence hurled at him, he leant over the table and covered his face with his hands, striving to shut out what seemed to him like a frightful dream?

There was dead silence in the room for some moments, whilst Mr Bouchier kept his face hidden, and by attitude and manner confessed his guilt. He was not a religious man, but like many others who disbelieve in the blessings of Heaven, had a lurking belief in its punishments. So, for a while, he sat and made no further sign. Then the first law of nature, self-preservation, asserted itself, and, by an effort, he strove to collect his shattered forces, and present the best front he could to the enemy. He raised his head and attempted to smile.

'Excuse me,' he said, 'I have been far from well lately, and your wild words'—then he ventured to look across at Digby Bouchier and saw the trap he had fallen into.

The young man was sitting in a graceful, careless attitude ; every trace of his passion and righteous indignation had vanished, but in place of them his lips wore a mocking smile, and his eyes an expression of triumph which spoke volumes to Mr Bouchier.

‘Guilty conscience,’ said the avenger, almost cheerfully. ‘Terrible thing a guilty conscience must be, I guess. Never thought you’d have thrown up your hand in that fashion so soon.’

There was a very strong American twang in his voice now.

Philip Bouchier was trembling with rage—he scarcely knew what he was about—his one idea was vengeance. With a shaking hand he tried to open a drawer in front of him. Manders’ keen eye watched every motion.

‘No you don’t, he said, thrusting his right hand into his breast. ‘Where I come from we make it a point to shoot first when we can.’

He was right to be wary, for, at that moment, heedless of consequences, Philip Bouchier would have shot him like a dog, and never regretted the act.

‘Now,’ said Manders, ‘sit up, and let us talk like sensible men who don’t believe in visions. Shall I speak first?’

Mr Bouchier said nothing.

‘It happened I found a man last night who saw my father killed as I described it to you. You know if it’s correct or not.’

‘He was no more your father than I am,’ said Mr Bouchier.

‘Look here, Mr Bouchier, I say he’s my father, and you say you didn’t murder him. When you can prove that I’ll prove the other fast enough.’

‘Who was the fellow who told you this tale?’ asked Mr Bouchier ; for, if it was known to one, why not to all?’

‘Never mind him—I can find him when I want him. Don’t you be afraid ; I’ll stop his mouth all right.’

His hearer shuddered—not so much from fear, but because he realised he was at the mercy of his companion.

‘Although you shot my father I don’t want to be vindictive. You do what’s right to the son, and we’ll make things comfortable.’

‘You are not John Boucher’s son.’

‘I say I am. I have every paper establishing me;

rights. They were all in my father's pocket-book ; the one he had that night.'

'How did you get that book?' Mr Bouchier had now given up all attempts to deny his guilt.

'It was forwarded through the post by some farmer I suppose, who picked it up on the road. Here's the letter sent with it.'

He handed farmer Davis' note to Mr Bouchier. Manders' explanation of the way he acquired the pocket-book was so natural and simple, that had he not deemed it impossible for a man to talk so coolly of compromising his father's murderer, Mr Bouchier might have believed him to be the man he personated.

All this practical conversation was bringing his mind back to its usual bent. He confessed to himself that this rascal had defeated him ; that to a certain extent he held him in his power. He guessed he would wield this power to his own advantage. Well, he must pay, and be thankful that money could hush the thing up. Having resolved this, Mr Bouchier wasted no more time.

'Now, how much do you want?' he asked sternly, and in a business-like tone.

'I haven't quite made up my mind,' replied the other, in the same business-like way.

'Make it up at once then. How much money?'

'I am not thinking altogether of money.'

'Think of it now, then—tell me how much, and let me get rid of you.'

'Well,' said Manders, his twang coming to the surface, 'if you won't speak of any other equivalent—just tell me what the estate's worth.'

'That is my affair, not yours—name your price.'

'They tell me, about here,' drawled Manders, 'it's worth from ten to twelve thousand a year, counting the red hematite.'

Mr Bouchier disdained to reply.

'Well, put it up at the lowest, ten thousand—you give me half, and we'll cry quits.'

'You fool!' said Philip Bouchier, with cutting scorn. 'You fool! not to know me better than that.'

'Then I'll have what belongs to me—the whole of it,' said Manders sullenly.

'You had better try—the law is open to all.'

‘I will try, and, anyway, you’ll hang for murder.’

‘If you had studied the law you would know that, granting your accusation is true, a man, in England, can’t be tried twice for the same offence. If you doubt me, I will show you chapter and verse. There are plenty of law books here.’ The speaker’s sarcastic manner was fast returning.

‘Well, I can do as bad. I can tell every one the tale; publish a circular and send it round; make it talked of all over the country; and you won’t dare move a finger to stop me.’

Yes, he could do all that. Mr Bouchier might laugh scornfully, but the fact remained.

‘And, I guess,’ continued Manders, ‘when the judge is asked to decide between you and me, a little bag of things which will identify the man you shot as my father won’t prejudice him in your favour.’

Philip Bouchier’s respect for his antagonist was rising—he was clearer sighted than he thought him—for he had, as soon as its effects had worn off, considered the theatrical display a childish and useless piece of work. At any reasonable price he must buy him off.

‘I will not prolong the discussion,’ he said. ‘Name some reasonable sum—it shall be paid you.’

‘I told you before, when you cut me so short, I was not thinking of money only.’

‘What were you thinking of?’

‘I want to get on in the world.’

‘With your talents,’ said Mr Bouchier politely, ‘there should be little fear as to that.’

‘No, I suppose not,’ continued Manders, choosing to take his words literally.

‘But, you see, I want a start, I want to mix with the right sort of people,’ he continued.

‘Go on.’

‘I’m your cousin—I’m Digby Bouchier—and, as I’m as legitimate as you are, the head of the family. I want you to acknowledge me as Digby Bouchier, to let me visit you here or in London, whenever I like. I shan’t be a disgrace to you, don’t you be afraid.’

‘Go on,’ said Mr Bouchier.

‘Of course,’ continued the new head of the family, ‘I must have some money; perhaps a thousand or so a year.’

I'll ask for it when I want it ; but what I want chiefly is for you to look upon me as your cousin. You'd soon get used to it, and find me a good sort of a fellow. We should all be friendly after a bit.'

With that gift which a good counsel has of identifying himself with his client—an actor of feeling himself the character he portrays—Manders was speaking as naturally as though he really was Digby Bouchier. His listener was for a moment staggered.

'Friendly !' he said. 'You want to be friendly with a man you accuse of killing your father !'

'Well, now,' continued Manders, almost kindly, 'I don't think so much about that shooting ; I wasn't so awfully fond of my father. I daresay he riled and worked you up. I expect I would have done the same in your place to a man who was coming to take everything from me. No, I'll forgive all that ; you meet me in this, and I'll never allude to it by word or look. You try me—I shall be a credit to the family.'

He spoke with such good-humoured cynicism—his voice was so pleasant—that Mr Bouchier, strange as it may seem, liked him the better for his cool audacity.

'Now,' he said, to humour him, 'will you kindly say what you intend to give me in exchange for these modest demands of yours ?'

'Well, I'll do what you like, except sign away my rights. I won't do that ; but as long as you treat me well, I won't press them, or against your son after you, if you leave me a proper sum.'

'You needn't trouble ; I'm not going to do anything of the sort. If you'll allow me to open my drawer, I'll write you out a cheque for two thousand pounds, and trust I shall never see you again.'

Manders rose—justly indignant. He was not acting now ; every word he said he felt and meant.

'I'll make no terms except those I have named. I'll not take a farthing. I'll turn you out of Redhills—I'll proclaim you a murderer. You think I shall ruin myself—never mind, I'll ruin you. If I can't hang you, I can do that. I'll go from here to London, and in a week you'll get some strange tidings. Good-morning—you've had your chance and missed. I swear I will do what I say. I haven't much to lose—you have.'



He turned to the door. Mr Bouchier could see he was in grim earnest; he knew that unpleasant consequences must ensue if he let him go.

‘Stop,’ he said, ‘you are too hasty. I must consider.’

‘I will give you time for that—till to-morrow. Then I will come for your answer. I will either be a good friend or a bitter foe.’

‘I will come and see you,’ said Mr Bouchier, who did not wish him to awaken any more curiosity with his visits. ‘You are at the inn, I suppose?’

‘No,’ said Manders, shortly. ‘I shall call on you to-morrow evening. If I am admitted, not only to the house but to your table—presented by my right name to your family as a cousin, well and good. I shall understand without another word that you yield. If I am denied entrance, I shall know the meaning of that—then matters will take their course. It rests with you to make things pleasant.’

Without another word he opened the door and walked out. He thought he had conquered this time. With a light quick step he went along the drive, nodded cheerfully and gaily to the old woman at the lodge. Some little way down the road he met the two girls returning from their ride. He raised his hat once more—a salute which only the younger acknowledged. He turned and looked after his new cousins, admiring their perfect figures and the way they sat their horses. Josephine with a girl’s curiosity turned her head for a moment.

‘I hope and trust,’ said Manders, who was most susceptible to such charms as hers, ‘that matters may be arranged pleasantly to-morrow.’

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## CHAPTER VIII

### MAKING THINGS PLEASANT

To a man who, all his lifetime, has been accustomed to have his own way, the feeling that some one holds the whip hand over him is not a pleasant one; especially when he is urged to go along a road which he strongly objects to.

It was a new sensation for Philip Bouchier to find he had a master, and he cast about in every direction to try and shake off the galling yoke. Until he had settled how to proceed he vouchsafed no information to his family as to the object of the young man's visit. His daughters' curiosity he defied with the explanation 'important and private business.' His wife he silenced by begging her to say nothing about it until to-morrow, when he would know more concerning the matter. All the evening and the greater part of the night he devised plans to get rid of the intruder, or baited golden hooks which he hoped he could not resist. He thought about it over his breakfast; he strolled through the grounds all the morning thinking about it, but could see no way out of the difficulty. He had now only a few hours to decide, and he knew if he did not decide as the self-styled Digby Bouchier wished, it would be war to the knife between them. He thought of the fellow's last words, and could not help believing he would go to any extremity. If the pretender laid claim to Redhills, he could with the evidence he possessed prove that he, Philip Bouchier, had taken the life of John Boucher. In spite of all verdicts which had justified his act, what would the world think? If this Digby Bouchier did not feel confident enough to carry his case into court, and simply spread the tale about as he threatened to do, how could he stop him? If he indicted him for libel he would plead justification—and then—Mr Bouchier shuddered at the thought. At any price the man must be silenced.

Then he began to stoop and made the first signs of submission. He wrote a note asking his antagonist to call on him at once; or, if he preferred it, he would come to the inn and see him. As he put the note in the envelope, a fresh difficulty presented itself; he could not bring himself to address it to Mr Digby Bouchier; yet he knew him by no other name. However, he left the envelope blank, telling his messenger to take it to the inn for the gentleman who was staying there, and wait for an answer. The answer made Philip Bouchier stamp with rage. It ran so—

'Mr Bouchier presents his compliments to Mr Philip Bouchier, and begs to say he will call at the hour he fixed

yesterday, and will then learn Mr Philip Bouchier's decision in the manner Mr Bouchier specified.'

This impudent assumption of the title Mr Bouchier, and the designation of himself as Mr Philip Bouchier, was a supplementary declaration of war. Philip Bouchier knew that unless prepared to fight he must grant the pretender his own terms. He went into the house and found his wife.

'Adelaide,' he said, 'I want to talk to you.'

Mrs Bouchier laid down the book she was reading and waited his pleasure.

'I told you who that young man was who called yesterday and the day before?'

'Yes, Philip. There is nothing to trouble about, I hope.'

'I don't know, but I fear so. There is no doubt but the entry of the marriage has been found. Indeed, I have seen the certificate.'

'Philip! What does it mean?'

'I hardly know yet,' said Mr Bouchier, savagely. 'But if what he says is true, it may mean Redhills.'

His wife looked at him with a terrified face. 'It seems impossible,' she said, 'after so many years.'

'That — old man kept the claim open with his law suits, or it would be impossible.'

'What is to be done?'

'It's about that I want to consult you. He does not seem unkindly disposed in the matter.' Philip Bouchier clenched his teeth as force of circumstances compelled him to speak in favour of his new master.

'Oh, pay him something! Try to arrange something!' cried his wife. 'Think of our children!'

'I do. I have offered him a handsome sum, but he insists on certain conditions.'

'What are they? Don't keep me in suspense.'

'He insists that we shall recognise his legitimacy—shall receive him here, in fact, as one of the family. If not, he will fight the case.'

This seemed such a natural demand, that Mrs Bouchier expressed no surprise.

'Is there any objection to it?' she asked. 'Will he give up his claim then?'

'Hardly give it up; but the matter may be arranged.

The objection is, that by receiving him I show the weakness of my hand.'

'What is the young man like? Is he a gentleman?'

'I hardly know; I was too much upset to notice his looks or manner of speech much. He has a touch of the American about him—I noticed that.'

'Do you really think he could turn us out?'

'As sure as he is the grandson of that old fellow he can. The last time I spoke about the case to Clarkson, he laughed, and asked me if I had heard anything more of the bastard branch. Then I asked him a plain question, "If that marriage could be proved, what then?" He said, "As there's no human possibility of proving what never happened, I don't mind telling you, as a lawyer, that the title to Redhills is dependent on that marriage or non-marriage."'

Mrs Bouchier's tears were flowing. 'Oh, it is shameful!' she said. 'To think we may be beggars at any moment! Oh, Philip, what shall we do?'

'I can suggest nothing, except meeting him as he wishes, and by-and-bye trying to make a compromise.'

'Oh, do!' she cried. 'Do anything you can. Ask him here, if you think it best to do so.'

'I do think it best, Adelaide.'

'Ask him, then. When will he come?'

'I promised to give him my answer to-day. We are alone to-night, he had better dine with us. I will send over and ask him.'

Philip Bouchier had never found words so difficult to utter as these. Even the crime that weighed upon him seemed little compared to the self-degradation of that speech. Even his wife was surprised at his haste to welcome this young man who made such a change in every prospect of life.

'Do as you think fit,' she said. 'I will meet him bravely, and play my part as well as I can.'

Her husband kissed her kindly, and went to the library to write the note which signified capitulation.

But, in yielding, he had no intention of being at this man's mercy all his lifetime. He laid down a line of action. He would receive him, acknowledge him as his cousin, conceal the distaste he felt to his society—would even consent to the world looking upon them as friends—he would

supply him with money for a while ; then, if he could get from him the name of that mysterious witness, and arrange matters with the latter—shipping him off to the antipodes, or otherwise providing for him—Mr Bouchier could turn on his taskmaster, defy him, and kick him out, bidding him do his worst. His story would only be regarded as a malicious act of revenge—the invention of an unmasked impostor. Necessity brings strange bedfellows, who can be kicked out when necessity ceases. The more he thought of it, the more feasible the scheme seemed ; he had but to be patient and wait. This man, Digby Bouchier, or whoever he may be, by his extraordinary determination to live as a friend within his enemy's gates, was sealing his own doom.

'Had he really been Digby Bouchier, he might have done it,' he said grimly, as he despatched his note. 'Not being Digby Bouchier, it is but the act of a fool.'

This second note was properly addressed to Digby Bouchier, Esq., and the joy of the recipient knew no bounds ; he felt he had triumphed all along the line. Had it not been for the ordeal that awaited him in the evening, he would have celebrated his victory in many brandies and water ; but on the threshold of his entrance to a higher life he saw it behoved him to be careful—he had a wary and unscrupulous foe to deal with. If he neglected caution, victory to-day might mean defeat to-morrow. When the appointed time grew near he dressed himself properly ; he had evening clothes with him, and blessed his foresight at such being the case. Then he walked quietly up to the great house. His confidence in his own powers had greatly increased ; the difficult part of the play was over, the rest was nothing to a clever man. As he reached the lodge-gate he turned round, and, fearing no observation, as it was getting quite dark, he waved a farewell to an imaginary person.

'George Manders, my dear fellow,' he said, 'we must part here—at the entrance to my ancestral halls. Farewell, George. I sha'll always think kindly of you—you have been a true friend to Digby Bouchier. We part the best of friends, but, I trust, for my sake, you will never dog my footsteps, force your acquaintance on me, or turn up at an inconvenient time. Farewell, for ever.'

He walked up the drive, knocked at the door, and was ceremoniously ushered into the drawing-room, as Mr Digby

Bourchier, by the same servant who two days before had been instructed to accelerate his departure. The man was too highly trained to express the slightest astonishment. It is only in shades of downstairs regions that a gentleman's servant should think of doing such a thing.

He had naturally expected that his reception would be attended by some embarrassment. It was not so. Mr Bourchier was perfectly polite, and expressed his pleasure at seeing him. He gave him his hand—coldly, of course. To all appearances Digby might have been nothing more than a new acquaintance. His host presented him to his wife, and then to his daughters. A few remarks were made about the weather, the look of the country, the steepness of the hills about, and then dinner was announced. Mr Bourchier led the way with a daughter on each arm, and Digby followed with his hostess. He was very much pleased at the way in which Mr Bourchier had commenced his share of the compact, and determined to make things quite pleasant if he could. He began to persuade himself that he felt a dawning affection for his new found relatives.

After the manner of all travellers who find themselves in a new country, he started by taking stock of his surroundings. Being for such a small party, dinner was served in a small room. Everything was in quiet, good taste, and giving little evidence of wealth. This was a surprise to Digby, who had an idea that people of such importance dined off silver and gold. It was the fault of his education that he was unaware of the value of the china scattered about the room, the pictures on the walls, the quaint old silver table appointments—for Philip Bourchier was a man of taste. From inanimate objects Digby turned to what he understood better, people. His host at the head of the table, with his well-cut features and coldly polite manner, did not interest him much—he knew all about him; so much that it was not without a little fear he drank his wine, in no wise doubting that if it could be done with safety poison would be put in it. The great object of his curiosity and speculation was the ladies. Mrs Bourchier sat on his left hand, Josephine on his right, and Mabel was opposite to him. He liked Mrs Bourchier's looks; she spoke kindly to him, and with a touch of sympathy in her voice. She had her part to play. Although thinking quite enough of her own station, she

could stoop to conquer ; and, after all, a young fellow who holds the fate of a woman's husband, children, and herself, in the hollow of his hand cannot be treated like an ordinary chance visitor. As to his opposite neighbour, Digby could not determine whether he admired her or not. She was undeniably beautiful, but there was too much in her face to remind him of Mr Bouchier for him to be much attracted. But there could be no mistake about Josephine. 'I call her a nice cuddleable sort of a girl,' said the young man to himself. 'She ain't such a queen as Frances, but just as pretty in her way.' He made up his mind to make things very pleasant for Josephine.

But, perhaps, this new addition to their family circle was examined with even greater interest by the female members of that family. Mrs Bouchier scarcely knew what to think of him ; but he was young, appeared kind and good-tempered ; so she hoped for the best. Mabel decided that, although good-looking and apparently at his ease among them, he was not a gentleman—except by the accident of having been born a Bouchier. Josephine, who seemed struck for a while with a fit of shyness, admired his eyes and straight features, and wondered if his disposition was akin to that of any of her favourite heroes, and if he knew how to ride. She felt very curious to know all about this new cousin, of whose existence she had been unaware until this afternoon. The girls had only been told that he was their cousin, nothing more—nothing as to his claim to the right of turning them out of house and home. They saw nothing out of the common in their having a cousin of whom they had never heard, for they knew that there were descendants of Robert Bouchier the first scattered about the world, and presumed this cousin was one of them.

He played his part very well. He made no glaring errors at table, and when he began to talk lost no time in saying something about his American education and manner of life, which served as an excuse for minor solecisms. Imitative as a monkey, he knew he should soon pick up the little secrets and ways of the new life he was entering upon. He had the good sense to talk naturally and unaffectedly. He told them boldly that his father had made his living by hard work in the New World, and that until a very short time ago he had looked forward to as hardworking a life as his father's. This was the only allusion he made to his

changed prospects, and only his host and hostess understood it. Harmless as the words sounded, they filled the heart of the one with rage, and that of the other with fear.

‘How long has your father been dead?’ asked Mrs Bouchier.

‘A very short time—about three months,’ replied Digby, with proper feeling.

‘How did he die?’ asked the lady, with sympathy in her voice.

‘He met with an accident, from the effects of which he never recovered.’

As he spoke he watched his host’s face, but it bore an expression of nothing more than conventional sympathy.

‘You have no mother?’ asked Mrs Bouchier.

‘Or sisters?’ added Josephine, who was finding her tongue again.

‘Neither. I am alone in the world,’ answered Digby, appealing to his listeners by a gentle sigh. ‘Quite alone. I believe you are the only relatives I have.’

So they talked through dinner-time, the ladies deciding that they did not dislike their new relative. He was polite, and appeared anxious to please Mr Bouchier. He spoke naturally and without embarrassment to the girls, yet betrayed no familiar presumption on the score of kinship. To Mr Bouchier, when that gentleman did address him, he was respectful, as in manner due from a young man to an older one of recognised station in the world. He commenced so well, that when the ladies left the table, and could talk him over between themselves, the verdict they passed upon him was far from being unfavourable.

It was a trying moment for both men when they found themselves alone with the wine and dessert. Mr Bouchier did a host’s duty as far as passing the decanters went, but for a while there was silence between them. Digby was the first to break it. Success had emboldened him.

‘Will you send down for my luggage to-night, or would you prefer that I should begin my visit to-morrow?’

‘For how long do you purpose honouring us with your society?’

‘Suppose you’ll be going to town soon?’

‘In a week or two.’

‘Well, I’ll stay till then any way.’



Mr Bouchier bowed.

‘It’s whether you like me to come to-night or to-morrow. Please yourself ; a night makes little difference.’

‘You are most considerate. But to me it is a matter of indifference, as you insist on coming at all.’

Digby laughed, and drank a glass of wine.

‘I’ll stay to-night, then. Will you send a man to the inn for my things?’

Mr Bouchier rose, rang the bell, and gave the order to the servant.

‘I say,’ remarked the self-invited guest, as his host returned to his chair, ‘I don’t really mean to be too rough on you. You’ll find I’m not such a bad sort as you think.’

‘Will you take any more wine?’ asked Mr Bouchier, restraining a biting piece of sarcasm, suggested by the last remark.

Digby declined, and rose as willing to follow his host.

‘Stop a moment,’ said Mr Bouchier, ‘you may as well let me look at those papers which prove James Boucher’s legitimacy.’

‘With great pleasure,’ said Digby, drawing out an elegant pocket-book, and handing all the certificates to Mr Bouchier—all except two—the one which certified the birth of Frances, and the one which told of the death of the infant Digby.

Mr Bouchier glanced over them, and then handed them back without a word. Digby’s eyes were full of triumph as he replaced them in his pocket. His host rose and came close to him.

‘Listen!’ he said, in a voice none the less stern because it was a whisper, ‘you have forced yourself upon me. For reasons you know of I am compelled to admit you to intercourse with my family. One word of levity or of more than ordinary courtesy to my daughters and I will kill you and take the consequences—you understand?’

‘Oh, yes, I understand.’

‘And know I mean it?’

‘Of course you mean it—you’d kill me now if you could safely.’

‘I would without a moment’s hesitation. If the chance comes I will. Now you are warned!’

Digby laughed. He was not a coward—not by any means.

‘That’s all fair enough,’ he said, ‘I don’t mind that—but I’ll take good care you don’t get a chance. Guess you’ll be smart if you ever do.’

Mr Bouchier said no more. He turned away, and led his guest to the drawing-room. Then he explained to his wife that Mr Digby Bouchier would sleep at Redhills that night and until further notice. Mrs Bouchier was really glad to hear it. She thanked the young man for consenting to stay on such a short invitation, and promised to do all she could to make his visit a pleasant one. Civility and kindness now might be worth much when the compromise was about to be settled—besides, as she did not dislike the young fellow, they cost her nothing.

Mr Bouchier, who had been so much worried all day that he had not looked at his letters, left the drawing-room to do so, promising to return in the course of an hour. Then Digby drew out his strongest weapon to attack the friendly foes that remained. Now that he was an invited guest, and likely to stay for an indefinite period, he ventured upon a more familiar style of conversation—a style quite unobjectionable, but more suitable to relatives. He manifested great interest in the family history of the Bouchiers—his education on that point, he said, laughingly, having been shamefully neglected. His inquiries almost won the proud Mabel, who had the history of her ancestors by heart—indeed, it was a wonder she did not inquire from what Bouchier Digby sprang. He listened with becoming reverence, and when the topic was exhausted asked for a little music. Mabel played and Josephine sang; their cousin applauded both performances, but not too rapturously. Neither of the girls for one moment thought of asking if this cousin, who had been brought up as a tradesman in America, knew anything of music. It was Mrs Bouchier who put them on the right track.

‘Perhaps Mr Digby sings or plays,’ she suggested.

‘Do you sing?’ asked Josephine, with a little furtive smile at the absurdity of such a question.

‘I sing a little,’ he replied. ‘I will try if you like.’

He rose and went to the piano, Josephine making a face at Mabel, which spoke of the infliction they were about to undergo.

Yet he seated himself at the piano as if he knew something about it. He ran his fingers over the keys as if they

were no strangers to such things, and then, to the supreme astonishment of his audience, his strong baritone voice rose and made such melodies as had never before been heard in the drawing-room at Redhills—for his singing, if not up to the standard of a great artist's, was miles and miles ahead of amateur form. His listeners were entranced; again and again they begged him to continue. He was only too willing to consent, and without a note before him he sang the stock songs of every artist. He sang majestic sacred songs, stirring patriotic songs, and passionate love appeals, and during the last ventured to look once or twice at Josephine, and by so doing made her silly, romantic, little heart flutter. Yes, they all, especially Josephine, found things getting very pleasant. All the ladies were fond of music, and if you, my reader, are musical, and have ever heard a truly fine singer, not in the concert-hall, but in a drawing-room—if you have noticed the transformation which takes place with a man who, perhaps, until the moment he gives evidence of his great gift, appeared to you plain, dull, and common-place—you can understand the sensation created by Digby's singing in the drawing-room at Redhills. The most ordinary man who owned such a voice would appear interesting—how much more so then, when the owner was a tall, handsome young fellow, with dark eyes, a pale face, and surrounded by a certain amount of mystery?—a young fellow whose real age was twenty-four, but who for his own reasons stated that he was not twenty-one. It is little wonder that the ladies, even Mabel, were carried away by his songs, and began to think his society would be a boon to them.

Mr Bouchier's hour with his letters was a very long one. Either they were more important than he fancied, or he was in no hurry to return to his incubus. It was nearly bedtime when he reappeared, and his feelings may be imagined when he found the three young people singing a trio in a most creditable style, and on unmistakably friendly terms with each other. He had to control himself as best he could whilst his daughters enlarged upon the musical treasure which had fallen among them. He could not blame them—he could not forbid them singing with the visitor—but he resolved to keep the eye of a lynx upon Digby's relations with his beloved children.

As they separated for the night, and the two men were

fain to make the usual polite farewell, he whispered sternly, 'Remember.'

Digby nodded his head jauntily, and went to his room humming a snatch of the last love song he had sung. Before getting into bed he took the precaution, besides locking the door, of placing a couple of chairs in front of it. Then he slept, and in the morning woke chuckling at the success of his schemes, which made him now a guest beneath his enemy's roof for as long as it suited his purpose to remain so.

Two or three weeks passed, and he was still there. He hoped to be able to remain, so he informed Mrs Bouchier, until they went to town in the course of a few days; as he also returned to town shortly, they would, if she would allow it, see something of him there. Mrs Bouchier, who had as yet found nothing to mistrust, and little to dislike in his character, gave him a cordial invitation to their town house. She, poor woman, was longing to hear that something was going to be sealed and signed respecting the renunciation of his claim to Redhills; but her husband vouchsafed no information on the subject. Indeed, the very mention of the visitor's name to him seemed to produce such unpleasant sensations with Mr Bouchier, that his wife said very little about the matter. She said less than she might have done had not the thought once or twice crossed her mind that the arrangement might shortly be easier to make than it would be now. After all, Digby was a fine young fellow, and she had her husband's assertion that the estate was really his—what if Mabel or Josephine, etc.? Then she broke off the train of thought, and blamed herself for imagining that either of her beautiful girls should stoop to a man so beneath them in education and position.

Digby would have found this country life very dull work had it not been for one thing which occupied him when he could with safety engage in it—that was, making things pleasant for Josephine. Close as was the watch Mr Bouchier kept upon him, significant as was the glance he threw at him if he saw him exchanging anything more than the barest courtesies with his daughters, he could not be always with them. A country gentleman has business to attend to, so must sometimes leave his family to its own devices. It was fortunate for Digby that he could ride—

not quite in the fashion of an English gentleman, but well enough to feel at home on a horse. As it would have been absurd for Mr Bouchier to forbid his girls riding with his own guest, Digby was the daily companion of their rides. Sometimes Mr Bouchier accompanied them, sometimes not. In the latter case the young man made hay whilst the sun shone. So different was his manner when their father was away that the girls agreed that their new cousin stood in terrible awe of Mr Bouchier. Josephine even teased him about it, and could not help noticing a peculiar smile on his face as he gaily confessed the accusation was quite true. His manner to the girls when Mr Bouchier was present was so quiet and void of any approach to gallantry that his host's fears on that head were rapidly being lulled to rest; and as day after day passed without the slightest cause for complaint, he felt little fear in leaving the cousins together. So they rode, walked, and sang together. They made excursions to objects of interest in the neighbourhood; and to one of the party the days passed so pleasantly that her foolish little heart began to regret the impending move to town. Yet Philip Bouchier suspected nothing; the schemer was too clever to show him a link of the strongest chain of all he was forging, until it was safely round him, and riveted in such a way that it would defy all strain.

There were few other visitors at Redhills during those weeks; save one small dinner party, only the usual callers, Sir Baker and Lady Ridley, together with two or three neighbouring landowners, who were accompanied by wives, daughters, and a son or two to make the male and female elements balance—were the guests at the party. Digby was in due form introduced to them all, and was an object of great interest. All properly educated county people know their neighbour's antecedents, so there was much speculation and wonderment among them as to what branch of the Bouchiers Digby represented. He was not far off from being a success at that dinner. He was in high spirits, and after the departure of the ladies amused the men with lively but not ill-chosen anecdotes; and, later on, his singing was thought wonderful. Mr Bouchier seemed in extremely bad spirits, which were not improved by Sir Baker's compliments upon the presence of mind he displayed in his recent encounter—for an event of such magnitude would naturally live long in worthy Westshire

minds. All the while he answered as shortly as he could Sir Baker's questions he felt that there was a mocking light in Digby's eyes. Yet he could not help feeling a little gratitude when he cleverly changed the subject, and made Sir Baker's portly frame shake with an anecdote of American character. It must have been very pleasant to Mr Bouchier that each of the gentlemen took the opportunity at some period of the evening of assuring him that his cousin was a fine young fellow.

The ladies also were all on his side. Indeed, kind old Lady Ridley, who may have intercepted a glance which passed between the two young people when Mr Bouchier's back was turned, tapped Josephine on the cheek and whispered—

'First cousins, my dear. It won't do, you know.' Thereupon the silly girl blushed as red as a poppy; and Digby, who guessed the meaning of that blush, trembled lest Mr Bouchier should detect it and ask the cause.

It was about a fortnight after his installation at Red-hills that one of those rare chances of spending a little time alone with Josephine occurred. Mr Bouchier was away on magisterial business, Mabel had gone to her room with a headache, Mrs Bouchier and her youngest daughter were in the morning-room trifling away time. Digby entered looking very handsome and happy.

'No chance of a ride this morning, I suppose?' he said.

'No,' answered Josephine, 'Mabel has a headache.'

He expressed proper sympathy for the sufferer, then turning to Josephine—

'Shall we walk through the gardens and look at the greenhouses? It's too fine to stay indoors.'

She looked up and saw his entreating eyes. What deep, beautiful eyes they seemed to her.

'May I go, mamma? Do you want me for anything?'

'No. Go if you like, my dear.'

Mrs Bouchier could see no objection to the cousins taking a stroll together. She did not see the look of triumph in Digby's eyes as he closed the door behind Josephine, who went to fetch her hat.

'Will Mr Bouchier return soon?' asked Digby, carelessly. It was but natural he should inquire as to the whereabouts of his host.

‘I am afraid he cannot possibly be back for a couple of hours.’

‘Awful work, I should call it, to be boxed up on such a day as this, sentencing poachers and vagrants.’

‘There are unpleasant duties in every position of life.’

‘I wouldn’t do them. I only ask for liberty and a few hundreds a-year. I should be quite contented with that.’

This last sentence fell very pleasantly on the lady’s ear; moreover, not the words alone, but the accent with which they were spoken. It told her that the sword would fall very lightly; that the wielder was kindly disposed, and would only let it inflict a small flesh wound, which need not be felt. She could not help giving him a look of gratitude, and with great complacency watched him accompany Josephine across the garden. She had seen nothing as yet to call for interference, and was half resolved, in spite of her husband’s evident dislike to the young man, to leave matters to shape themselves.

So Josephine Bouchier and the self-christened Digby Bouchier walked together that soft spring morning across the close cut lawn, past the pride of the place, the magnificent cedar, past the fish pond and the old sun dial, on and on until they reached the lower range of glass houses. The girl looked up shyly at her companion, who said little for a while. Josephine, somehow, lately had felt very timid and restrained whilst in company with him. She was thinking how brave and tall he looked—how beautiful the world looked altogether—how sweetly the birds sang—but she little thought to what a fate that fair pathway she was treading would lead her.

They walked through hot-houses, green-houses, orchid-houses, and vineries; lingering now and then to admire a flower—their fingers at times just touching as they raised, in order to see it better, some bloom more choice than its fellows. Then they entered the orchard-house, which was filled with a pink cloud of peach and other blossoms. The trees were trained longways and crossways, and formed screens of flowers which hid nearly everything from the outside world. They sat down on the raised broad stone edge of the bed and began to talk. Of all subjects in the world Digby chose family history.

Both Josephine and her sister were entirely ignorant as to the young man’s true or asserted position. He was now

going to experience the pleasure of informing his listener as to whom he represented. As a preliminary he took her hand. She did not withdraw it—they were cousins.

‘Josephine,’ he said, ‘I want to talk to you—to tell you something about myself.’

Her thoughts flew far ahead of his words—he was going to confess to some romantic piece of wickedness—something he deeply repented of now—something which had cast a temporary cloud over his life—most of Josephine’s heroes had clouds over their lives; clouds which began to lift about the middle of the third volume, and disappeared entirely at the end of it.

‘Do you know why I came here, Finey? he said, boldly venturing to use her pet name.

‘To see your cousins, I suppose,’ she answered, laughing.

‘No, I came down here to turn you all out of your home—to claim your father’s estates, and beggar you all; but I am not going to do it *now*, Finey.’

No word was ever spoken which expressed more than that word ‘now.’ But the girl was too much astonished by his assertion to give it the notice it deserved.

‘What do you mean?’ she cried. ‘Turn us out—the Bouchiers of Redhills!’

Then he told her all about himself—all about the original Digby Bouchier branch—all about the law suits; of which she had some knowledge already. He made a most affecting history of the affair—far more affecting than the true facts of the case. He had got the whole thing up perfectly, and embellished it as his imagination suggested. It was quite a romance, of which he was the hero—a romance which lost nothing from his impressive way of narrating it, and when he had finished by telling her how his heart smote him when he saw the happiness of the house he was about to destroy—how he struggled with himself, and finally determined to renounce his birthright—willing to claim only sufficient to support him as a gentleman—only insisting that his legitimacy be recognised, the girl was murmuring through her tears ‘noble—good and noble,’ and thought the man who stood before her was the greatest and most self-sacrificing hero the world had ever been honoured by beholding. Poor little Finey!

‘And papa knew it all the time!’ she said; ‘and that is why he is always so cold and distant to you!’



Then her fingers closed with an admiring and consoling pressure round those of her noble cousin. Her hero was found.

‘Yes,’ said Digby, kindly and considerately; ‘but I don’t blame him. He could scarcely be cordial to a man he thought his enemy—as, indeed, I was at one time—not *now*, Finey.’

Again that powerful ‘now.’

‘Do you know—can you guess why I gave this up?’ he asked, drawing very near to her.

If she could guess, she would not. She blushed and trembled.

‘It was for love of you, my darling. You have saved your father, mother, brothers—every one. Kiss me, Josephine, and tell me you love me!’

He clasped her to his heart, and kissed her passionately—for he really loved the girl, or thought he did. She was very pretty, and throwing himself completely into his part, he felt he was making great sacrifices for her sake.

Is it any wonder she believed him? Any wonder she laid her head on his shoulder—gave him the kiss he asked her for—told him she thought she had loved him from the moment they met, and felt supremely happy at having won such a noble heart? She had a right to be happy, for few girls can marry the men they love, and by so doing confer such inestimable benefits on their families.

And a man capable of such an act of self-abnegation must be right in what he asks. So she promised to be guided by him in everything—for the present to keep their love a secret even from her own sister Mabel—even from her mother. She promised to be happy if he continued to behave in her father’s presence towards her with the same cold politeness he had hitherto shown. She promised to love him for ever and ever—was he not her hero? Then, as the time for Mr Bouchier’s return drew near, the adventurer led her back to the house, the happiest girl in England.

The rascal was young, and every young man, however bad, must have tender feelings towards a pretty girl whose heart he has just won—although he has won it under false pretences. So there was a tenderness mingled with his self-congratulation as he retired to rest that night and thought over the events of the day.

‘Hang it,’ he said, ‘she’s a dear little girl. I don’t see why we shouldn’t be happy for evermore with one another—I am awfully fond of her. I guess when it’s all over I shall have rooted myself rather firmly in this establishment.’

But he took the precaution of putting more articles of furniture than usual behind his door. It was well to guard against the chance of Mr Bouchier having learnt the event of the day and going Berserk, utterly disregarding of consequences. But nothing of consequence transpired for the next few days. Then the townward migration took place. The visitor left a day before the family, promising to pay his respects very soon in London. Mr Bouchier with hearty good-will speeded the parting guest.

How do they do it, these handsome scamps? How do they persuade a girl against her better nature to take a step she knows to be wrong? To meet clandestinely, to correspond through hidden channels, and at last to consent to a secret marriage? We do not know how—we are respectable people, fathers of families, it may be, who have been married to our partners in the orthodox way, with bridesmaids, groomsmen, favours, and cakes. We know nothing of the manner in which such a thing is brought about; we only know that occasionally it does happen. That a girl, at the bidding of some scamp, will leave her home, her father and mother, her friends who have loved her since childhood, and trust her future, without a saving clause, to the mercy of the man she loves. It is strange, but it is so.

Perhaps there was some excuse for Josephine. She was romantic; she was going to marry a hero; she was a willing sacrifice to the welfare of her family. The moment the ring was on her finger concealment was to be at an end—and, more than all, Digby wished it. She may have sighed in secret for the orange blossoms, trousseau, and other bridal accessories, but Digby was resolved on a private marriage. As soon as the rite was performed, the news may be proclaimed. Indeed, they would go down to her father’s house, Redhills, and spend the honeymoon. They would have nothing to be ashamed of.

So, with these arguments, she stilled her conscience; and one fine day, towards the end of May, Mrs Bouchier came into her husband’s presence with trepidation in her look and an open letter in her hand.

‘I am very busy, Adelaide,’ said Mr Bouchier, testily.

She handed him the letter without a word. It was from Josephine. A half-penitent, half-triumphant letter. She had married Digby that morning. They had gone down to Redhills to stay for a while. She was sorry for the concealment, but Digby had told her *everything*; and when her papa and mamma knew how nobly and generously he was prepared to behave *in the matter*, she felt sure they would freely forgive both her husband and herself.

Philip Bouchier read it from beginning to end; his wife waiting anxiously to hear what he would say, but not without an idea that matters had shaped themselves to the best end. Then her husband laid down the letter, gazed at her with a look on his face which froze her blood, uttered some five words—a curse which made the woman shiver like an aspen—threw out his arms, and fell senseless across his study table, with a thin stream of blood trickling from his nostrils.

Truly, his punishment had begun !

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## CHAPTER IX

### MDLLE. FRANCESCA

It is still spring; but the spring of the third year after that which witnessed the events last recorded. We are still surrounded by green; but not the green of the meadows. It is a tossing, tumbling, changing green; darting about in those short chopping hillocks of water, which make the English Channel such a terror to travellers. The New-haven boat has just steamed out of Dieppe harbour, and the passengers are preparing to enjoy the trip—to pretend to enjoy it, or to endure it as best they can, according to the disposition of each, or the power possessed of withstanding old Neptune’s rough gambols—for the wind is blowing merrily, and, although there is not a great sea on, there is enough to make the experienced steward and stewardess feel sure that there will be many calls for those painfully suggestive white objects which it is their duty to distribute as needed.

The boats in this particular service are not the largest in the world. I am told that Dieppe harbour will not allow a very large steamer to enter ; and if harbours are made for boats, boats in return must be made for harbours. Nevertheless, in spite of the long voyage, it is astonishing how many people prefer this route to the shorter passage from Calais to Dover. The railway journey from Paris is much shorter, and whilst standing on dry land we are unanimous in asserting how much we prefer the steamboat to the stuffy little French railway carriages ; but unless we are good sailors, before we are half way across we repent the decision, and wish we could see the white cliffs, like we see them after starting from Calais, almost at hand.

It is too late now—we must go through it—seven, eight, nine hours, or whatever the time may be. The boat is tossed up and down, the waves are dancing at her sides, and, as soon as they can, obliterating the line of alien foam left in our wake. Every now and then an aspiring wave, bolder and more fully grown than its brethren, manages to fulfil its desire of dashing itself into a little cloud of spray higher than the vessel's bows, and occasionally succeeds in getting partially on board, christening the forward passengers, and dying away in almost imperceptible salty particles somewhere about the waist of the ship. It is what would be called a fine sailing day—a day when the pilot boats take in their jibs, and spin along under foresail and reefed mainsail, each of which is wet some two or three feet up.

There were many passengers on the boat this particular day—all sorts and conditions of men and women—in all degrees of comfort and discomfort. Passengers who were perfectly at their ease—passengers who tried to appear so—passengers who knew what was inevitable, yet struggled against it, and passengers who succumbed at once, and, could they afford the extra charge, buried their woes in the tiny cramped deck cabins. As we are only concerned about two of the number, we need take no further notice of any save these.

The first was a tall young man, with Englishman written plainly upon him, but not in such large letters as to be aggressive. His age about twenty-four, his eyes blue, features good, hair light brown, complexion clear and healthy, good strong chin, broad shoulders, well-formed, but capable hands and feet. Indeed, an excellent specimen of that peculiar race

produced by the blending of ancient Briton, Saxon, Dane, Norman, and who knows what other nations. He was covered from neck to feet by a thick ulster, and wore a close-fitting cap. In spite of the wind, he was struggling to smoke a cigar, and, in spite of the sea, walked up and down the quarter-deck

The second passenger was a lady—a young lady, with a face and form which would wake longings in an artist's or a sculptor's heart—longings insatiable until his art had copied them on canvas or in marble. She was quietly but richly dressed, and, young and full of health as she looked, apparently found it needful to take great care of her throat and chest. She sat on one of the skylight seats in the centre of the ship, and to all appearances enjoyed the tossing of the sea and the fresh keen wind. Now and again she rose, and walking to the side, looked out over the dancing waves, and throwing back her broad shoulders, seemed literally to revel in breathing the sea air. A woollen rug lay on the seat beside her, but she did not use it. Indeed, she seemed a being far above woollen rugs. Young as she looked, she had the stateliness of a queen and the composure of a middle-aged woman.

A man, unless he has very serious matters on his mind, cannot walk up and down in front of an attractive girl, passing close to her every fifteen seconds, without noticing her, or without the girl becoming aware of his presence. The young Englishman soon realised that his travelling companion was exceedingly beautiful, but, being a gentleman as well as an Englishman, did not stare her in the face, or sit down beside her and attempt to commence a conversation. No doubt, some wish as to a suitable chance occurring which might lead to the last-named crossed his mind, and he also felt curious to know who or what she might be. She seemed to be quite alone; for a long time no one came near her. Sea-sickness had no more terrors for her than for him; it was clear that she thoroughly enjoyed the tossing and the blowing. Young ladies of this description are so rare that men admire them beyond measure when they meet them on board ship. A woman who can take a voyage without being a nuisance or object of deep pity to her male friends, is certainly entitled to respect.

'I expect her people are all ill below,' said the young

man to himself. 'Such a creature as that can't be traveling alone—it wouldn't be allowed. Yet it might be; she could go from St Petersburg to Paris without being insulted.'

But she was not quite alone. By-and-bye another woman, a lady's maid probably, came to her. She was utterly undone by the sea; she looked as limp as an old kid glove—her face was almost the colour of the waters; but she had a noble disposition, and between her paroxysms had struggled to reach her mistress, and inquire if she could be of any service. She spoke in French, and her mistress replied in the same tongue, with an amused but kindly laugh.

'Service, my poor girl—no. Go and lie down again, and try to be as comfortable as is possible. The voyage won't last for ever.'

The young man was close by as she spoke, and he could not help the twinkle of merriment in his eyes as he looked at the poor, wretched, dishevelled maid, with the resolution of a martyr, proffering her assistance to her young mistress.

The girl caught his eye—the absurdity of the situation must have struck her also. She turned her head away to conceal the smile which made her face look more attractive than ever.

The young man was growing more and more interested. He was beginning to argue with himself, and carry conviction by his argument, that it would be but the act of a gentleman to ask her if he could do anything towards her comfort. But she was so happy and contented that his special pleading was futile. He was longing for a chance of addressing, with propriety, the fair girl who sat within a few feet of his limited walk. The chance did come, but the manner of it was not too dignified.

A bigger wave than usual caught the boat—caught it full and fair, and the lurch which followed the boisterous attack caused the tall young man to lose his footing—lose it just opposite the girl. He fell down on the seat close to her; indeed, it was by great exertion that he avoided falling plump into her lap; he did save himself from that indignity, but only just. Gathering himself up, he apologised for his awkwardness. She bowed forgivingly. He then raised his hat and resumed his walk, regretting he had not found presence of mind enough to take advantage of the

chance which had literally almost thrown them into each other's arms.

As he felt his cigar was in his hand ; he clung to it like the proverbial straw, but the lighted end was crushed and extinguished. It was not worth re-illuminating, so he threw it to the fishes.

A few more turns up and down, and a strong smell of something burning was manifest—so strong that he looked for the cause of it, and soon saw that the woollen rug, which was lying to the leeward of the girl, was in a slow but sure state of combustion. Horror-stricken at the enormity of his crime, he seized it and stamped on the smouldering fire ; then turned to make a second apology—a task which was made very easy by the look of amusement on the girl's face. Then—his excuses being accepted—he ventured to say a few words more, still a few words more, and at last he begged to be allowed to sit down ; and in ten minutes the two were in full conversation. He was delighted to find she was not French. He was afraid she was, having heard her address her stricken maid in that language. He knew the tongue fairly well, but naturally he preferred his own. After talking a short time about the passage, the steamer, the sea, and the wind, he told her how he had almost resolved to try and apologise for his fault in French, and how pleased he was to find she was English.

‘But I am not English,’ she said.

‘Not English ! you must be.’

‘No, I am an American.’

‘That's all the same. We are one great family. Your ancestors were English.’

‘Oh, yes ; my father was English.’

‘Then we claim you, of course.’

‘I shall not resist the claim ; I think I shall like England.’

‘But surely you know it ?’

‘I have been in London a few months in the course of my life ; but I know nothing of the country, nothing outside that one city. I am longing to see English fields and country faces.’

‘Ah, you must go to Westshire for the best of both.’

‘Westshire—you live there, I suppose, as you recommend it ?’

‘It is my home ; or my father’s house is there, although I am often away from it.’

‘You have a father?’ said the girl, with a touch of envy in her voice, ‘and a mother and sisters, perhaps?’

‘Yes, I have all, and a brother.’

‘You are happy ; but I daresay you don’t know your own happiness. You must be all alone in the world to realise what they are to you.’

‘Yes, but remember, when you have relatives you love, you have other people’s troubles to bear.’

‘Bear them, and think yourself fortunate to have those who will help you in return.’ She spoke earnestly. Somehow she was quite at her ease with her companion. He talked sensibly, and ventured to pay no compliments. She was such a self-possessed woman that she fancied herself older than her companion, and spoke to him with authority.

‘There is no happier lot I can imagine,’ she continued, with her eyes fixed on the sea, and speaking as if she thought aloud, ‘than that of being one of a large family, where the fortune or misfortune of one is that of all.’

‘Your ideal is correct ; but reality never comes up to it. There is always the disturbing element of marriages to be considered. Outsiders enter the magic circle, and work grief and trouble—old landmarks are removed, old love effaced.’

‘I scarcely understand you.’

‘Well, as we are strangers, I may speak more plainly. Three years ago, my sister, the pet of the house, married in secret a man she had only known a few weeks—a fellow I had never even seen.’

‘Is he poor or unworthy of her?’

‘Both. Poverty would not have mattered so much. We are rich, and my father could have provided for them. The man is a scamp—a clever, handsome scamp. He won her, and in a year grew tired of her.’

‘Then she wants your love and sympathy the more.’

‘She has it, but it does her little good. Like a woman, even now, after he has treated her shamefully, she stays with him. I daresay if he died she would weep and wail. Rogue as we know him to be, she must love him more than she loves either brother or sister, father or mother, or else she would leave him. How do you account for that?’



‘Easily,’ said the girl with a grave smile; ‘is she not a woman?’

‘My father nearly died when he heard of the marriage—he has never been the same man since; but why should I trouble you with my troubles? Yours must be a most sympathetic nature to have led me to speak of them.’

She smiled. It was a compliment, but a compliment she willingly accepted.

‘Have you travelled far?’ he asked, turning the subject.

‘From Milan. I stayed a day or two in Paris.’

‘And all alone?’

‘Yes; all alone. Don’t be shocked, I am used to being thrown on my own resources. My friend, lawyer, guardian—I scarcely know what to call him—intended to meet me at Paris, but important matters prevented him.’

He was growing very curious as to his companion’s station in life.

‘Do you live in London?’ he could not help asking.

‘I have no home in England I told you; but I suppose I shall be obliged to live in London the greater part of my time.’

He would have given much to have brought himself to the impertinence of asking her name, but he could—he dared not. He could only declare to himself that she was the fairest woman he had ever seen, and frame some absurd wish that the steamer might break down and prolong the journey indefinitely—even finishing it by being wrecked somewhere, that he might have an opportunity of saving her life, or of being of some service to her. It was a natural wish, but, considering the other passengers, a selfish one.

The passage, although above the average duration, seemed unusually short to him. At Newhaven he did what he could to be of use to her; but her requirements were very modest. She had a great deal of luggage, which was, of course, in the hold; he could carry her cloak and handbag ashore, and give a Samaritan’s aid to her wretched maid—that was all. Then he saw her greet a middle aged gentleman, who awaited her arrival; he saw them enter the train together, but was not ill-bred enough to choose the same carriage. When they reached London he looked for them, but did not happen to see them. So he went away disconsolately, wondering if fate would ever bring them face

to face again, and, it need hardly be said, praying fate to be kind and obliging in the matter.

He had learnt a little more about her before they parted ; just enough to puzzle him more than ever. As the boat neared Newhaven he could not help feeling sorry and somewhat sentimental. They had been talking in such good fellowship, so naturally and unconstrainedly, that she seemed an old friend, not the acquaintance of a few hours' standing.

'It is very strange,' he said, 'almost sad I call it, to think that when the boat touches that quay wall we go our different ways—very likely never to meet or see each other again.'

She laughed quietly. 'I should be very sorry to think so.' The words might have sounded very pleasant to a young man's vanity, had not the accent shown they were meant to bear quite a matter-of-fact construction.

'I am vain enough to hope,' she continued, 'that you will often see and hear me.'

He was greatly mystified. 'I scarcely understand what you mean,' he said. 'Do you know me or any friends of mine?' He had mentioned the names of several persons during the voyage.

She shook her head.

'I don't know half a dozen people in England'

'Yet we shall meet?'

'I did not say meet. I said you might see me.'

He began to wonder whether he was talking to a princess—the future bride of one of the royal princes—whom he might see in public and at a distance. However, she did not enlighten him as to the meaning of her words, and shortly afterwards they parted as described.

He drove to his hotel, stayed the night in town, and the next day went down to Redhills ; for his name was Allan Bouchier, and he was the eldest son of Philip Tremaine Bouchier.

For days and days the recollection of that beautiful face haunted him. He blamed his incapacity and want of address in not in some way ascertaining who she was, or at least the name she bore ; for, in spite of her mysterious words, he feared that years might pass before chance brought him again in contact with her. Strange to say, the impression she had made upon him did not wear away ;

indeed, the true reason why, in the course of a fortnight, he left Redhills and returned to town, was the unspoken hope of encountering her again.

And the girl, on her side, as she was conducted by the middle-aged gentleman to the carriage, almost regretted she had not asked her companion's name. He had been kind, attentive, and considerate—he was a gentleman—he had talked to her sensibly, and made no absurd advances; and, above all, he was the first Englishman she had spoken to on his native soil, as it were, for some three years, and he was very handsome. Such an agreeable contrast to the dark-eyed, olive-complexioned people she had been surrounded by for so long. She would have asked his name had it not been for the family secrets he had disclosed to her, which forbade such an indiscretion.

Well, they might meet again or they might not; she had far more important things to think about. In a few weeks' time she was to make her attempt to rank high in the world of song. She was to stand before a critical audience and find out if success or failure was to be her portion—if her three years' hard work at the art had been wasted—if the power of her voice was as great as judges, many of them severe judges, averred. But until the ordeal she was going to stay with her friends the Trenfields at their pretty villa on the Thames. Both Mr and Mrs Trenfield had insisted upon it being her home, at least for the present; and Frances Boucher, glad to think she had some friends in England, readily accepted the invitation.

She was cordially welcomed. The Trenfields—father, mother, and children—had, during the short time she had been with them previously, learnt to love her and to look upon her as one of themselves. They had not seen her during her absence from England; although a visit to Milan had been promised every year, something had always prevented it. They were stay-at-home people—not of the modern travelling school. After the first greeting, and after Frances' unlucky maid had been sent to her room to sleep off the effects of the journey, and recover at leisure her national vivacity, Mrs Trenfield drew her guest under the lamp, for by this time it was dark.

'Now, my dear,' she said, 'let me look at you, and see what three years have done for you.'

Frances threw off her mantle and stood as requested.

She had no reason to fear the inspection, even had less friendly eyes been making it.

What had the three years done for her? Changed her? No. Girls of her type change little; she was a woman at nineteen, and can be only a woman at twenty-two. Yet the three years have perfected every charm—they have given her even a more graceful and queen-like carriage; they have given her confidence; have taught her to meet the eyes of men and women fearlessly; to know that she can hold her own with the best of them. The soft Italian air has not been prejudicial to her health—she is straight, large limbed, and strong; the picture of what the mothers of a fine race of men should be. As far as appearance, disposition, and constitution go, she has every element needful for success in a public career. So Mr and Mrs Trenfield looked at her with honest admiration, their daughters with pride at having such a splendid friend, and their son, a young fellow with shadowy whiskers, and an affection for the classics, was so whirled from his metaphorical feet that he could only keep on misquoting to himself some line about ‘Great Here’s eyes.’

Yet there was nothing severe about her beauty—nothing cold in her manner. She was above everything a true-hearted loving woman, with weaknesses enough to win the love of her own sex. She was at home in a moment with every one. Tired by her journey—lie down—not a bit of it—she wanted to change her dress, bathe her face—and, yes, she did want her dinner. In half-an-hour she was at the table with her friends, as fresh and blooming as when she left Dieppe at early morning.

She had been regular in corresponding with them all, so they knew all about her life in Milan. She talked of the journey and how well she had managed alone. The two daughters looked at her with increasing reverence as they thought of her courage in coming all that distance without protection. Mr Trenfield apologised again for his inability to have kept his promise, and Charlie, his son, sighed and wished he had been sent as a substitute. Such a chance, he thought sadly, comes to a man but once in a lifetime.

‘Then you stayed in Paris some time?’ asked Mr Trenfield.

‘Yes; ten days. I had business there.’

‘Where did you stay?’ asked the elder daughter,

thinking a girl who stayed alone in Paris was brave beyond her sex.

‘At a nice, quiet, dull board-house. Nearly all the guests old ladies and gentlemen. They were all very kind to me.’

‘Of course they were,’ thought Charlie.

‘Now, may I ask,’ said Mr Trenfield, ‘what possible business you could have in Paris? Till you dismiss me, I am your legal adviser, and have a right to know.’

‘I spent heaps and heaps of money—that’s all I mean to tell you.’

‘Boarding-house charges so high, then?’

‘You stupid man!’ said his wife, ‘can’t you guess her business?’

‘Not a bit; but I hope it went off satisfactorily.’

‘Perfectly,’ said Frances. ‘Oh, they are such beauties! There is one too lovely to wear.’

The ladies quite fluttered as she made this announcement.

‘When shall we see them? Are they here?’ asked one of the daughters.

‘They will come with my luggage. I daresay it has come now. We will look at them all to-morrow, and try them on.’

Women know with what pleasure to-morrow was looked for.

‘Oh, I see,’ said Mr Trenfield; ‘dresses, eh?’

‘No, sir, masterpieces—poems—works of art.’

‘Well, you are young, and of course could not resist the temptation; that’s where the money went, was it? Cost a lot, I suppose?’

Frances laughed, drew out her purse, and shook two or three sovereigns on the cloth.

‘See,’ she said, ‘all the money I have left, and you know what you sent me.’

‘Phew! you are an extravagant young lady; you will corrupt my wife and daughters.’

‘No, I am a gambler putting down a heavy stake; or I am a woman of business investing capital. What I shall do with the things if I fail, I don’t know. Mrs Trenfield must buy them at a great reduction.’

‘Ah,’ said Mr Trenfield, ‘but I wouldn’t fail if I were you; if you do you will have enough to live on. Now

there will be no difficulty in claiming your father's money ; we will see about it at once.'

Frances' face grew sad. Her father's mysterious death was the great trouble of her life. She had never wavered in her resolution to find George Manders, and force him to speak. She knew Mr Trenfield had heard no news of him, or he would have told her, but she felt sure they must meet some day.

The ladies went to the drawing-room, where Mr Trenfield promised to join them after one small cigar, as the hour was getting very late.

Young Trenfield fidgeted about for a few minutes, then told his father, if he would excuse him, he would follow the ladies. Mr Trenfield looked at him with a kind but a meaning smile on his face.

'I say, Charlie, my son, take an old man's advice. Don't you fall in love with Miss Boucher.'

Charlie blushed, and hung his head in boyish confusion, marvelling how the parental eye had read his thoughts so clearly.

'She is a good and a beautiful girl, and you are a very decent boy—I am proud of you ; but try and remember that the probabilities are that in a few months she will have all society at her feet—that her name will be known all through England—so think what chance you have, and don't fall in love with her.'

'I won't, if I can help it,' said Charlie, almost piteously.

'You must help it. If I see symptoms developing I'll keep you at the office till nine o'clock every night over leases, conveyances, and briefs, and send you home so tired you'll only be fit to creep up to bed. Now, you're warned, go if you like.'

He went, and found himself rather out of place, as his sisters were anticipating the delights of to-morrow by hearing a description of them. Don't accuse Frances and her friends of frivolity ; rather accuse me of writing of women as I find them, even the cleverest and best. Think what the advent of several dresses direct from a great Parisian milliner means to a house where ladies are in the majority.

But their conversation was soon interrupted by an energetic ring and a flourishing knock at the front door. Mrs Trenfield looked aghast. Visitors at this hour ! Who could it be ?

Who but the amiable Teuton, Herr Kaulitz — with excitement in every feature, such excitement that his very spectacles seemed to have caught it and to beam more brightly than usual. He entered, passing the servant as she announced him. Yet, excited or quiet, he was a gentleman, so his first words were words of apology to Mrs Trenfield.

‘Ach! dear lady, forgif me,’ he cried, taking her hand. ‘I could not help it—I knew Miss Bouzher comes to-night back. You must forgif me. Sleep would not come until I zee her.’

Then, his duty done, he rushed over to Frances and shook her by both hands in a most energetic fashion. She was unfeignedly glad to see him—every welcome to England was pleasing to her. So she made him sit beside her, and tell her how he had been getting on; how the public had been appreciating the compositions he had deigned to bestow upon it; praised and thanked him for several he had sent her at various times—in a word, was kind, friendly, and gracious to him. Yet, after a few minutes he began to appear ill at ease; he moved about in his chair, wiped and re-wiped his spectacles, and, according to his habit, disarranged his hair again and again. He cast furtive and longing glances towards the side of the room. He was as nervous as a lover about to ask his mistress the important question. So utterly uncomfortable he seemed that Mrs Trenfield and her daughters, who were prosaic people in their way, glanced at each other, signifying their fear lest the little man was preparing for a fit of some kind. Even Frances looked at him inquiringly. He coloured as he met her eyes.

‘Ah, that I might dare,’ he whispered. ‘But, no, after such a voyage it would not be fit.’

‘Dare what, my old friend?’ asked Frances.

‘I haf heard it from many—from all. I haf written to this one and he says “Vonderful! grand!” and this one and this one they all zay the zame. But I am Didymus, I long to hear for myself. But no, it is too late!’

There was such a world of self-denial in the last sentence that Frances laughed aloud. ‘You want to hear me sing—is that it?’

‘Ah no—it would be gruel to night.’

‘I should think so,’ said Mrs Trenfield. ‘Frances must

be quite worn out. Go away, Herr Kaulitz—you may come again to-morrow.'

'Yes, I vill go—I vill come to-morrow,' he said, rising and feeling like a martyr—'Goot night.'

'Nonsense,' said Frances, I am not a bit tired. Come to the piano and play an accompaniment.

The little man obeyed her with a rapturous face. 'You are an angel—you are too goot—but oh! I do so long to hear you!'

He sat down to the piano and ran his fingers along the keys. 'Ah,' he said, turning to Mrs Trenfield, 'you have had him tuned—goot!' Then without another word he struck a few opening notes of the Jewel Song from *Faust*, and looked at Frances. She nodded.

Herr Kaulitz was one of the finest accompanists in the world. Perhaps the least said about his original compositions the better; but he could teach singing and could accompany a singer superbly. He neither followed nor led—he accompanied. He had a knack, when it was possible, of looking at the singer's face and watching her lips; and as he gazed at the present singer, as he saw her throw open her grand chest and heard her voice rise in a richness and power which even he, great believer as he was in her gifts, scarcely dreamed it would reach to, his emotion almost overcame him, and for a moment he feared he must cease performing his minor part. But he finished faultlessly as he began; and when the wonderful music ceased, and the room seemed empty and colourless without it, he sprang from the music-stool and literally embraced the girl, absolutely kissing her on both her cheeks. Startling as his action was, she was not offended; she understood what he meant—knew that he had been carried almost out of his senses, and far beyond proprieties, by his admiration for her singing; and knew that had she been the ugliest woman in the world he would have saluted in the same manner—that he was kissing, not herself, but her voice. She was pleased with his verdict, for the little man had known and heard all the queens of song of his generation.

He was too much excited to congratulate her in English; so let loose a flood of his own native language—so guttural, so hissing, so resonant were the fearful words he hurled at her, that no one could help the painful feeling that she was standing as best she could against a blast of the most



terrible swearing. Then finishing up with a flourish of past participles or infinitives, which made his hearers' hair stand on end, he shook both her hands like pump-handles, and collected his mind enough to recall his English, and, like a modest man, apologise for the liberty he had taken.

'But she vill understand—yes, she vill gomprenhend,' he said, turning with an apologetic face to the others, 'that it is not the voman I zalute, it is the artist.'

'Now, that is flattering to me professionally, but not personally,' said Frances.

'I cannot flatter you,' he said simply; 'you are abofe flattery—in both ways,' he added, for he was but human.

Frances bowed with mock humility.

'Now, go to bed. You ought never to have to-night zang—not even for me. Mrs Trenfield, I go at once—she must go to bed. Think if she has overdone it, and should be ill. Oh, it vill be terrible.'

A prey to remorse, he took his leave as hastily as he entered. Mrs Trenfield insisted that his instructions should be followed, and Frances, who was beginning to think the day had been long enough, was pleased to obey.

Yet it was some time before she could sleep. She was in England, and the turning point of her life was at hand. To her there was no middle station—nothing between success and failure. She had not devoted herself to her art for the sake of earning money as a second or third-rate singer. She was bidding for such high rank that she trembled at her temerity; yet nothing lower would satisfy her. What many would deem success would be failure to her. She would make her cast, and if it failed, her career as a singer would close even as soon as it began. 'The many fail, the one succeeds,' she repeated over and over again. Would she be of the many or be the one? Anyway, a few weeks would make that clear. Her chance was at hand.

For Frances, or, as the public would know her, Mdlle. Francesca, was to make her first appearance before an audience of any great account, early in the season, as *Lucia di Lammermoor*.

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## CHAPTER X

## TAKING THE WORLD BY STORM

THE approaching advent of a new *prima donna* must make a little flutter in the musical world. The established favourites shrug their shoulders, but shake in their shoes all the same. They are never quite sure but the new-comer, whose appearance is heralded with the usual flourish of trumpets, may not be one among the many they have seen fail; who is destined to share their kingdom, divide, and therefore, somewhat detract from their popularity. But as they probably know little about her, they must wait as patiently as the public—wait and hope for the best—for themselves. Impresarios and managers know all about the ambitious stranger—their eyes have been upon her for years. Very likely, if she is thought worthy of it, the deepest diplomacy and stratagem has been used to secure her. But, if they know, they say little; their disappointments have been so many, that they are chary of prophesying until after the event. Then they reap the reward of their acuteness, or bear silently the losses caused by their mistaken estimate.

Yet it was curious when, among the attractions of the opera season, it was announced that Mdlle. Francesca would make her first appearance in England as Lucia, how many people knew all about her and her antecedents. It was more curious still how these well informed people differed. She had a magnificent voice, but her appearance was nothing. Her voice was scarcely worth consideration, but she possessed great beauty. She could sing, but not act. She could act, but not sing. She could do neither. She could do both. She was English, Italian, French, German, Spanish—everything. She was the wife of an Italian count; she was the daughter of shopkeepers in Switzerland; she was picked up some years ago playing the fiddle and singing outside a village inn, by that clever fellow M. ——. So on and so on. However, these gossips deserve to be encouraged; they help to fulfil the great end of the age, advertisement; and there can nothing better happen to any one who makes a bid for the public favour than to be associated with a little mystery.

But there should have been no mystery attached to *Mdlle. Francesca*. Perhaps it was the very simplicity of her history, the lack of romance connected with her previous career, that made people put her into all sorts of places and conditions of life, and endow her with the most conflicting attributes. Her history was only this,—

She had left England, and placed herself in the best hands. She had studied her part willingly, ungrudgingly, and intelligently. Intelligently, because she had trusted to the experience of those who knew the technical part of it thoroughly. As far as this went, she gave herself up unreservedly to them, followed their counsels, mastered every detail, every—the phrase will slip out—trick of the trade. Yet, if she knew this was indispensable she also knew that there must be something no master can teach—something words cannot explain, although the name for it is inspiration. It was whether this came to her or not meant success or failure; for the rest she had no fear. She went to the farthest point tuition could lead her, both musically and histrionically. She was of a calm, steadfast nature—had no wish to meet fate unprepared. If she failed it should be through no fault of shirking the work which art demanded. In this respect her conscience was at ease when her masters told her the time had come to prove her worth. Their task was ended; hers must now begin. She had gone through the whole routine. She had appeared—and successfully—on the minor Italian stages, now she must challenge the verdict of the capitals of the world.

She had no difficulty in finding a battlefield. The choice lay with her. A soprano with such range, power, and quality as her voice possessed is as rare as a great poet, and much more sought after. It can make her own and a dozen other people's fortunes, whilst poets usually die insolvent. There were plenty of people in Europe ready to give her the chance she wanted, but she had resolved to learn her fate from English lips. She felt she should be more at home with Englishmen than with Italians, Russians, or Germans. So the treaty between her and the manager of one of the great English opera-houses, was duly signed and sealed. She had sold him her voice for three years; but with a generosity which staggered him, had insisted upon a clause to the effect of allowing him to

rescind the contract, if he chose, within one month from her first appearance. This was that he should not lose if she failed. On the other hand, she was to play nothing but principal parts.

The manager was fully satisfied with this arrangement. He had little doubt as to the success she would make. 'If she only sang decently,' he said, complaisantly, 'she must go down, with such a face and figure—but face, figure, and voice!'

Shortly after her arrival in England, little paragraphs about her began to creep into the papers. Musical critics mentioned her in their reviews and opera gossip. London correspondents said something about her in their letters. Society papers understood that Mdlle. Francesca, the new *prima donna*, etc., etc. Some even hinted at her personal appearance being so very attractive. Some of the paragraphs were incorrect, but some so correct that the girl wondered who could have inspired them. Perhaps the manager knew; he was a clever man, and neglected nothing. However, the ground was well prepared for her, and she felt that great things were expected of her.

The days that must pass before Mdlle. Francesca's ordeal were busy ones. She had a thousand and one things to do. People to see—important people some of them, whether theatrical, musical, or sartorial. She had much to learn and to study—then came rehearsals—and study, study, study ever. As a distraction there was some legal business, for Mr Trenfield had now succeeded in getting the proper authority granted, and the money lying at the bank in John Boucher's name was made over to his daughter. The court threw no obstacle in the way, and the appeal was scarcely worth a reporter's notice, or Philip Bouchier might have been much astonished if he had seen an account of it the next morning in the *Times*. As it was, it attracted no attention.

Mr Trenfield congratulated Frances upon her accession to comparative wealth.

'I must find you a safe investment for it,' he said.

'Yes, do what you like. How much will it bring me in?'

'Nearly three hundred pounds a-year, I hope.'

'I can live comfortably on that if I fail next month. I shall go to America if I do.'

'To try your luck with a New York audience?'

'Oh, no. I shan't sing again. I am very sensitive. If I fail now it is all over. I have every chance of success offered me—it will be my own fault. No, I shall go and look for Manders.'

'That's absurd, a young woman can't go hunting the world after a young man.'

'I will—some day.' And Mr Trenfield, looking at her, and seeing resolution in every feature, knew she would.

'Don't invest all that money,' she said, presently, 'I shall want a lot presently.'

'More dresses?'

'I shall want to buy some diamonds.'

'I did not know you cared for jewellery.'

'I don't; but I shall want them, or I may want them. The public expects to see singers with diamonds. I always did when I went to hear a great singer.'

'You talk in a most business-like way. Now you speak of it, my people never come back from a grand concert without talking of the wonderful jewels Madame So-and-So wore. Her looks are more spoken of than her voice, I think.'

'It's for concerts that I shall want them,' said Frances. 'But I'll wait till *Lucia* is over.'

'You put me in mind of my wife last year. She would not order a new dress until she heard whether an old aunt of mine would die or grow well.'

'That's the principle exactly,' said Frances, smiling. 'We are both sensible women.'

They lived very quietly down at Twickenham. Frances refused to make any fresh acquaintances. The people she was bound to see she saw. Herr Kaulitz was also always welcome. One day, moreover, she called on her old landlady, Mrs. Stacey. The good woman received her with effusion, and besought her to honour her by taking a cup of tea with her. It was, indeed, a great honour for Mrs Stacey to entertain such a distinguished-looking young lady.

'Do you sing, miss, as much as ever?' asked Mrs Stacey, after tea.

Middle. Francesca, the coming *prima donna*, was much amused at the question.

‘Oh, yes; quite as much, Mrs Stacey. You remember my singing then?’

‘La! yes, miss. I used to creep upstairs and listen outside the door. Never in my born days did I hear anything like it—never!’

‘I did not know it, or I should have asked you to come in.’

‘Thank you,’ said Mrs Stacey. ‘But I should like to hear you again. Would you mind,’ she asked, shamefacedly—‘would you mind just singing me one little song? The first-floor lodger has a piano, and he’s away now.’

The good woman asked so earnestly that Frances had not the heart to refuse. She followed Mrs Stacey to the drawing-room, which seemed very familiar to her; then, to the accompaniment of a very discordant ancient piano, the property of the first-floor lodger, she sang a couple of simple ballads in a way that brought the tears to Mrs Stacey’s eyes.

With all her classical face and bearing, Frances had a great sense of humour; and the incongruity of the present situation appealed to it almost irresistibly. *Mdlle. Francesca*, whose name was in all music lovers’ lips; who had only since she came to England sang to one outsider, Herr Kaulitz, exercising her gifts for the pleasure of a poor, hard-worked lodginghouse-keeper, and singing to a little cracked piano, which should have been cut up long ago for firewood and rat-traps. It was very comical—she could scarcely help laughing aloud.

‘Mr Manders, he sang beautifully, too,’ said Mrs Stacey. ‘Do you know where he is, miss?’

‘No. I intended to ask you. He never returned, I suppose?’

‘No. He left some boxes and things here. He’s never even sent for them. I don’t know what to do with them. I think the poor young man must have died.’

‘I don’t think so,’ said Frances, reflecting.

It seemed very strange that Manders had not fetched or sent for his belongings.

‘If you hear from him—if he writes for his things—will you let Mr Trenfield know at once?’ she asked.

‘Certainly I will, miss. Must you go now? It was so kind of you to call.’

Mrs Stacey was much surprised, some little time after-

wards, at receiving two tickets for a forthcoming performance at the opera-house. They were accompanied by a note from Frances, hoping, as she was so fond of singing, Mrs Stacey would make use of them. The recipient was greatly flattered, and putting on her best clothes, and calling upon her son—the smart lad at the auctioneer’s—to escort her, she went, and was, it may be supposed, astonished at what she saw and heard.

Truly, if *Mdlle. Francesca* made a success, it would be a genuine one. With the exception of Mrs Stacey, *Kaulitz*, the *Trenfields*, and one or two persons the manager had found it useful to present to her, no one in front of the curtain would be called upon to raise a breath of applause from friendship’s sake. No wonder, brave as she was, that the girl felt lonely and at times dispirited—no wonder she had envied *Allan Bouchier* his family circle.

Once or twice she gave a thought to the handsome young man who had been her fellow voyager. *Mr Trenfield*, who had seen him bid her farewell at *Newhaven*, would sometimes rally her upon the subject; for when people grew to know Frances, they ceased to fear her, and spoke to her as if she were an ordinary mortal. And once she saw him in London. She had hired a quiet little brougham to take her about—from the station to the theatre, or wherever she wanted to go. Driving down *Piccadilly*, she saw him standing on the steps of one of the clubs, talking to two other men. His face was partly turned away, so her carriage passed him without his seeing who was inside it. She little knew how much time he spent looking at passing carriages and people, in the hope of seeing her at last. She was unconscious of that, and he was unconscious that the object of his pursuit had just passed him. Frances smiled to herself as she thought of his evident mystification when they parted. Had she known his name I believe she would have sent him, anonymously of course, an order for a box on the eventful night. She would have feared little if all the critics were like that young fellow. But not knowing his name, she could only hope he might be there of his own accord. She enjoyed in imagination his surprise.

The day of days dawned at last. Before the midnight all would be over—the best or the worst known; and everything that was not the best would be the worst. To say that Frances was calm and confident, would be to

represent her as more than mortal. It is a great deal to say that she did not show her hopes and fears to every one she came in contact with ; did not worry herself by them till she was in a state of nervousness which would at the first check or obstacle almost insure a complete breakdown. She went for a long solitary walk in the morning, afterwards rehearsed her part for the last time, and for some hours before the performance began lay down and tried to rest. Then the moment came.

She would not have postponed it had it been in her power so to do. She was in perfect health, perfect voice. She had already faced audiences, and believed she would not be rendered incompetent by that stumbling-block to beginners—stage fright ; so, a few minutes before she was called upon to step on to the stage, her emotions were under far better control than those of certain deeply interested gentlemen, who were giving her a few last words of kindly encouragement and advice.

She had from the first stipulated that Donizetti's great opera should be the one in which her first attempt should be made. Till its German rival drives Italian opera completely from the stage, Lucia will always be a favourite character with ambitious sopranos. Absurd as most of the situations and all the surroundings are, there is in the part of the heroine plenty of room for a display of acting. Love, fear, and madness are strong passions, and give great scope for effect. Middle. Francesca knew what she was about when she decided to stand or fall by Lucia.

She knew every bar of the music by heart—she heard them slipping away one by one, comparing their passing to the sands running out of an hour-glass. The opening chorus is over now. Enrico, Normanno, and Raimondo are on the boards, the *scena* is ended, and she hears her cruel brother's grand baritone voice begin the cavatina—'Cruda, funesta smania.' How soon page after page of the music flies ! How quickly that oft-repeated, melodious, but terrible vow of vengeance is got over ! The second number of the opera is ended. She hears the first bars of the introduction to the third number, and her heart begins to throb as it has never throbbed before. Yes, she would postpone the trial now—if she could. The deeply interested gentleman by her side gave her one quick inquiring look, then like a sensible man turned his eyes away. It was too



late in the day for counsel or advice. Then, how she never knew, Lucia was standing with her companion Alisa on the great stage, and facing her audience.

What were her thoughts! Her first one was of disappointment; the large house looked so empty; her next was that she was to open her mouth and sing; her last was a kind of wonder where she was to find her voice. For a moment it seemed far away from her lips. But, to her great surprise, she did find it, and managed to produce the three words of recitative, 'Ancor non giunse!' with which Lucia's part opens.

It was, perhaps, fortunate that after that beginning the strain is for a few bars taken up by Alisa. The respite was a short one, but long enough for Frances to breathe a thought of gratitude to the composer. It was long enough for her confidence in herself to become quite restored—long enough for her to forget the audience, to forget where she was, what was at stake—to become transformed into the poor, persecuted girl she represented. The *scena* was finished faultlessly, and then came the solo, 'Regnava nel silenzio,' in which her first effort must be made. There was room in this for the actor's art. By aid of it she could express the horror felt at the sight of the apparition at the fountain, and change from horror to delight as the words and music described the deathless love she felt for Edgardo. As her voice, clear as a silver bell, and powerful enough to fill every inch of that large house, rose and fell with the cadences of the music, the rival queens who could not help coming to hear and judge for themselves, knew that she would leave that stage their equal.

Edgardo came. She was very fortunate in her stage lover. He was the tenor of the day, and could act as well as sing. The long love duet between the ill-used pair was rendered with complete success. They were tender, passionate, fearful—in fact, everything that two such romantic young people should be. Edgardo, on the stage, was a handsome man, so that Lucia's devotion to him seemed perfectly natural. Many tenors, who happen to be short or stout, or old looking, are very terrible as the Master of Ravenswood. Such a romantic being should be fittingly represented. This one made delicious love to Lucia, and the younger and most ardent of men in the audience who saw him do so would have been shocked had

he failed in this respect—the girl's beauty having at once struck everyone. To be a judge of music is acquired—to be a judge of beauty comes natural to all men.

Whatever might have been the manager's secret fears and doubts, which, to do him justice, he breathed to no one, all were set at rest as the curtain fell on the first act. The spontaneous recall said that Francesca had not failed. Edgardo led her before the curtain, and when the pair returned she was carrying a bouquet—an actresses's first bouquet. Is it, I wonder, as beautiful a thing to her as his first proof-sheet is to an author? Certainly it is a prettier and much less troublesome affair.

The house was full when she came on in the second act. Now that she felt her success was all but assured, she surpassed herself. Her singing and acting with Enrico and the unwelcome wooer Arturo were superb. By this time the house was crowded. Royalty even was there, and its gracious representative, like a true music lover, and one who understands the art, was giving the stage his undivided attention. There is a double, a treble recall at the end of the second act, and so many bouquets fell that Edgardo's arms were full of the floral tributes.

The manager rubbed his hands, and dreamed of fortune. He would have liked to have embraced his new star, as he calculated what he might hope to make out of her in the next three years. He had made many failures and a few good hits, but *Mlle. Francesca* promised to be the best hit he had ever made.

'If she can keep it up to the end,' he said, 'she'll be reckoned the best Lucia that ever appeared!'

The crowning effort had yet to be made. The mad scene in the third act is the one on which the stage *Bride of Lammermoor* must rest her reputation. To go mad, and lift this appearance from the absurdity of the situation requires an actress. She has to make her audience forget that the retainers are standing around her, and in a most unconcerned way regarding her paroxysms. She has in her madness, after it is understood she has stabbed Arturo, to depict nearly every passion that humanity is capable of feeling. For a long time she holds the stage entirely. Others are there, but they are utterly disregarded even forgotten—everything is centred on Lucia—and Lucia was equal to the demand upon her. The tenderness

with which she recalled the love scenes between herself and Edgardo—the fear she showed at the remembrance of the phantom which had threatened her—the joyful transition to that state of mind which made her believe her marriage with her lover was in the act of being celebrated, her reproach to Enrico, her explanation of her falseness to the imaginary Edgardo, her assurance that she loved him only—every point was rightly made, every gesture and expression was truthful, and her voice seemed to grow in its wonderful power and sweetness as her part in the play drew to an end; and when the poor, betrayed girl fell senseless, there were many weeping eyes among the audience.

Success! the annals of the opera-house could scarcely show such another. Even whilst her unfortunate Edgardo was singing his pathetic melodies at the tomb of his fathers, preparatory to accomplishing his own end, a message was sent from the royal box begging she might be conducted thither. Upon her obeying the summons, the most exalted personage there, with his own lips, congratulated her, and praised her performance, using those particularly appropriate words which always seem to be at his command at the right moment. She bowed and expressed her gratitude for the honour done to her, and then had to hurry back behind the scenes, as the curtain was just about to fall on Edgardo's last moments, and the public were free to express their feelings, which they lost no time in doing.

The applause came in a storm—a lasting storm. Time after time *Mdlle.* Francesca went before the curtain and made her acknowledgments; the audience seemed never to be weary of seeing her. By the enthusiasm shown it might have been in France or Italy, such a sustained meed of applause being almost unknown in sober England. So many times did she appear in answer to the call, that at last she began to find it growing monotonous, and was ungrateful enough to hope that each call would be the last. After a while she gave up counting the number. Whatever it was, it was enough to assure her that her success was real. At last the people grew tired, and left the theatre; and *Mdlle.* Francesca, like a sensible girl, went—under Mr Trenfield's protection—to the hotel at which she was staying for the night. She had succeeded beyond her wildest hopes—beyond the wildest hopes of her most sanguine friends. Her triumph must be a solid one.

The applause had been led by no personal friends; the great reception she had met with had been given with free goodwill by the large audience who had come equally ready to applaud or condemn her, as she deserved. She was very happy—very proud.

There was a quiet supper at the hotel. The Trenfields were all staying there for the night, and Herr Kaulitz was bidden to attend. The little man wept tears of pure joy at his favourite's triumph; whilst Charlie Trenfield, who had clapped his hands together until they were quite swollen, eat his supper somewhat sorrowfully, feeling that any wild hope he had ever nourished must now be at an end. His father had spoken the truth—Miss Boucher would in a very short time have the world at her feet.

This might be, but to-night she was as kind and simple to all as if she were but an ordinary young woman. She felt thankful the ordeal was over, and more than thankful she had not failed.

As she undressed herself preparatory to taking a well-earned night's rest, a smile crossed her face. She was wondering if that tall young man, whose name she knew not, had been in the theatre. She rather hoped he had been there, although she did not know why she formed the wish. Very likely they would never meet again.

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## CHAPTER XI

### REPENTING AT LEISURE

WHEN Allan Bouchier told his travelling companion that the shock of his sister's clandestine marriage had nearly killed his father, he was, making allowances for the usual exaggeration of such statements, saying something very nearly the truth, although he did not know the true source of the emotion which had caused Philip Bouchier to fall like a log and for some days to lie in what was called a critical state. He did not know that his wild rage at the news was even more injurious in its effects than the sorrow he felt at Josephine's conduct. He did not know that his father blamed himself more than he blamed his daughter—blamed himself for not having bought the interloper's

silence, even at a cost of half his income—blamed himself for having been so weak as to yield—for not having defied the man to do the worst he could do. Like all other dangers, now it was over it did not seem so great.

Philip Bouchier wondered how he could have let this fellow overreach him ; how he, a clever man of the world, could have allowed himself to be so foolish as to be made the tool of a boy, and used to destroy his nearest and dearest. He almost raved in his fury as he thought of Josephine's future in this man's hands. So clearly did he by manner and words show the excited state of his mind, that the doctor told him that unless he could calm himself his recovery would be retarded an indefinite time. As he could do nothing, either for his daughter or himself, until he got well, he was compelled to obey the doctor, and curb his fits of wrath and paroxysms of rage against his new son-in-law.

His first act, upon recovering anything like health, was to write to Digby, and command him to come to London for an interview. His letter found Digby very happy and comfortable at Redhills. Josephine was in a sort of Arcadian dream, and spent every moment of the day in the worship of the noble being who had given her his love. He was very kind and affectionate to her. No man, however great a rascal, could help being so directly after marriage with such a dear little girl. He was really fond of her, or fancied he was, and was good enough to frame a mental wish that he should not by-and-bye get tired of her, and find her attentions and affectionate solicitude a bore.

The only drawback to the girl's perfect happiness was the fact of her father's illness, which she could not help connecting in some way with her marriage. Mrs Bouchier had written her a few hasty lines, telling her that her father had suddenly been taken unwell, and Mabel had from day to day written and apprised her as to the condition of the invalid. Neither of the women said a word either of reproach or congratulation—Mabel because requested by her mother not to do so, and Mrs Bouchier because she was so frightened at the course events had taken, and the consequences thereof, that she feared to move a step in the matter without her husband's consent.

So it was that many little agonies of remorse and fear played in and out of Josephine's new-wedded bliss. But

then Digby laughed them away. What wrong had they done? They had not run away like criminals; they had at once returned to her father's house—or that house which he intended to bestow on Mr Bouchier. All she had done was to consent to his wish of having a quiet wedding—a wedding which would save the whole family from destruction, for he would keep his word with her to the fullest interpretation—would retain just enough for himself and his little wife to live upon as a lady and gentleman, and confirm Mr Bouchier and her brother, if necessary, in the possession of the remainder. All would be right—chase away the fears, kiss him, and come for a stroll through the woods or a ride across country. She did as he told her, and felt comforted—he must know best. Was there ever such a dear, good, noble, handsome husband as her Digby?

One morning a note came for Digby. He was glad to receive it, being anxious to know how Mr Bouchier intended to act; or, as he put it to himself, 'if he would take it lying down or fighting.' The letter gave no information on this nice point. It was a coldly-worded request, or more than a request, that Mr Digby Bouchier would come to town without delay, as the writer wished an interview. Digby read it and tossed it over to his wife. Her eyes sparkled as she saw her father's handwriting.

'Oh, I am glad! He must be better, as he writes himself.'

'Papa doesn't write very lovingly to his new son,' said Digby.

'No,' said Josephine, much discontented at the tenor of the letter. 'But you will go and see him?'

'Of course, I shall. I'll go to-morrow.'

'And I may come with you?'

Digby reflected.

'Do you want to go?'

'Do I want to go! I am longing to see papa and mamma, and Mabel. Besides, I want some things; I've scarcely a dress to wear. Of course, I shall go with you.'

'There will be an awful row, I'm afraid. Hadn't you better keep out of it?'

'No, sir; if we are to be scolded, I must take my share of it. I am as much to blame as you. But why should they scold? Besides, I must go; I can't be quite happy until they all forgive me.'

‘Very well—we’ll go to-morrow.’

Digby kissed her, and lit a cigar. He was moody and thoughtful for the rest of the day—looking over his weapons for the fight to-morrow; a fight which he expected would tax all his resources heavily.

The young couple arrived at Mr Bouchier’s town house in due time next day. Mrs Bouchier and Mabel received Josephine affectionately, but sadly; they shook hands coldly with Digby, but neither said a word respecting the new relationship between them. Digby was asked to go to the library, where Mr Bouchier awaited him. Josephine was anxious to accompany him; she had some idea that the fellow culprits should throw themselves on their knees, to be raised, after a few words of reproach, by a mollified father, who would bless them, and fold her to his bosom. She began to grow a little frightened when her mother insisted that Digby should see Mr Bouchier alone. He gave her a reassuring nod, and followed Mrs Bouchier with a confident step to the library, the door of which she opened, and let him pass in unannounced.

Bad as the impostor was, he almost felt pity as his eyes fell upon his father-in-law, and he saw him thin, worn, and looking ten years older than when the two men last met. Had he been the person he pretended to be—the son of the murdered man—and had it been his mission to take full measure of vengeance on the murderer, he could not have gone about it in a more successful way. As far as health went, Mr Bouchier seemed a broken man; yet there was a look of stern determination on his face, which told Digby that he meant to fight, and fight hard. It was when he saw that look the young man began to fear lest he had been too clever in his plots—had spun his webs too finely and artistically—whether the thread which closed and completed the network of schemes would not hamper his own movements.

He stood waiting for Mr Bouchier to speak. He expected a torrent of reproaches and threats. He was not sure but what he might have to defend himself against personal violence. Yet, after all, he found that Mr Bouchier had little to say. That gentleman fixed his eyes on his visitor with a look of scorn, bitterness, and contempt.

‘I intended to kill you for this,’ he said, without a word of preface; ‘but I have changed my mind. Scoundrel as

you are, in this matter you have been a fool. You will see it by-and-bye. All I want to see you about now is in respect to money matters.'

In spite of himself his listener was taken aback. He did not quite see Mr Bouchier's drift respecting his folly. True, he had counted a great deal on the love the father bore towards his daughter.

'Money matters,' he said; 'yes we must arrange something now. I am willing to——'

'Your wife,' said Mr Bouchier, interrupting him, 'your wife when she is of age will have three hundred a year of her own. The capital, I am pleased to say, is settled on herself. What are your means?'

'I am the owner of about ten thousand a-year when I choose to claim it.'

'We will leave that out of the question. What else?'

'I have something over two hundred pounds in my pocket-book at present,' answered Digby, attempting bravado.

'Really!' said Mr Bouchier, with a return of his old sarcasm. 'For an adventurer you are well equipped.'

'You insult me, Mr Bouchier.'

Digby drew himself up in approved fashion. Mr Bouchier paid no attention to the remark or to the attitude.

'As my daughter, even if your wife, must live as much like a lady as is possible under such circumstances, I shall pay two hundred pounds every quarter-day to her credit at Coutts'. When she comes of age I shall reduce this amount by the income which will be her own. Now, be good enough to leave me.'

'This is absurd, Mr Bouchier.'

'Be good enough to leave me. Or, stay a minute. I should mention that I shall always be willing to see my child; but if you approach me, I will take steps to prevent such a nuisance being repeated. I shall come down to Redhills next week, and if you are not gone, I shall kick you out.'

Digby was white with passion. 'You are a rash man,' he exclaimed. 'I will ruin you?'

'I am not rash. It is as I said before—you have been too clever. You were to be bought. I would have given a fair price. You took your own mode of payment. You



are silenced. You can't expect any tale of yours to be credited now.'

'If I am bought and silenced,' said Digby with a wicked meaning in his voice, 'the price, remember, is your favourite daughter.'

His words made every nerve in Mr Bouchier's body thrill. He rose and pointed to the door. 'Go,' he said. 'Never speak to me—never let me see your face again.'

Digby saw his shaft had gone home.

'All right,' he said, carelessly, 'I'll go now; but we shall have lots to talk about before we've done with one another.'

Josephine was waiting for him; she was growing very anxious. He gave her a smile and a kiss. She blushed like a rose, for her mother and sister were in the room, and these conjugal amenities in public were a new experience.

'Better go and see the old boy,' he whispered. 'I can do nothing with him—he's very cranky. I'll go out and stroll about for half-an-hour, then come back for you.'

'We're not going back to-night,' cried Josephine, in dismay.

'Oh yes, we are, by the 4.40. We haven't much time to spare.'

As neither her mother nor Mabel objected, Josephine did as her husband suggested.

It was when she saw her father that she realised what she had done. The look he gave her said as plainly as words that it was her work—yet it was not a look of anger. It was a look which made her rush forward, throw herself on her knees before him, and, with her head on his shoulder, sob out entreaties for forgiveness. He stroked her bright hair tenderly.

'Poor little girl—poor little Finey—I have forgiven you. No reproaches from me shall add to the bitterness of your future life. My pretty butterfly, your summer days are over.'

He kissed the face that nestled by his own with a kiss that told the girl he had forgiven, and loved her still. It is not necessary for a man to be a good man to love his children fondly. That is a purely animal instinct, and, moreover, with human beings, phrenologists say, regulated by the gradations in size of a bump, at the back of the head. If his manner at times was stern and even cold to them, no

man in the world loved his children more truly than Philip Bouchier. Digby had taken a heavy price for his silence.

Happy as Josephine felt in his forgiveness, the words coupled with it alarmed her.

‘My future life, papa!’ she said. ‘Oh it will be such a happy life, now you forgive me. Digby meant it for the best.’

He looked at her thoughtfully and sadly.

‘Poor little girl! Tell me, Josephine, if a great trouble must come, would you rather be prepared for it, or, that it came like a thunder-clap?’

His manner frightened her.

‘I don’t know,’ she said. ‘But you must tell me what you mean—you are frightening me.’

‘Yes; I had better tell you. Put your arms round my neck—I am your father, and I love you.’

She clasped him and kissed him fondly. Oh, how worn and ill he looked!

‘Josephine, I said your future would be a bitter one. Oh, my poor girl, you have married the blackest-hearted villain in England!’

She started up, her cheeks flaming, the tears springing to her eyes.

‘Oh, papa! How can you say so! You of everybody in the world. You must know how good, how noble he is; what he is going to give up for all our sakes. That was why I married him like that.’

‘Then you don’t love him?’ asked her father, eagerly.

‘Not love him! Who could help loving him? So good, so self-sacrificing. Oh, papa,’ she cried, ‘I thought you would be so glad that all would be settled. I did not think you would say unkind words of Digby.’

‘What has he sacrificed?—what is he going to give up?’

‘Redhills—your estate, papa,’ said Josephine, proudly.

Mr Bouchier ground his teeth, and heaped another curse on his daughter’s husband. This was superfluous and useless, for had his curses carried any virtue the object of them would long ago have been past plotting and scheming.

‘Josephine,’ he said, very gravely, but tenderly, ‘I am your father, and have a right to be believed. That man has no more claim on my estate than my butler has. No matter what he tells you—what papers he shows you—it is an imposture.’

She was bewildered, stunned—what did it all mean? She pressed her hands to her temples and began to think. Which was the true—which was the false?

‘But, papa,’ she asked, hesitatingly, ‘if what Digby says is not true, why did you ask him to stay with us, and tell us he was our cousin?’

He shuddered. If she were to ask her husband that question. Somehow he could not believe the man would tell her the truth. It would recoil on himself, for his daughter would at once see through the scheme, and would probably leave the husband to return to the father, however great the latter’s guilt might be.

There was the deepest pathos in his voice as he answered her.

‘That is my fault or my misfortune. As you love me, never ask me or your husband why. Mind, Josephine, I have every reason to say that he is your cousin; but his claim on the estate is an invention—his generosity the bait he used for you. It is because I brought him to my house that I forgive you—that I shall always be glad to see you—that when you are in trouble you may come to me. Kiss me once more, and say good-bye.’

Whom should she believe? Her father, to whom she had lisped her earliest words, or her husband, who a few weeks ago was a stranger to her? Like every woman, sad as the fact is, she believed her husband. After all, a woman’s future life is in her husband’s hands, and one likes to fence with misfortune as long as possible, to keep off whilst one can the deadly thrust which takes away, not life, but hope, youth, trust, love—all that is worth living for. Pity Josephine, do not blame her. She will want your pity.

She left the library, weeping bitterly. From the dining-room window she saw her husband, walking up and down the pavement, smoking, as was his usual custom. He did not smoke at any particular time or in any particular place—he simply smoked when he could. It was one little flaw in his behaviour which Josephine had as yet condoned. She called him in.

‘We must be quick,’ he said. ‘Do you want to pack anything?’

‘Yes; a few things.’

So Mabel and Josephine went upstairs. Mabel, who was

quite prepared to say the most severe things to her sister when an opportunity occurred, changed her mind at the sight of the little girl's evident distress—comforted, petted, and caressed her. What censure she gave fell on Digby's shoulders, not on Josephine's. Mabel had always acted the elder sister, but to-day Josephine, with her new troubles and uncertainties, felt years her senior. Besides, she dare not tell her anything that had transpired between her father and herself at their recent interview. She could only say he had fully forgiven her, but not Digby.

'I should think not,' said Mabel, whose wrath was hot against her brother-in-law.

They just caught the 4.40. Both were very silent driving to the station. Josephine was too unhappy to talk, and her husband had a delicate question to decide. He had by now come to the conclusion that Mr Bouchier had been quite right. He had been too clever. The price he had been paid or had taken was inadequate. If he had been more matter of fact, and abjured anything romantic, he might have done remarkably well. He might, he believed, have sold his silence to Mr Bouchier, for, say, twenty or thirty thousand pounds, if he had been content to go in for simple extortion of money. As it was, he had won in the delicate game he had been playing eight hundred a-year and a wife. He had overreached himself. Like all young players, a deep finesse had been an irresistible temptation—the finesse had failed. The new trump which marriage had brought into his hand was his antagonist's love for his daughter; but it had not scored as he thought it would. In plain words he had been defied to do his worst—and what was his worst? He was in a weaker position than when he was dismissed with contumely after his first interview with Philip Bouchier, and he scarcely saw where the card of the value of Stokes' evidence, which changed the aspect of the game, was now to come from. And Josephine? Of course he was very fond of her, as he was of all pretty girls who loved him—for a time.

Somehow Josephine did not look so pretty at this moment. Her father had been right in calling her a butterfly. Rain does not improve butterflies, and tears did not improve Josephine. Great, dark, tragic beauties, with cream-coloured complexions, may be more attractive than ever in their woe; but little, fair, bright women should

never weep. Their skins are too thin, and the nervous sanguine complexion has a knack of reddening. Josephine, when in good spirits, and with everything pleasant in life surrounding her, was as charming a little blonde as you could meet with ; but tears did not suit her ; and on the drive to Paddington she wept copiously and vigorously. Her grief was enhanced by the fact of the newly-married couple being allowed to depart in a hansom—not being taken properly to the station in her father's carriage. It was the first taste of the bitter future. Scarcely pathetic—bathetical, rather—but ominous.

Her husband noticed her changed appearance, and wondered how it was he ever thought her so beautiful. This was the hackneyed 'little rift within the lute.'

He asked her one or two questions.

'What did the old fellow say to you?' was the first.

She gave a little shiver. The form in which he couched his inquiry struck her as being, if not atrociously vulgar, too familiar.

'Oh, I can't tell you. Such dreadful things, Digby ; they are not true?'

The question did not imply doubt, only desire to be doubly assured.

'True!' he said, with an irritable laugh. 'If they were to my detriment, you may depend they are not true. He ought to know better, for his own sake.'

He was silent for a while, busy with his own thoughts. He forgot his wife's presence.

'Cursed old fool!' he hissed out, with an unmistakable emphasis.

'Who? Who, Digby?' she said ; and as she spoke the pale, careworn, but loving face of her father rose before her.

He saw the slip he had made.

'The fool driving. We shall never catch the train.'

His explanation was adroit ; but as the cabman was a very young man, and at that moment was lashing his horse and driving like a fury in hope of earning the extra fare promised to him, it scarcely satisfied Josephine. She dared not own her doubt, even to herself ; but she felt as one of the devotees to the Prophet of Khorassan might have felt, if an inch of the veil had slipped aside for a second, and had been so quickly replaced as to leave her uncertain whether the glimpse of horror she saw was real or imagined.

He asked her some questions also as to what sort of a fellow her brother Allan was. He had not yet met him, these momentous events having occurred in term time, whilst Allan was in residence at Oxford. Neither had he met the younger son, Kenneth, who was a delicate lad, and under the care of a private tutor at Bournemouth. Allan being a subject Josephine could enlarge upon, she did so, and finished up her panegyric by prophesying as to the friendship which would at once spring up between two such high-minded persons as her husband and her brother; and all the while she spoke the thoughts of the former ran in this fashion—

‘Seems to me the old boy’s breaking. Won’t I work Allan when he does succeed to the estate—that’s all!’

The thought of this quite cheered him up, and he was very kind to his wife on the journey down. They caught the last train from Sleaford, and, having telegraphed for a carriage to meet them at Brackley, reached Redhills that night. Five days afterwards Mr and Mrs Digby Bouchier went back to London, and, taking a small house, commenced housekeeping on their own account.

All this, you know, occurred some three years before Mdlle. Francesca made her successful *début* in Lucia; and by this time Josephine fully understood the meaning of her father’s sorrowful prognostications. Her idol was mutilated, despised, and overthrown; but the fall of it had crushed the brightness out of her, and she was now a girl in years, but a woman in sadness and lost illusions.

For a while the two went on fairly well. The young wife could deceive herself; she would not meet the truth. As long as her husband loved or pretended to love her, she insisted upon trusting him, although her trust had to face several shocks. It was but natural that her great desire was to prove herself in the right, by her husband signing the renunciation of his birthright, as he grandiloquently called it. She hinted at this as delicately as she could; then ventured to ask him outright to make the promised settlement. First he evaded the subject; then he told her, sternly, to mention it no more. It displeased him. Her father had treated him shamefully. It was his place to approach him. When that approachment took place he was ready to do all he had promised. The months went by and Mr Bouchier made no sign. A chilling dread crept into

the girl's heart. Had she been deceived—was her father's version the true one? If so, what could she think of her husband? In a very short time the idol began to totter.

Allan and Digby did not hit it off together. Her brother had been to see her several times. He was too fond of her to forsake her because she had made an imprudent marriage. The two young men met and, by common consent, disliked each other. Allan spoke his mind roundly to Mabel as to Josephine having been the victim of a specious cad—for he saw through veneer. Indeed, latterly, Digby had not taken so much trouble to show a polished surface, and some of his sayings and doings were, to say the least, a matter of surprise to his worshipper.

Then money troubles began. Digby was expensive in his tastes, and Josephine thought less of money than anything else. At the end of the first year they were deeply in debt. He wrote to Mr Bouchier, and demanded money to pay his creditors. Mr Bouchier sent the letter back torn in half. Then he insisted upon Josephine making an appeal to her father. She was kindly but sadly received; but Mr Bouchier was inflexible in his refusal. Perhaps she pressed him rather faint-heartedly. Her husband was an idol no longer—scarcely a mystery even. She felt degraded by having to make the request; only her husband's entreaties—commands even—had induced her to sink so low. It was when she returned empty-handed from her unpleasant errand that she saw once for all her husband in his true lurid light—saw his face without even the semblance of a mask over it—saw the blackness of his heart without his attempting to soften or conceal it. She heard the curses come from his lips—directed at her, and then the girl knew what she had done, and shuddered at the future. Her butterfly days were indeed over!

From that day he commenced a course of neglect and ill-usage—commenced and carried it out with deliberation and purpose to gain his own ends. He had now to strike Mr Bouchier through his child; it was her safety and happiness the father must purchase. He did not absolutely bring physical violence to bear upon her, but for a time he tried every other method by which a man may torture a woman without infringing the law. Josephine was not altogether weak and silly; certain characters show unex-

pected traits under certain circumstances. She knew she had been deceived and wronged, and this knowledge enabled her to face her tormentor bravely for a time. Then she possessed a good deal of pride—the Bouchiers all possessed pride—so she offered an unexpected resistance. It was not until he made her life unbearable that she sought her father's protection. This was what her brutal husband had counted upon. He went after her, forced his way into the house, and claimed his wife. It was only Mr Bouchier's express command which prevented Allan, who happened to be at home, from throwing him out neck and crop. The upshot of it all was another interview with Mr Bouchier—a distinct avowal that he was ill-using his wife to wring money from her father; a peremptory demand that she should be restored to him; a threat that if proceedings were commenced in the divorce court, to put an end to his power over her, other things would be made public, even if he, Digby Bouchier, went to pieces in the general explosion. If, on the other hand, the money he wanted was paid, and a much larger income guaranteed for the future, he would treat his wife kindly. Return with him she must; so long as he was fairly dealt with she would have no more to complain of than thousands of women who live under the same roof as their husbands, but miles away from them. It was a *sine qua non* that Josephine still lived with him.

His victim struggled, but yielded. The money was paid, and Josephine induced to return under certain conditions. It was the keenest cut of all the bitterest part of Philip Bouchier's punishment, that he was forced for the sake of silence to urge his daughter to return to the man he hated—to the husband who had in so short a time proved beyond a doubt his utter worthlessness and villainy. He made her promise that at the first sign of a revival of hostilities on the part of her husband, she would leave him and tell him to do his worst.

At the end of the third year matters were much as this treaty arranged them—Mr Bouchier had kept his part of the compact; Digby had not exactly broken his. Josephine was living with her husband, yet meeting and speaking only when obliged to do so. She did not fear him. Her sentiments towards him were those of utter contempt; and fear and contempt do not assimilate. She was not the



most unhappy woman in the world, if she was the most hopeless. She had several friends of her own, who pitied her and sympathised with her. She went her way, and let her husband go his way without question or reproach. He laid no commands upon her, except that he would not allow her to leave him for too long a time. He could not permit the lever which moved Mr Bouchier to be out of his sight, save for a brief interval. He had needed to use it once or twice as it was, or to threaten to use it. The threat had never failed, and any extra sums he wanted had been forthcoming.

Recently he had been thinking a great deal about Frances. He guessed the time was at hand when she would appear in public; and, upon seeing the announcement of Mdlle. Francesca's coming *début*, concluded that Frances and the new singer were identical. Meeting with her was a danger he must guard against; although he felt a longing to see her, to hear her once more. He dared not hope she would forget him. He knew that, if chance brought them face to face, she would insist upon an explanation as to the manner of her father's death. This explanation would entail others which would be embarrassing to Mr Digby Bouchier. So all he could do was to shun her. It was not a difficult task. Except in the street they were unlikely to meet. His companions and friends were not of the class which entertains *prime donne*. For in late years his tastes had deteriorated, or rather he had thrown off the assumption of higher things. At first his villainy had an amount of vanity in it. He wanted to use the lever he possessed to raise himself and make a figure in the world. The enmity he instinctively felt towards Allan Bouchier was clinched by his flat refusal to propose him for a club of which he was a member. The one really refined taste the man possessed, music, was rapidly leaving him. He cared little for it—his voice was now only heard raised in a drinking song, for the delectation of boon companions, both male and female—for he drank hard now, and united other vices with that of intemperance. Is it a wonder his wife's feeling was one of sheer contempt—that she led her hopeless life, and took what pleasure she could find in the society of her own friends? Poor child! she was now little more than twenty-one—her whole future spoiled and closed in by the one foolish act of a girl.

As to the rest of her family, Mr Bouchier had for a long time been in bad health. I should be wrong in saying it was caused by remorse for his crime. There must be many a murderer in the world who eats, drinks, sleeps as well as you or I do. He had done the deed in cool blood—had done it to benefit himself and his children. If for a while his victim's face haunted his dreams, it began at last to fade from them. Had George Manders not made his discovery, and used it for his own ends, it is probable that after a time Philip Bouchier would have ceased to think of his crime—would, even, when all danger of discovery seemed past, have rejoiced that he had found the opportunity, and had been able to nerve himself to establish his right to his inheritance by one desperate but successful stroke. No, it was not remorse that made him an old man before his time. It was fear—it was the sword which the impostor held always over his head. It was regret at the price paid as hush-money—Josephine's happiness. It was dread lest the sword might some day fall—it was the worry of having to keep up a continual fight with the wielder of it—to dare him to do his worst, then to tremble lest he should be taken at his word—to pay the black mail, yet strive to keep the tribute down to a reasonable amount. It was the horror of thinking that some day his wife and the children he loved might be forced to look upon him as a murderer. Surely, leaving what remorse there might be out of the question, Philip Bouchier found enough in these things to break his health.

Sleeplessness was the root of the evil. Without artificial aid he could not sleep; and a man must sleep, die, or go mad. He did not resign himself to being a thrall to the chloral fiend without many a struggle. But what did they avail? Let him lie down and say, I will wait sleep until she comes. Thoughts, thoughts, thoughts came, but not sleep. Then he must give in and swallow a dose of the deadly drug. Only his wife knew what a quantity of it he had been taking during the past months. They tell me chloral destroys the body but not the mind. It would, perhaps, have been well for Philip Bouchier had its effects been equal as to each. He was a man of strong will; he fought hard against his master. He plunged into politics in a way that steady Conservative squires are seldom in the habit of doing. He sought society. It was all of no avail.

Then he gave up the struggle, and delivered himself over to his fate. Soon a distaste to the society of all save those who were nearest and dearest began to manifest itself. This interfered with his Parliamentary duties. There was also a need of curtailment of expenditure—Digby's demands pressed heavily upon him. He applied for the Chiltern Hundreds, gave up his town house, and went down to Redhills to spend the remainder of his days in seclusion. Ah! it was a bad hour for Philip Bouchier when he drove that man from Brackley to Redton.

And his wife? She was what she had always been—a true, faithful, suitable helpmate. Her husband was her god. Her life is summed up in that. In health, in sickness, in riches, in poverty, in good repute or in bad repute, he was her lord and master. Could a wife be more? To her there was nothing visible save failing health—accelerated, it may be, by Josephine's hasty and ill-judged marriage. This was the only thing Mrs Bouchier could blame herself about—the only time she had acted, or refrained from acting, without her conduct having been regulated by her husband. She wept and regretted, but as Josephine was so unhappy, she forgave.

And Mabel? Mabel had married well and suitably. Not the Honourable John, who was urging a hopeless suit, but the representative of an old county family—not a Westshire family, but a Midland counties one. As her husband had large estates, and would succeed to a title if a sickly life failed, Mabel's prospects were very bright. The contrast between her lot and her sister's was bound to occur to Josephine. But Mabel loved her as of old, and Josephine's happiest hours were those she spent with her at Shortlands.

And Allan, whose existence was only hinted at in the earlier chapters? He had finished his university career—had taken a fair degree, and was now enjoying life as the heir to a fine estate was entitled to enjoy it. He also came into money when of age—so was, if he chose to be so, independent. It not being a Bouchier tradition for the heir to enter any profession, Allan was an idle man—if a young fellow of twenty-four can ever be idle. He was fond of travel, fond of sport, fond of art, and many other things, so that his life was a very enjoyable one. He had chambers in town—for Mr Bouchier had no town house now—but

he spent a good deal of his time at Redhills. On every occasion lately he fancied his father was growing to lean more and more upon him. He felt much troubled and very anxious as he saw how prematurely old his father was growing. As he dated this declining health from Josephine's marriage, his feelings towards Digby may be imagined.

And Kenneth, the youngest, was just thinking of Oxford. Whether his fate was to be the church or the bar was not yet decided.

Now this is the position of the Redhills family when Frances returned to England, and, as Herr Kaulitz predicted, took the world by storm.

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## CHAPTER XII

### IN THE GREEN ROOM

ALLAN BOURCHIER was lounging in the smoking-room of his club. He had dined there, and was debating what he should do with the remainder of the evening. He had no particular engagement, so he half formed a resolution to look in at one of the theatres. He was not a great patron of the drama. He was fonder of real men and women—real events and actions. That was why he liked London better than the country, barring the outdoor exercise. He liked to feel the surge of life around him; to live in the whirl of busy men. Sometimes he regretted he had not a career to run—a fortune to make. He intended sooner or later to enter the struggle. He hoped some day to be in Parliament—as a working, not an ornamental member; but his time had not yet come. He was thinking of all these things as he sat in the smoking-room. Thinking of the great city around him, of the millions who filled it. Then from London his thoughts went over to Paris, from Paris to Dieppe, and after leaving Dieppe they stayed for an indefinite time on board the Channel boat, and puzzled and puzzled as to who the girl whose image filled them could be. Somehow he could never forget that face. Every line, every feature, every change from grave to gay,

dwelt with him. He was now beginning to despair of ever meeting his unknown companion. Weeks had elapsed, but although he had spent nearly all the time in London, they had not met. Oh, if he had only asked her name! So he sat dreaming and bringing that perfect, classical face through the smoke wreaths he sent up to the ceiling.

He was still dreaming when a hand fell on his shoulder. Coming back to earth, he saw the gay face of a friend, Ernest Pierrepont: a young fellow—younger than Allan—very rich, rather dissipated, but a favourite with all who knew him. A boy who would be spoilt or made by London life, as chance might be. He was not spoiled yet, or he would not have been an intimate friend of Allan's.

'All in the clouds—the smoke clouds—Allan?' asked Pierrepont.

'I was wondering how I should spend the evening.'

'I envy you. My fate is decided. Tea, music, and long whist.'

'The two first, if good, may atone for the last.'

'Nothing can atone for it—except duty. I am going to see my godmother.'

'Quite right. Mine is in the country, or I would do the same.'

'I wish mine were there too. But she prefers London, and insists on seeing me occasionally. I tell you what—a godmother with thirty thousand pounds to leave is an awful nuisance.'

'Depends how she leaves it.'

'That's it. It's hardly enough to struggle for; but too much to neglect. So I must go. What did you say you intended doing?'

'That's exactly what I can't determine. Shall I come with you and say a good word to the old lady, whoever she is?'

'No. Friendship has its limits. But I will be generous to you in gratitude for the offer. Take my bone, and go and hear Francesca. I intended to go for the first act.'

'Is she so good, then?'

'Good—she is superb! She is lovely! Didn't you see her Lucia?'

'No, I was engaged.'

'Go then, now—and in your transports think of me.'

He tossed the ivory ticket across to Allan, who thanked

him, and glancing at the clock, said he ought to start at once to enjoy the full benefit to which it entitled him. He had, of course, heard a great deal about the new singer. He had read the glowing accounts, the favourable critiques. He had resolved to hear her, but as yet had not done so. Allan was fond of the opera, so he hurried away from his club, and reached the theatre just as the overture commenced. To-night Mdlle. Francesca made her first appearance as Marguerite. Her former successes had fully awakened the public to her great merits, and no singer ever faced a more crowded or more enthusiastic house. As she appeared on the stage, Allan, who until that moment had been wearing a quiet look of anticipatory enjoyment, could scarcely help starting to his feet, and in a moment he knew that the Marguerite, the new *prima donna*, whose name was in every mouth, was the beautiful girl with whom he had crossed the Channel.

Now he understood what her words meant. She hoped he would often see and hear her. He ought to have known the meaning at once. See and hear her! As he sat and listened to her magnificent voice, as he saw her graceful form, noted every action, every attitude, every look—found fresh charms every time she came on the stage—the young man thought that the whole of his future life would be worthless unless he spent the greater portion of it in seeing and hearing Mdlle. Francesca.

To say he was enraptured does not meet the case. He was hopelessly, irrevocably in love. He had loved her from the first—that was now clear enough to him. So he sat in his stall gazing at her with all his eyes; listening with all his ears; longing to do something to attract her attention; wondering if a great actress in the midst of her pathos and simulated joy and anguish ever recognised one of the audience her art held spell bound. Once he fancied her eyes met his—that they singled him out by a slight gleam of recognition, but of this he could not be sure. He could only hope it was so; and invoked blessings upon the head of Pierrepont's aged godmother, whose liking for her graceless godson's company had been the primary cause of Allan Bouchier solving the mystery which surrounded his unknown friend.

He left the theatre and walked home in a delicious kind of trance. Heaven had opened before him. He had

found her. He loved her. To this fact he resigned himself without dispute. But what was he to do? People may see heaven without being able to climb to it. Many a young man may ardently desire to make the acquaintance of a new *prima donna* without that boon being accorded to him—and as many more may wish to win her love without doing so. Very likely had Allan seen her for the first time that night, he would have loved her only as we all love great singers and actresses—on the stage; but their first meeting had been in private life; it was the woman, not the actress, who had first awakened the interest he felt. Beautiful as he saw her in the midst of stage accessories; marvellous as was the power of her voice to move the heart; to him she was yet more beautiful in every-day attire, talking and acting like an ordinary mortal; braving the keen wind which tossed and played with one or two truant locks of bright-brown hair. No, it was not the stage-queen he loved; it was the fair, bright, but stately woman he had met.

He even regretted the eminence of her position. Not from any feeling that the heir to an old family should not take a wife from the stage. He had no prejudice of this kind, or if he had, it went overboard in an instant. In his way he was a strong-minded young man. He determined without more ado that *Mdlle. Francesca* was fit to grace a throne, and that Allan Bouchier was over head and ears in love with her. All that could be done was to try with might and main to win her love. So dreaming his dreams—now exulting in thoughts of success—now desponding as the difficulties of the undertaking rose before him, he sat very, very late into the night planning and plotting how to make the first advances.

‘How did you like Marguerite?’ asked Pierrepont the next day. ‘Is she not divine?’

‘Yes,’ replied Allan, so quietly that his friend wondered at his want of appreciation. The fact was he could not trust himself to express the praise he would have bestowed.

‘Do you know any one who could present me to her?’ asked Allan; for Pierrepont knew many people.

‘Struck, eh? Well, I don’t wonder. Everybody is asking the same question. I wish I did.’

‘Who is she?’

‘No one knows. Some say American.’

‘Yes, I know that much.’

‘Then you should be content ; you know more than most of us.’

‘I wonder if Sinclair knows her,’ continued Allan, naming a well-known composer with whom he stood on terms of friendship.

‘Of course he does—if not he *can* introduce himself first. He’s your man, Allan. Geniuses can dispense with the usual forms of society. I wish I were a geuius’

‘It’s foolish to wish for impossibilities,’ said Allan.

Yet, was he not wishing for an impossibility? It might be so ; but he could not help his fate ; and at four-and-twenty there is little a man thinks beyond the bounds of possibility. At that age one is not prone to lack courage.

At first Allan had some wild idea of writing to Frances and asking permission to call upon her, but he shrank from this course. He was not a distinguished man whom the artist might be pleased to meet. He was simply an English gentleman, and he felt he could scarcely base his claim to her favourable consideration either on the fact that he had been her fellow-traveller for a few hours, or that he was deeply in love with her. The latter would be even a weaker plea than the former ; and, knowing the world, or the London world, Allan frowned as he thought that by this time many had told her or shown her the same thing. No, he must wait until he could find some one who could present him, or until they met under some friend’s roof. It was the woman not the singer he was seeking to make acquaintance with. Meanwhile he could at least go and hear her every time she appeared in public. That was his undeniable right and privilege, of which he partook to such an extent, that for the next fortnight whenever Mdlle. Francesca charmed an audience there was one young fellow in it who listened as though he would monopolise all her magic sounds, and who gazed so ardently at the singer that had she been aware of it she might have been greatly discomposed.

Frances had now appeared several times in grand operas, and was announced as one of the great attractions at an important concert—her first appearance in England except on the stage. Allan Bouchier was in attendance as usual. So regular had he been in putting in an appearance whenever she sang that Pierrepont bantered him unmercifully on



the devotion he displayed to the new star—the more so as he found he had not, as yet, succeeded in getting the coveted introduction.

The concert was held in one of the largest halls in London. There were several queens and kings of song there, so the honours were divided. Every queen had her subjects, and when each reigned so successfully the palm could be adjudged to none. In the first part Francesca sang one song and in a duet. To say the least, she was as enthusiastically received as her contemporary sovereigns. Had the sovereignty been dependent on personal appearance, no doubt would have been entertained as to whom it should have been adjudged. Her beauty shone out conspicuous. Her rivals were as candles before the sun. She needed no arch gestures, no pretty and petulant by-play, to impress her audience in her favour. She looked what she was, whether on or off the stage—a queen among women. Her dress, one of the before-mentioned Parisian masterpieces, suited her exactly. Let me attempt to describe it.

A rich satin—a lemon-coloured satin ; the front trimmed profusely with white lace and pearl embroidery. It was, after the fashion of the day, tight to the figure, and let who will complain of the trying style. *Mdlle. Francesca* had no occasion to fear as to the symmetry of the form it shadowed forth. The skirt terminated in a train of portentous length ; the bodice was cut square, and revealed the dazzling whiteness of her neck, on which rested a diamond pendant, attached to a necklace, consisting of a single row of large pearls. On one shoulder was a large bunch of dark purple pansies. The contrast of these with the lemon-coloured dress had a striking and admirable effect. Her ear-rings were diamond solitaires, whilst other diamonds were arranged in cunning places in her thick soft brown hair. Gloves, the exact colour of her dress and fastened by a number of buttons, covered her rounded arms—alas for the exigencies of fashion!—hiding their beauty and whiteness. If any lady who reads this feels any doubt about the ravishing effect of this triumph of millinery, let her order a similar dress and she will not be disappointed with the result—especially if she be as beautiful as *Mdlle. Francesca*. *Francesca* was one of those women who seem to be especially designed to wear jewellery. There are some hands on which the smallest

circlet of gold looks more than is necessary ; others who may cover every finger to the knuckle with gems, yet appear in faultless taste. Simple as Frances was in her habits, her style was the grand style—rich clothing became her. The diamonds on her neck, her arms, and in her ears seemed in their proper place. It was not that she needed such decorations, but they suited her ; and knowing the value of outward display with the public, she had invested a portion of her capital in precious stones. Altogether her appearance and attire were admired nearly as much as her singing.

Perhaps Allan was the only man in the room who did not appreciate those gems. Somehow diamonds on the stage are suspicious possessions. People wonder if they are presents—if so, by whom given, and why ? Speculations of this kind have the effect of investing the wearer with a piquant interest. Even Allan had an idea that few artists bought their own adornments ; and although he could not believe that a girl with that noble face, those clear, steadfast grey eyes, would take gifts of such a description from any one, he would have been much happier had he known those sparkling stones had been purchased and paid for by her own proper money.

He was quite resolved that, when he made her his wife, those presents should be returned to their respective donors. He was a determined and sanguine young man, looking into the future hopefully, and with the confidence of youth.

Allan's friend, Mr Alfred Sinclair, the well-known composer, was at the concert ; he had enjoyed the first part greatly, and expected to enjoy the second part even more, as the programme for this was of a more popular nature, and included two of his own songs. Mr Sinclair had that morning finished a very exquisite setting to some very sentimental words, and was anxious that Mdlle. Francesca should 'take up' the song, as it is called. Only composers and music publishers know what a *prima donna* 'taking up' a ballad means, or how by such a kindly yet well paid act on her part the sale of a great many thousand copies is assured. Mr Sinclair had naturally made Mdlle. Francesca's acquaintance, and was now wishing to make an appointment with her, to show her his melodious effort and to enlist her sympathies on behalf of this tuneful offspring

of his genius. So, in the interval between the parts, he was hurrying to the green room to prefer his request. A hand placed on his shoulder arrested his progress; turning round he saw the tall form and pleasant face of Allan Bouchier.

‘Oh, how d’ye do, Bouchier?’ he said—adding quickly, ‘excuse me, I am in a hurry.’

He saw that Allan had something to say to him.

‘Where are you going in such haste?’

‘I only want to say a few words to Francesca.’

Sinclair meant no disrespect, singers being usually spoken of by their surnames pure and simple, without prefix.

‘You know her then?’ asked Allan.

‘Of course I do, my dear fellow—why shouldn’t I?’

Mr Sinclair’s accent implied that it would be absurd to suppose that any singer could rise to eminence without, as a necessity, being well acquainted with a person of such distinction in the musical world as himself.

‘Do you know her well enough to give me an introduction; and, if so, will you do it, if I ask it as a particular favour?’

Sinclair shook his head.

‘I can’t say I should like to presume on our acquaintance, which is purely artistic, as far as that. You see, Bouchier, you’re not a poet, or a painter, or a musician.’

‘But I am very anxious to know her.’

‘So is everyone. Better wait until you meet her at the house of one of your grand friends. It will be better taste.’

Allan felt annoyed, but dare not show it, at the risk of offending Sinclair, who was of a choleric nature.

‘Will you ask her permission?’ he said. ‘There can be no harm in that.’

‘What shall I say? Mr Allan Bouchier, a member of a rich old county family, wants to offer up his homage personally?’

‘No. Say that the gentleman who travelled with her from Dieppe to Newhaven is anxious to be presented in due form. You might do this much for me, Sinclair.’

‘Of course I will,’ answered Sinclair, who was glad to oblige everyone, particularly young men who moved in good society. ‘You wait here; I’ll be back in a few minutes.’

He plunged through a door which led, it seemed, under the stage, and Allan waited hopefully. That dingy,

painted door might have been the gate of heaven for him. Presently Sinclair returned.

‘All right ; come along,’ he said.

‘What did she say ?’ asked Allan.

‘Said yes, of course ; or I shouldn’t have come back for you.’

‘Nothing else ?’

‘No, but she smiled. By Jove, what a wonderful smile that girl has !’

Allan, trying to look self-possessed and at his ease, with a beating heart followed his conductor.

The ‘green-room’ either of the theatre or the concert-hall is, to a layman, always invested with a kind of mysterious awe—a feeling which has been sometimes known to surround it even as long as to the third visit paid to its sacred precincts. It is when one is about to be introduced to the temporary abode of those radiant and gifted creatures who ravish eyes and ears by their performances, that one feels most acutely the insignificance of one’s own station in life. Who is he that he should dare to tread the hallowed ground, should presume to breathe the same air as those whose names are world-renowned ? Then it is that a private gentleman of modest disposition wishes he had written a successful book, painted a grand picture, crossed the channel in a balloon, been the hero of four divorce cases, invented a patent medicine, or, in fact, done anything to lend his name enough lustre to justify his intrusion. It is only when he begins to realise the fact that the thrilling sopranos, the rich contraltos, the sentimental tenors, and the massive baritones are in private, or even semi-private life, very much like ordinary men and women, that he feels at all at his ease. Alas ! when this takes place—when that comfortable state of mind begins—very often the attraction, the fascination, the mystery of the green-room is past, and another illusion gone over to the majority.

Allan would no doubt have crossed the threshold humbly and reverently, but his companion, who was at home in such places, entered very quickly, and as one whose right was indisputable ; closing the door at once behind him to shut out the singer’s foe, the draught. The sight which awaited the visitor was of a very ordinary description. Some half-a-dozen ladies, their gorgeous attire hidden by

thick cloaks or jackets, sat in various parts of the room, apparently doing nothing. About the same number of men were scattered about. These were the artists. They did not appear to converse much. Probably they all met so often they could find little to talk about. One or two visitors were talking to their tuneful friends, and Allan noticed that the great tenor of the evening was speaking in a mixture of English and Italian to Frances, who sat in one corner of the room. Signor Celicour was a dark-eyed, dark-moustached man, with a voice like a nightingale; and seeing how he was engaged, Allan felt a sensation something like hatred towards the good-tempered Italian, who, by-the-bye, had a wife and eight children, whom he idolised. However, in spite of his natural annoyance, Allan could not help feeling grateful at the promptitude with which Signor Celicour bowed and moved out of the way as he followed his sponsor to Frances' corner, and was properly presented.

The girl gave him her hand, whilst an amused smile played over her lips. 'I am glad to see you,' she said. 'I told you we should meet again. It was presumptuous to discount success—was it not?'

She was so natural that Allan felt at home with her at once. They might have been on the steamboat, with the wind blowing, and the merry sea dancing around. Perhaps he wished they were.

He told her how astonished, how delighted he had been to recognise her, and thanked her for allowing Sinclair to conduct him to her presence.

'Not at all. I am pleased to be able to thank you properly for the care you took of me across the Channel. Now sit down, and let us talk. My next song is a long way off.'

He sat on the red-covered bench beside her. He was only too glad to find that she greeted him like an old friend.

'What a success you have been!' he said. 'I must congratulate you.'

'Thank you. I have been very fortunate, and people very kind.'

'What a career before you! I little thought to whom I was talking when first we met. Yet you seem little changed.'

'I am not changed,' said Frances, simply.

‘But your life must be changed?’

‘It was what I always looked forward to — what I studied and wished for.

‘Do you like it?’

‘I love my art. I love to stand on the stage and know that I am moving people’s minds. You were pleased I could see.’

‘You saw me, then?’ Allan could scarcely restrain showing his delight in his voice.

‘Of course, I saw you—several times. I passed you once in the street; just before I appeared first. I had a great mind to send you a ticket.’

‘I wish you had. Why did you not?’

‘For several reasons—the most weighty of which was not knowing your name.’

‘You know it now. May I hope you will remember it?’

‘Oh, yes, it is a pretty name—something like my own; I shall remember it.’

He thought she meant a pretty name, even as Francesca was a pretty name. The best constructed sentences sometimes bear two meanings.

‘You have plenty of friends now, I suppose?’ he continued.

‘I have made many acquaintances, but as yet few friends. Friend is a title not to be lightly bestowed.’

‘Great honours should be hard to gain—you are right.’ Allan spoke very earnestly and seriously; so much so that the girl could not help giving him a grateful look. He was not beginning badly if his wish was to gain her friendship. He had paid her as yet no absurd compliments on her beauty or her voice. He appeared to take it for granted that she knew the merits of each, and did not want to be told them; also that she knew that he appreciated them; so he simply talked to her as a gentleman might talk to any lady in whose company he felt pleasure. Had he known the girl’s character exactly he could not have commenced better.

On her part she felt a decided interest in her companion. His manner stood out in favourable contrast to that of several whose acquaintance she had recently made: for a *prima donna* cannot live quite such a secluded life as other persons may. Introductions are inevitable, and a man of high rank who wishes to pay his homage to a particularly

bright operatic star cannot in policy be denied. So, many came and paid their homage ; and judging her by others of her kind, thought the greater amount of incense they burnt the more acceptable it would be. They were mistaken. Not that she was indifferent to praise. Given by a Gounod, a Wagner, a Rubinstein, or any one whose name stamped the approbation with worth, it would have been delicious to her. To others she was indifferent. She built her hopes as to the reality and stability of her success upon the general verdict given by her audiences. To the single voice she was careless. Allan had avoided this common error—error as far as Frances was concerned—intuitively. So much the better for him.

‘You won’t at this rate see much of the English green fields you talked about,’ resumed Allan. ‘Perhaps your wish for them is departing?’

‘No. I shall run down somewhere into the country as soon as I can find time.’

‘I like London best,’ said Allan.

‘I am growing to like it—too much, I fear, sometimes.’

‘Then you are happy in your profession—that’s the great thing?’

‘Yes ; I am very happy in a way. Of course there must be annoyances in every one’s life. I can’t expect to be exempted.’

‘Tell me some of yours. I fancy you would bear a great many without showing their effects.’

He was answered by an illustration. It was the turn of a great singer to gratify the audience. She rose and threw off her wrap, and as she turned to depart for the upper regions flounced the train of her dress and the dust it had picked up in an unmistakably contemptuous manner, if not exactly over Mdlle. Francesca, certainly at her. The action spoke volumes. It was an insult which could only be borne in silence. A philosophical mind might have perhaps regarded it as a compliment, as it showed that the songstress who had so long reigned undisputed had now encountered a rival who came near enough to be worthy of her enmity. Nevertheless, to a woman the act must bear its sting. The blood mounted to the girl’s pale cheek, and Allan felt he should like to treat the spiteful antagonist as she deserved.

Some few of those who saw the action had the bad taste to smile and titter, but one of the ladies sitting not far

from Frances leaned across towards her and patted her arm kindly. She was a woman now past her first prime, but dear to every professional heart for her uniform good temper. A fine motherly woman, who had done great things in her day, but was now past representing youthful heroines.

‘Nevare mind, my dear,’ she said. ‘Tink of de bringings up.’

Yes, the ‘bringings up.’ For the scornful queen had been brought up in squalor, dirt, and poverty somewhere in Moldo-Wallachia or Roumania. Then a lucky seeker had found the jewel of a voice she possessed, and in a few years she wore satin and velvet instead of rags, and sovereigns had vied with each other in paying tribute to her powers. She was clever, and endeavoured to adapt herself to changed circumstances. In this she was fairly successful; the two things she could not restrain were her temper and—horrible to state—an inordinate affection for a peculiarly obnoxious cheese which was indigenous to her native land, and in the days of her childhood formed a staple article of her diet. Both weaknesses rendered her at times less attractive to her numerous admirers than she might have been could she have conquered them entirely.

So Francesca thought of the ‘bringings up,’ shrugged her shoulders, and was comforted.

‘I suppose that is one of your annoyances—jealousy?’ whispered Allan.

‘One must expect it and put up with it,’ said Frances. ‘Some are kind, some are not. I only hope I may never feel jealous of a new comer and try to make her unhappy.’

‘That you never will, I am sure,’ said Allan, softly.

It was soon her turn to take the stage. He followed her to the bottom of the stairs which led up to it, and listened to her singing above his head, delighted to hear the storm of applause which rose from all parts of the house after her song. She came down smiling, followed by the accompanist. Still the applause continued, so she had to turn and appear again. There was little room for turning at the bottom of the stairs, and her maid waited there to perform the simple operation of rearranging her train as she went up. Allan noticed it. She came down again, and was again called for. ‘Let me do it,’ he said, eagerly, as the maid bent over her mistress. Frances heard his words, she



knew his hand took the hem of her robe and put it in place, and she knew she blushed a little as she returned to him after another acknowledgment of her recall. She could not help it—but it did not much matter—it was natural she should return from victory flushed.

Then Allan thought it time to say adieu. He felt very happy. Even the diamonds did not distress him. She shook hands with him cordially.

‘You will let me call upon you?’ he asked.

He spoke quietly, and she little knew what her answer meant to him.

‘Certainly,’ she said, frankly, ‘if you like to take the trouble.’

‘Where do you live?’

‘I have just commenced housekeeping on my own account. Drayton Villa, St John’s Road.’

‘What is the best time to call?’

‘At any reasonable time. I am usually at home unless professionally engaged.’

‘I shall come very soon,’ said Allan.

She smiled, but offered no objection, and he left, one of the happiest young fellows in London. Had he not seen her, talked with her, touched the hem of her dress, found her, moreover, kind, frank, and natural? Certainly not upset by her great success. It seemed to him that she might be won. The only fear he had was that her art might prove a barrier—not as far as he was concerned, but on her part. Would she ever consent in the first flush of her triumph to give her love and bind herself for ever to a simple country gentleman? He began to wish she was an ordinary creature, of his own rank in life; yet blamed himself for the wish. No, let him do his best to win this glorious woman, give up, if necessary, every tradition for her sake, mould his life to hers, think her successes his own, with, perhaps, a glimmer of a future day when, tired of triumph, she would quit the stage and rule at Redhills as much a queen as she ruled in large towns. He was very deeply in love, and tormented with the usual hopes and fears, but of all the imaginary obstacles he raised there was nothing to be named in the same breath with the real but as yet unknown, unsuspected bar that lay between him and his love.

Although Frances had by no means fallen into the same

state after two interviews with Allan, she was at least interested in him. She was glad to have met him again—glad, if she had cared to cross-question herself, that he had asked permission to call upon her. She saw no reason why she should not find a friend, and a sympathetic one, in Allan Bouchier. Most young people are great believers in platonic affection; as they grow older they get wiser.

Some few days after Allan's introduction to her she was on the stage thrilling her audience by her rendering of one of the greatest songs ever written, when suddenly, and whilst in the middle of her vocal and dramatic effort, she saw far away in front of her the face of a man. Even in the semi-obscurity, in the back of one of the topmost tiers of seats, she recognised it in a moment, and realised, as by inspiration, that the man knew she had seen him. There may have been a gasp of surprise which marred an upper note, and made a critic in the stalls shake his head ominously, but that was all; the actress triumphed, and, except for that slight flaw, never had the music been better sung. Before she left the stage she noticed that the face had disappeared. This showed her she had not been misled by any fancied resemblance; showed her she was right in thinking that her momentary glance of recognition had been detected; showed her that George Manders was in London, and that he wished to avoid her.

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## CHAPTER XIII

### WOODED AND WON

MR TRENFIELD'S clerks were all hard at work at the broad double-topped mahogany desk in the outer office. As a rule they did not take much notice of the arrival and departure of clients. It was the junior clerk's province to receive them, announce them, and show them into the inner office. The copying clerks felt little interest in their business until it arranged itself on sheets of draft paper, covered with strange abbreviations, erasures, alterations, and interlineations, all of which it was their duty to decipher and embody in a beautifully-written document. They were hard-working men, who began

writing at nine o'clock with the regularity of machines. With the exception that during the morning they could look forward to lunch-time, and during the afternoon know that every folio they penned brought them nearer to the hour when the underground railway or the 'bus might take them to their homes, their office life was little different from the life of a machine. Still the entrance of such a notable client as *Mdlle. Francesca* made an unparalleled sensation. Pens were thrust into ears, and heads craned over the wooden railing, or eyes peered through the bars which surrounded the desk, and gave the writers semi-retirement. Indeed, as the green baize door which opened to Mr *Trenfield's* sanctum closed behind the girl, the gentlemen in the outer office permitted themselves a moment's leisure for desultory conversation.

'My eye!' said Mr *Timmins*, a gentleman with a very fierce appearance, caused by his carrying a red-ink pen behind one ear and a black-ink one behind the other; 'she is a screamer—that *Francesca*!'

'She's my bow idea of a woman,' said Mr *Green*, who was very genteel, and scorned slang.

'Seen her in *Lucia*?' asked Mr *Timmins*, with the air of a critic.

He called it *Lusia*, but meant well. Mr *Green* was kind enough to correct him.

'Yes; I was enraptured. They tell me,' continued Mr *Green*, 'she'll be getting the matter of a hundred and fifty a-night soon.'

'By Jove! a girl like that. In one night to make as much as we make by sweating all the year. Wish I could pick up a girl like that and marry her.'

'Better ask this one, *Timmins*,' said *Green*. 'She won't refuse you, if half your tales are true;' for *Timmins* always had some adventure to relate about a perfect lady who had shown him great kindness. Then the machinery resumed work and made up for lost time.

Mr *Trenfield* greeted his client cordially. *Charlie*, who was in the room, blushed visibly and guiltily. He had been thinking of her all the morning, and felt as if he had been caught in the act.

'And what brings you to *Bedford Row*?' asked Mr *Trenfield*.

'*Manders* is in *London*. I saw him last night.'

'Shall I send Charlie away?' asked Mr Trenfield, thinking her business might be private.

'Oh, no. I've nothing to say but what he may hear.'

'Well, where did you see the man?'

'In the theatre. He knew I saw him, and went away at once.'

'Was he alone?'

'I suppose so. I saw him speaking to no one. What can I do?'

'Only trust to the chance of meeting him. He is almost as far off in London as in America. You could advertise, but he wouldn't answer.'

'No. It's clear he means to avoid me.'

'Just so. Either his taste must be very bad, or he has some object in doing so.'

'If I meet him anywhere, I will follow him until I find an opportunity of speaking to him.'

'Take care where you follow him. Don't you think, Frances, it would be better to let the matter rest? Your father must certainly be dead. The mode of his death can matter little after this interval.'

'It matters much to me. I will find out.'

'How does the house get on?' asked Mr Trenfield, to change the subject.

'Capitally—and Mrs Melville is a treasure.'

'A treasure is she? Good friends already, then?'

'Yes. She seemed to shudder at the mention of the stage for the first few days. Now she is quite reconciled to her lot, and, I believe, will eventually degenerate into a regular theatre-goer.'

'"Evil communications corrupt good manners." Mrs Melville has always prided herself on her manners. Now, if you have any more business to talk about do so; if not, Charlie shall show you to your carriage.'

Frances laughed at her dismissal, and left the office, escorted by Charlie. He saw her safe in her little brougham.

'Come and see me soon, Charlie,' she said as she drove off, and by her invitation left him a very happy boy. He knew his attachment was hopeless, but it was a great thing for a young fellow to be on visiting terms with a *prima donna*. He felt that he should be the envied of his friends.

Mrs Melville, of whom Frances had made mention, was a lady who had been selected to preside over her establishment, keep her company, look after her, and, in a word, to play propriety when needed. She was a friend of Mrs Trenfield, by whom the arrangement was made ; yet not without difficulty, for although the comfortable home offered to Mrs Melville was an immense attraction, she being a widow in very poor circumstances, an obstacle, which at first seemed immovable, presented itself. This was the utter horror with which she regarded everything connected with the stage. She was not an illiberal-minded woman, but from her youth upwards had mingled with that peculiar class of persons who think the entrance to a theatre the road to ruin ; people who at the most draw the line at circuses. It seemed the irony of fate that her steps should be guided stagewards. When Mrs Trenfield first broached the subject to her she shuddered, and begged it might never be mentioned again ; but her friend, who knew her many good qualities in spite of her peculiar notions, was persistent. Frances, who had seen Mrs Melville several times, liked her ; and the good widow was so pleased with the girl that she began to waver and say to herself that if all actresses and singers were like this one, she may have judged harshly. Then Mrs Trenfield, who was anxious for both parties that the negotiations should be concluded satisfactorily, talked to her in a way which almost convinced her it was her duty to accept the charge offered her. Mrs Melville, by a great sacrifice, not of herself, but of her opinions, which were as dear to her, consented. It may have been her hope was to turn Frances from her dangerous career. If so, it soon left her, and, as the stronger mind began to influence the weaker, Frances was not far wrong in her assertion that Mrs Melville was experiencing a new-born desire to witness with her own eyes the stage triumphs she had read and heard so much about.

Frances had taken a furnished house for the rest of the season. Leaving the fact that Twickenham was too far from London out of the question, she had no intention of abusing the Trenfields' hospitality. Besides, she felt that a public character, as she knew she must with success become, would upset with her presence that prosaic, well regulated home ; so as soon as she knew her future lot was a public, not a private one, she had, as she said, set up housekeeping, assisted by Mrs Melville. The house was a

small one, but answered every purpose ; and as Frances had been extravagant enough to refurnish the drawing-room in accordance with her own taste, she was pleased with her new home, and determined to make herself happy there. Mrs Melville took all the cares of housekeeping off her shoulders, and played the part of protectress with great dignity. The visitors who called wondered who the self-possessed middle-aged lady was. They concluded she must be some near relative of the girl, as there was nothing in her manner which betrayed dependence.

She was indeed a treasure to Frances. Now that the first plunge was taken, her conscientious scruples soon vanished. She had in former days moved in good, if very strait-laced society, which was one of the great reasons why Mrs Trenfield was so anxious to place her with Frances. It was, she knew, doing a good turn to each of her friends.

Allan Bouchier had not as yet called. He had been at the opera, but had not ventured to intrude behind the scenes. Frances knew he would call, and, perhaps, was looking forward to the visit. She was sitting alone with Mrs Melville this morning. That lady was engaged in one of the hundred feminine methods of passing time—one of those little tasks which employ a woman's hands without interfering with the liberty of her tongue. No wonder they are so popular. Men are unfortunate, none of their occupations offer the same advantages.

Frances was at the piano with a manuscript song before her, which she was trying over. It was the last effort of an ambitious composer—perhaps Mr Sinclair. I can give the words, but not the music.

Now all is done and all is said,  
 And Love uncrowned between us two ;  
 The last tears dried our eyes would shed,  
 And both are free to love anew—  
 Both free to take what life may hold,  
 New smiles to seek, new love to claim—  
 Yet, love, if happier than the old,  
 The new love will not be the same !

Though new love's light our eyes may fill,  
 It pales by that which lit them last ;  
 And sweet new words can never still  
 The sweeter echoes of the past—  
 Yea, even as a tale twice-told,  
 A star that burns with borrowed flame,  
 Though happier, truer than the old,  
 The new love will not be the same !

Mrs Melville laid down her work as the song ended.

'I don't think the new songs are anything like so good as the old,' she said.

'Very likely not, but remember only the very best of the old songs have lived.'

'Yet there were lots of little things we used to sing which sounded much sweeter than these new ones. Perhaps I am like the old man who didn't think the toys of the present day so good as those of his boyhood.'

'Tastes change, you know.'

'But all the modern ballads are about despairing, dismal lovers, or angelic children, or impossible sailors.'

'What were they about formerly?' asked Frances.

Mrs Melville looked nonplussed.

'I scarcely remember,' she said; 'but they were very pretty and moving. Different, I think, to the present ones.'

Frances laughed.

'I suspect they were much the same. They go round and round in the same circle. Every now and then one gets outside, and becomes a great song, but only now and then.'

'Well, you know best. Perhaps I was in love with some one when they used to move me so.'

Mrs Melville sighed a little regretful sigh.

'Perhaps when that time comes for me the modern ones may have a like effect. I will wait and see.'

'Mr Bouchier,' said a servant, opening the door.

He entered, looking very handsome and glad. Frances welcomed him, and introduced him to Mrs Melville, who was gracious to the young man. He stayed some half hour chatting pleasantly, then took his leave.

'I suppose,' said Frances, 'you don't know a young man, a few years older than you, I should think, named Manders—George Manders.'

He shook his head.

'I know lots of men, but no one of that name.'

'Would you mind asking some of your friends the question?'

'Not at all,' he said, eager to be of any service to her. 'What is he? What is he like?'

She gave him a minute description of the man. People can very seldom identify those they know by description, so Allan was none the wiser.

‘He must be a good-looking fellow from your picture of him,’ he said, feeling rather ill at ease.

‘Yes, he is handsome—in his way. I have lost sight of him for years, and am anxious to see him again.’

‘An old friend, then?’

‘Yes, a very old friend.’

He asked the question as if so much depended upon it that she could not help blushing as she answered it. Was the blush for him or for Manders? Allan would have felt much more comfortable had he known.

‘I will “ask about,” as they say in the West, and let you know,’ he said, bidding her adieu.

‘Good morning, Mr Bouchier,’ said Mrs Melville. ‘I am glad to have seen you. I knew your father. I danced with him years ago at a county ball, and met him several times afterwards at a friend’s. I wonder if he has changed as much as I have.’

‘He has changed a great deal,’ said Allan rather sadly. ‘Sometimes I fear he is breaking up altogether.’

He was glad to find that Mrs Melville knew his father. He fancied she was nearly related to Frances, and it was pleasant to find that the girl’s connections were of his own station in life. Not that it made any difference to him; but by-and-bye, if things went right, he would have to tell his father and mother of the happiness he had won.

‘I like that young man,’ said Mrs Melville, after his departure. ‘He means well, my dear. He is good and honest, and by no means a fool. He is the eldest son, and Redhills is a fine property.’

‘So much the better for him,’ said Frances.

‘Yes. There is no position so pleasant as a country gentleman’s. His father was member for the county; very likely it will be his turn some day.’

Frances said nothing.

‘Philip Bouchier was a handsome young man—not so handsome as his son, though. He was not much liked then; he was proud, and people whispered funny tales about him. Then he reformed and settled down. There was a lawsuit about the estate some long time ago.’

‘Did that make him settle down?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Mrs Melville, not noticing the absurdity of the question. ‘Perhaps it did. Lawsuits are great trials—all my husband’s money went in one.’



Mrs Melville, during Allan's visit, had seen what Frances had not seen, or pretended she had not seen. There were little signs, tokens, ways of speech which revealed much of the game to an experienced looker-on. With the keen interest she felt in the girl, nothing would have pleased Mrs Melville more than to have seen her married to a suitable person, and Allan seemed to fulfil every requirement. With her strange ideas of the stage, it never entered into her head to doubt but what Frances, even at the outset of her promising career, would, without hesitation, resign all the honours which she might expect were waiting for her, in order to become the wife of a gentleman who would hold such a good position in the county of Westshire as Allan when he became Bouchier of Redhills. The opposition, she feared, would come from his family. Naturally, they would object to his taking an actress for his wife, although she could not help thinking, in spite of her prejudices and the exalted value she placed upon county aristocracy, that Frances would be an acquisition to any family she entered. So the kindly old match-maker hoped the young fellow would call again, and trusted that in time her charge would feel as much moved by the modern love songs as she had been by the old ones in the days of her first attachment.

Oh, yes, he called again and again—very often in fact. He called with varying success, as sometimes he found the ladies alone, sometimes with many visitors; for *Mdlle. Francesca's* circle of acquaintance was rapidly enlarging. He met men he knew there, some one or two, the very sight of whom in that little drawing-room made him grind his teeth with rage. Yet he could not blame her. According to the customs of society, they might have called on his mother or his sisters; and, moreover, Mrs Melville's sheltering wing was always over her. He blessed that wing, although at times, when he was the only visitor, he wished it would flutter and bear the owner away for a short interval.

They were great friends now, Allan and Frances. On one or two happy occasions she had let him accompany her to the picture galleries or other places where something was to be seen; and after a while Mrs Melville grew very merciful, and often left them alone. He made what use he dared of his opportunities, and little by little hope grew into something like certainty. He was very happy—

he felt that the girl welcomed him as she welcomed no other, talked to him as no one else heard her talk ; that with him she was softer, sweeter, even humbler, wishing for some reason which she dared not own even to herself, to please him as a woman, not to claim his homage by right of genius. The truth was, although as yet Allan dared not venture to breathe it to himself, Frances was by no means indifferent to him.

As yet he had not ventured to ask her if she loved him. He dared not risk everything by that one question. Sooner or later he knew that the moment would come when he would be unable to keep his secret, if it were a secret, any longer ; that any day a word or an action of hers would bring the passionate avowal from his lips. The time came sooner than he expected.

One day he called at an unusually early hour for a visitor. The servant showed him into the drawing-room, and told him that Mrs Melville was not well enough to leave her room, but Mdle. Francesca would doubtless see him. He bore the news of Mrs Melville's illness with ungrateful resignation, and sat down to wait until Frances should appear.

Whether the servant forgot to announce his arrival, or whether the announcement fell upon heedless ears, will never be known—anyway, he waited alone in that little drawing-room for a time that seemed interminable. Then the door opened very quickly, and Frances entered. She did not see him at first. She walked swiftly across the room towards her writing-table, bearing herself in a manner which was so unusual off the stage, that he stood transfixed, instead of stepping forward to greet her. Her brows were bent, her cheek was flushed, her figure drawn up to its full height. She was evidently under the influence of some strong emotion ; and as she entered he noticed her hands were tearing a letter longways and crossways until it became a number of small square fragments.

Of course he had but a moment or two to remark all this. However much upset a lady may be, she is bound to notice the addition to the ordinary contents of her drawing-room of a gentleman standing six feet in his stockings. So, with a start of surprise and a forced return to a semblance of her usual manner, she turned and greeted

him. She smiled, but her eyes told of tears. Actress though she was, for once she failed in her art. It would have deceived no one, much less one who studied every look with the penetration of love.

‘Tell me what vexes you,’ he said, taking her hand. ‘Let me know if I can help you.’

‘Tell you!’ she said, in a tone of wonderment, at the same time tossing into a wastepaper basket the tiny fragments of paper which the letter was now reduced to. ‘Tell you; ah, no.’

‘Yes, me,’ he said, eagerly. ‘Are we not friends? If you have trouble, let me share it.’

‘There are troubles a woman cannot tell her friends.’

‘Yet tell me; are we not even more than friends, Frances?’

The moment had come, he knew. He was speaking in that tone which tells, more than words, how a man’s heart is moved. She made no pretence of misunderstanding him, but she disengaged the hand he again tried to take. Her eyes fell to the ground, and she was silent for a while. He waited until she spoke; then her voice was scornful, but full of passion, although the words came slowly and distinctly.

‘Shall I tell you that two men have offered me their love to-day—in clear language, written language?’

His face flushed, then grew pale.

‘Yes,’ she continued, ‘and both are rich—both count their income by thousands. One of them,’ she added, with scarcely perceptible gesture towards the torn-up letter, ‘bears one of the noblest and highest titles in the land.’

‘And what else?’ asked Allan, who knew she had more to say.

‘There is only one little thing—perhaps even you will think it strange that an actress or a singer should take it into consideration—they both happen to be married.’

There was biting scorn in the last words. Allan ground his teeth.

‘The letters might have been written by the same hand,’ she continued, ‘the wording is so similar. Is there a peculiar form in such cases? Each regretted being forced to write—each would rather have spoken; but unfortunately each found so much difficulty in finding an opportunity

of speaking to me alone. Are these the gentlemen of England, Mr Bouchier?’

What could he find to say in defence of his kind? Very little, I am afraid. He was filled with indignation, but had no one to vent it on. He knew much of the frailties of mankind, it may be he judged them lightly, but he would have utterly despised any man who could thus without a word or look of encouragement so degrade a pure true woman in her own eyes. The writers of those epistles would have fared badly had they at that moment been in Allan Bouchier’s hands. Yet out of evil cometh good. He caught her hand and drew her to him.

‘I love you,’ he exclaimed; ‘you know it. Frances, my love, come to me, take me—let me stand between you and this. Let the one who insults my wife have to face a terrible reckoning with me.’

It was over—over in a second—closer and closer he held her.

‘Tell me you love me!’ he entreated, as he saw the bright blood crimsoning her face and white neck.

He must hear her say it—not that he doubted now, knowing that the girl would have suffered no man’s arm to hold her unless her love was his.

‘Yes, I love you,’ she said, quietly, and then with a feeling of strangely blended happiness, love, shame, and safety, she laid her head on his shoulder and sobbed.

Allan comforted her as young men usually comfort their sorrowful loves. He was soon successful, and the two sat side by side, looking for and reading the future in each other’s eyes till they were bound to part.

‘I shall go down to Redhills to-morrow—no, the day after—and tell them all about it at home,’ said Allan, as he left her.

‘Yes,’ said Frances.

It seemed the most natural thing he could do. It never occurred to her that his people would not be pleased at the step he contemplated.

So Allan left the house, wondering why such bliss was reserved for him in particular, and Frances went in quest of Mrs Melville, whose ailments were not serious enough to induce her to defer the news.

‘Oh, my dear,’ said Mrs Melville, ‘I am so glad. I have been hoping it would be so ever since he first came here.’

Nothing could be better. I do congratulate you with all my heart, and, above all, I am delighted to think you will leave the stage.'

Frances opened her eyes astonished.

'Leave the stage!' she echoed.

'Of course you will. Why should the wife of a country gentleman continue on the stage? Did he not say so at once?'

Mrs Melville, in her inexperience, quite ignored everything to do with contracts, heavy penalties, etc.

'He never mentioned such a thing,' said Frances. 'Indeed, I understood the opposite.'

'My dear, naturally he took it for granted. It will be the first thing he will insist upon.'

The girl was silent a minute.

'I think not,' she said; 'I hope not.'

But she grew thoughtful, and wondered whether Mrs Melville's surmise was correct. When she met Allan the next day she determined to clear this point at once.

'You will have a wandering life with me, Allan,' she said.

'No matter; it will be a life with you—what more do I want?'

'We shall go almost over the world together. France, Italy, Germany, America—who knows where my profession will take me?'

'You will not give it up, then?'

It was not an entreaty, simply a question.

'I cannot for a long, long time. Could you, with fame and fortune to make? Are you rich, Allan? I care so little whether you are rich or poor that I can ask.'

He kissed her, and quite believed her.

'I am fairly well off now,' he said; 'and, of course, I shall be rich some day—but may that day be a long one, as it means my father's death.'

'You will take me as I am, Allan—not asking me to give up my career?'

He held both her hands, and looked passionately into her face.

'Love me, and be my wife,' he said; 'I ask nothing else. My life shall be shaped by yours—it must be a blessed one. Perhaps the time may come when you will grow tired of triumphs—tired of all save my love—then we will settle

down into private life like an ordinary couple. Till then let us say no more about it.'

He was promising a great deal—more than he dreamed of. It was rash; but who would not be rash and promise everything when such eloquent eyes were ready to thank him—such lips willing to reward him?

'Ah, he says so now, my dear,' remarked Mrs Melville, ominously but not unkindly. 'But wait and see. Every gentleman likes to have his wife all to himself, not share her with the public—that is, unless he means to live on her earnings, which Allan does not. Wait and see; but when the time comes take my advice and do as he asks you.'

The next day Allan went home. He left London feeling, or persuading himself he felt, no fear as to the result of his interview with his father and mother. Why should he? He was going to give them the most beautiful, sweetest daughter in the world. If she followed a profession against which some vulgar prejudice still lingered, she was at the top of the tree in it, and her name was above reproach. Still, as he came mile by mile nearer to his destination his sentiments were less sanguine. Difficulties began to crop up, and he saw objections forming with fearful rapidity. However, in spite of all that might arise, there was but one thing to think of. He loved her passionately, and he was pledged to marry her—marry her at once. With or without his parents' consent, on his return to town he would settle the very day. This was his frame of mind when he drove up to Redhills.

His advent was a welcome one to his father and mother. He thought the former looking rather better, and was glad to think so, knowing his impending revelation would be an agitating one. It took place after dinner, when father and son were alone at the table. Allan plunged headlong into the matter.

'I came down to tell you I am thinking of getting married—soon,' he said.

'I fancied you had something to tell me; your manner has been so nervous. I was afraid you were in debt; but this is better news.'

'Yes, you have been telling me for some time I ought to marry; so I take your advice.'

'Tell me who it is, Allan, although I have no fear as to the suitability of your choice.'

He told him without excuse—without even stooping to assure his father that Frances was so far beyond any possible shadow which, rightly or wrongly, is supposed by some to be cast by the stage. He spoke so firmly, so confidently, and as one so grateful for the happiness he had won, that Mr Bouchier, knowing his son's disposition, was compelled to feel that for good or for ill the thing was settled; that opposition from him, although lamented, would be disregarded. The news was grievous news to him, but he heard all that Allan had to say without comment or betraying how it affected him. He was disappointed, but somehow of late years he had given up expecting to get any more gratification from his life.'

'I suppose, Allan,' he said, as his son ceased speaking, and looked for his reply, 'that you mean to please yourself in this matter whether I consent or not?'

Allan made no reply.

'Your mother and I are asked to accept as a daughter a girl you saw a few months ago for the first time—a public singer.'

'See her, and you will not wonder at me,' said Allan.

'It is no use my commanding or entreating, I conclude.'

'I am afraid—I mean I hope not.'

'Then I don't see what more I can say. I cannot prevent; you cannot expect me to consent. As to my future action, I must be guided by circumstances.'

'Circumstances I have no fear about, sir.'

'That's as may be—anyway you will be able to live on your wife's earnings, I suppose.'

The son flushed. 'You wound deeply, father,' he said. 'I love her—more I cannot say.'

'I did not mean to wound you. You are my eldest son—I care for no one as I care for you.' There was deep affection in his voice; so much that Allan held out his hand and grasped his father's.

'Go and tell your mother,' said Mr Bouchier; 'leave me to think.'

Allan obeyed. He was not dissatisfied with the result of his confession. He could scarcely hope his father would at once agree to his wishes. With his mother he expected a far easier task.

In this he was mistaken. She was shocked at what she called his infatuation, scandalised at the thought of a

daughter-in-law who sang for money, indeed wanted to pooh-pooh the affair as a boy's folly. Allan had great work to restrain himself. Mother and son were nearly on the brink of a serious quarrel. It was only evaded by the mutual agreement that Mr Bouchier was the right person to decide the matter.

'And he will never, never, countenance such an outrageous thing, Allan,' said Mrs Bouchier.

Yet he did. To Allan's surprise, he announced his intention of returning with him to town. He went to his hotel, and spent the next day making delicate inquiries. He had many friends who knew everything about every one. He learned all that the world knew concerning Mdlle. Francesca, and from some to whom he entrusted the true reason for his inquisition he found that his son should be an object of envy, not of blame. From old Lord Keynsham for instance.

'Begad! Bouchier,' he said, 'your boy may think himself lucky. That girl might marry any man in England she chose. I wish she'd take a fancy to Willsbridge. In ten years she'd have sung all the mortgages off the property. I'll lend them one of my places for their honeymoon. You go and see her, Bouchier; the very sight of such a fine woman will do you good.'

He did go and see her—next day. It was by his own request. Frances received him gladly, naturally, without embarrassment. Then he went back home and told his wife that he should offer no opposition to Allan's marriage. His word was law with Mrs Bouchier, so the matter was at an end.

He used exactly the same words to Allan, who thanked him, but added he feared none when his father and Frances once met.

'By-the-bye, Allan,' he said, as they parted, 'what is her right name?'

'Not unlike our own—Boucher.' His father shuddered. It was an ominous name. He looked upon it as a pure coincidence. Boucher is not uncommon.

'She is English, I suppose?'

'Yes,' replied Allan, who always considered her so. He fancied his father had a prejudice against Americans, and saw no reason for awaking it.

'Who are her connections?'



‘She has no relatives—she is an orphan.’

All the better, thought his father, and there the matter ended.

How little Frances thought whose blood was on the hand of the man she was both pleased and proud to welcome—Allan’s father!

Why was Philip Bouchier, a man, proud in some of the worse senses of the word, so easily induced to give his consent or withhold his opposition to his son’s marriage with Edle. Francesca, the singer? To know why, you must look into the man’s secret thoughts: then you will perhaps understand. To begin with, he was passionately fond of his children, and the fear that was gnawing at his heart, day by day sapping his health, was that with the knowledge possessed by Manders, the hour might come when he might have to stand before his children—not, perhaps, a convicted but a proven murderer. The sword might fall at any moment—the eyes of those who, if they feared, yet loved and respected him, might turn from him in horror and grief—their lives even as his would be blighted by the crime. At any cost he would keep his children’s love as long as he could. If Allan some day should mutely accuse and blame him, it should not be in his power to say he had thrown other obstacles in the way of what he had determined was his happiness in life. He knew that Allan would walk in his own path—so be it. He had chosen, and he might be right in his choice—but right or wrong, father and son should be friends till the dreaded hour came.

Allan and Frances were married in a few weeks’ time—married so quietly that not half-a-dozen people knew it. So well was the secret kept that when it became public property it was almost too long past an event for the journals of the day to trouble much about. They feared to retail stale news; and fresh-culled gossip is the life of a society paper.

They were very, very happy. Nevertheless a private gentleman who marries a *prima donna* must indeed be a sanguine man if he thinks that his life is to be quite free from annoyance and trouble.

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CHAPTER XIV

INNUENDOES

MR and Mrs Digby Bouchier lived at Shepherd's Bush in a house even smaller than was rendered necessary by the pitiful income, as Digby called it, which his cleverness had wrung from Philip Bouchier. He did not object to this, as he had no wish to encourage expenditure in the home direction, and the smaller the house, the lighter the cost of his establishment, so much the more money was left for him to enjoy and spend in a variety of ways apart from his home. Every quarter-day, as promised, a sum of money was paid to Josephine's credit, which by her husband's command she at once transferred by cheque to him ; or all of it that was left after paying tradesmen's bills and any other amounts due. On this point she was firm, and although Digby would have liked to have allowed all the bills to run until they grew tired of running, and eventually staggered up to Mr Bouchier as their natural goal, Josephine, in spite of threats, persisted in cutting their career short every three months ; so that the household at Shepherd's Bush was conducted on a principle of solvency. There had in the course of the last two years been many other amounts paid direct by Mr Bouchier to his son-in-law, but of these Josephine knew little or nothing.

It was between eleven and twelve in the morning, Digby, unshorn and untidy, in slippers and an old dressing-gown, was trying to eat his breakfast. His head was aching from the effects of dissipation over-night, and he was looking back with regret upon the days when no amount of smoking, drinking, or late hours interfered to any appreciable extent with his appetite. Not being successful in the eating line, he unlocked a spirit case, and filled a small glass with brandy. Tossing this off, he refilled the glass, and placing it beside him, lit a cigar and smoked, now and then knocking the ashes on to the plate which held his half-consumed breakfast. Presently Josephine entered, and as he neither changed his attitude nor occupation, we may presume there was nothing uncommon in them. Certainly there was little of the noble heroic element left about this untidy, dissi-

pated-looking man, smoking over his breakfast-table, and drinking raw spirits at noontide.

However strained relations may be between husband and wife, so long as they live under the same roof, and a quarrel is not absolutely raging between them, they must see something of one another, and interchange remarks. Josephine never quarrelled with her husband ; she did not even go out of her way to avoid him. She simply ceased to care for him or trouble as to what he did or where he went. She was a brave little woman, and held him in too much contempt to fear him. Of a morning, when he went out, she asked him whether he intended to dine at home or not. If he expressed his intention of returning to dinner, she provided it, and partook of it in his company. If not, she went about her own affairs. When, as on several occasions, he returned home the worse for brandy, she left him and retired to her bedroom until the next morning ; and once when he made his appearance in a stage of drunkenness, which may be called an amorous stage, a condition in which enough sobriety was present to make him realise the fact that she was still a very charming little girl, and, moreover, his wife, she made it clear to his spirit-dazed eyes that a hand laid upon her with familiarity would produce exactly the same consequences and be less acceptable than a blow ; that is, she would leave the house at once. She looked so resolute and determined that her husband since then had not ventured either to caress or strike her, although at times he felt urged to do both.

Josephine's hero had vanished, and in its place stood a crafty, cowardly, vicious adventurer.

Long after she had seen broad glimpses of his true nature, he tried to keep up the deception as to his title to Redhills. It was only when she told him that nothing would please her better than to see the claim openly asserted and settled for ever, that his assertion ceased to carry weight with her ; and when convinced that even this was an untruth on his part, every vestige of lingering love left her heart. Henceforth let them be acquaintances, lodgers under the same roof—nothing more.

'Are there no letters this morning ?' asked Digby, as she entered the room.

'I had one from my mother. There was no other.'

'Old boy and girl pretty brisk ?' asked Digby.

He was fond of speaking in this disrespectful way of her parents. He fancied it annoyed her. If so, she did not show it.

‘They are much the same as usual. Papa, perhaps, a little better.’

‘Any more news?’

‘Nothing to interest you—except that Allan is going to be married.’

‘That is most interesting to me. I hope he is going to marry money. He may want it some day. He has very few claims on my consideration.’

She paid no heed to the hint—the imposture was too old by now.

‘He is going to make an unsuitable match also.’

She could not help that ‘also.’

He laughed his most unpleasant laugh.

‘I can only hope he will be as happy as I am. What’s the girl’s name?’

‘She is Mdlle. Francesca, the new singer.’

Digby dropped his lighted cigar and stared at his wife with a bewildered look. That look on his face was the only true one she had seen there for a long time.

‘Mdlle. who!’ he cried.

‘Francesca. You have heard of her. Fine voices seem to have an attraction for our family.’

Certainly, Josephine was not afraid of her husband.

He said nothing, but, resuming his cigar, thought as intently as his aching head would allow him to think; and as Josephine, who was wondering at the surprise he had displayed, watched him, she saw a wicked smile—half malice, half triumph—flit over his face several times. The smile well expressed his thoughts. This marriage must be to his advantage. He hated Allan Bouchier. Doubtless it is pleasant for a bad man to hold his enemy’s happiness in his hand; to be able to bid it vanish whenever he chose to speak the word. It was a new combination, after his own heart. Allan’s marriage with his cousin would certainly confirm him in the possession of Redhills: but when he succeeded to his inheritance, what would he be willing to pay Digby to conceal the fact that his father was the murderer of his wife’s father? He was shrewd enough to comprehend that Allan would love Frances with a great passion. Even he himself, he honestly believed, could have

done that—not for a week, as he had loved his pretty wife, but for ever. It was the best news he had heard for a long while. The only danger to be guarded against was a premature disclosure. He must keep the more carefully out of Mrs Allan Bouchier's way, and it would be well to keep Josephine away from her. They were all in his power now!

He was so exultant that his wife saw it and feared. What did it mean? She did not, however, condescend to inquire.

'So Allan the grand is going to marry the divine Francesca,' he said. 'May they be happy all the days of their lives. She is a charming creature.'

The manner of his speech startled Josephine.

'Do you know her?' she asked.

'I know at least something about her.'

The tone, the accent, the stress on the words were those which, when used in club-rooms or other centres of gossip, cast an imputation on a woman's character without absolutely revealing anything. Josephine was much exercised by them. We may easily suppose that Mrs Bouchier's letter was not expressive of the writer's entire satisfaction at the pending alliance; indeed, Josephine knew from the phraseology employed that her mother heartily disapproved of it—nay, more, feared for the results. It was certainly no point in favour of Allan's chosen one that Digby knew anything about her. Josephine loved her brother, and would have done much to save him from such a sorry fate as her own. She had learnt the meaning of repenting at leisure.

'Tell me all you know about her,' she said, sharply.

Digby looked at her with a mocking light in his eyes.

'My dear, I could not think of interfering with the plans of any member of your family, much less with those of Allan, who is old enough to take care of himself.'

'Have you anything to say against her?'

'Nothing whatever. I never disparage a beautiful woman. When she is Allan's wife I suppose you must go and visit, but until then there is no necessity for it.'

He rose and left the room, and shortly afterwards went out.

His words had done their work—so well that, after

considering them and looking at them in every possible light, Josephine went off in search of Allan.

She called twice at his chambers without finding him there. The third time she was successful. He was very glad to see her, and guessed she had heard the news.

‘Come to congratulate me, Finey?’ he asked, kissing her.

She was under some disadvantage in offering advice to her elder brother. He had always regarded her as the frivolous member of the family, and her ill-advised match had not enhanced his opinion of her sagacity. But she went boldly to work to save him.

‘Oh, Allan!’ she said, ‘think before you marry this girl. They tell me she is beautiful; but don’t be rash. Think of me and my husband!’

He was not angry. The comparison between her husband and Frances was too absurd to be looked at from any save a ludicrous point of view. He only laughed.

‘Don’t laugh, Allan,’ she pleaded; ‘I am in earnest. When I tell you that my husband says he knows a great deal about her, you will understand my anxiety. Don’t be cross, dear.’

Cross, no—but he was angry. It was no laughing matter now.

‘Josephine, tell me word for word what your husband said.’

He looked very stern and terrible as he towered above the fair, pretty little girl.

‘He said—he said he knew something about her.’

As she spoke she realised the weakness of her case. How could she reproduce the accent and the sting of his words.

‘It was not so much what he said, but what he implied.’

‘Your husband is a mean hound, Josephine. He must be, or he would never have cajoled a child, like you were then, into a secret marriage, and lived ever since on your money. He dislikes me—I dislike him; this is his spite.’

She dare not tell him that Digby had advised her not to visit Frances; his wrath, she felt sure, would be too terrible.

‘See what I have done with my life,’ she urged. ‘Allan, do pause and consider.’

She looked very childish and pretty, and the tears were in her eyes. He could not be angry with her; and, besides she had not seen Frances.

‘Look here, Finey,’ he said, ‘I am going now to call on Frances—come with me. You will understand everything after you have seen her.’

She was curious as any woman would be, yet she shrank from going. She could in no wise lend her countenance to the marriage of her brother with a woman concerning whom her husband had stated he knew something.

‘Not now, Allan,’ she said; ‘after you are married, perhaps—that is, if you are resolved to marry.’

‘As you like,’ he said, coldly; ‘but don’t forget that a man treasures up a slight of this kind, even when a sister confers it.’

‘Oh, Allan!’ she cried, weeping, ‘don’t you of all people turn against me—my life is not a very happy one.’

He said no more, kissed her, put her into a cab, and sent her home; but he felt, as he drove to St John’s Road, that one of the greatest pleasures life could give would be to wring Digby Bouchier’s neck.

To him Digby was an impostor. After Josephine’s marriage, and when he had learnt how the man had been admitted to his father’s house, he had at once jumped at the conclusion that something startling, and making a vast difference to his own prospects in life, would result from the sudden appearance and recognition of this strange cousin. He had asked his father boldly for an explanation, and Mr Bouchier had been obliged to admit that he had been frightened and deceived by a specious tale and concocted evidence, that at one time he had trembled lest the estate should be torn from him. He had now found out the imposture, but not before the adventurer had married his favourite daughter. It never entered Allan’s head that Digby was not the representative of the bastard branch. He was, he thought, simply a clever scoundrel, who had traded on his knowledge of the family history, and by persuading Mr Bouchier of his legitimacy, had forced his way into the family circle with such direful results. It was not a pleasant history to recount, so no wonder Allan simply told Frances that his sister had married his cousin, and the cousin had turned out a rascal. There was no chance of any intimacy springing up between them, so there was no need to say more.

Josephine called on Allan’s wife after her marriage. She was determined not to like her, and partially succeeded in

keeping her resolve. Her manner was somewhat constrained, and her politeness forced. Frances saw it, and read clearly her disapproval of the marriage. She was a far prouder and more sensitive woman than her visitor; but her heart was kindly disposed to a sister of her husband's, whose life was such an utter wreck, so she said nothing about the matter to Allan.

'You would like me to call on your sister some day?' she asked him.

'No; I would much rather not. I would rather you never entered her husband's house. Make poor little Josephine welcome here whenever she comes, and explain to her that I do not wish you to call. She will understand perfectly why it is.'

'Very well,' said Frances.

'You know nothing of her husband, I suppose?' said Allan

'How should I; why do you ask?'

'Josephine fancied he hinted at having met you somewhere.'

She shook her head.

'I knew no one named Bouchier until I knew you.'

Bouchier sounds such a different word to Boucher that even the name of Digby being coupled with it awoke no associations in her mind. Perhaps she had forgotten; perhaps never heard the Christian name of that brief-lived infant brother whom she had never seen.

So it was, that although Frances and George Manders were now so closely connected by marriage they never came in contact. He was in no hurry to meet her. As soon as Mr Bouchier left the world he would have a chat with Allan. He fancied Mr Bouchier was not destined to live long. He knew what his true complaint was, and from time to time jogged it on by demands of money and threats. He could wait a while and see. If Philip Bouchier's health improved it was to him the true position of Allan's wife must be told; with him the bargain must be made — perhaps a supplementary one with Allan. He would make no mistake this time. A large sum down, and a freer, merrier life in the new world. He was getting tired of London. He would take care not to be too clever this time.

Josephine, chiefly at Allan's request, came several times



to his house ; but no affection sprang up between the sisters-in-law. Digby's words and insinuations were always coming back to Josephine. His manner had persuaded her that for once he was not lying. His astonishment had been too natural to be counterfeited. Although she was compelled to own that Frances' beauty was enough to absolve Allan from the charge of rashness ; although she could not find in thought, word, or deed anything to object to, the feeling that the match was an unsuitable one for her brother could not be got rid of. However, she kept her fears to herself, and in her letters to her mother and Mabel said nothing that was not favourable to her new sister-in-law.

Had Digby chosen to tell her any more she would not have listened. She was too proud to permit him to insinuate anything to the detriment of the girl who was now her brother's wife. It was not likely, therefore, that she would in any way approach the subject again. On his side Digby said no more. His ambiguous words had done all he needed in preventing his wife and Frances from becoming friends and allies, and so lessened the danger of a premature revelation.

Allan had now been married some two months, and was beginning to realise all the advantages and some of the disadvantages of being the husband of such a famous woman as Mdle. Francesca. As it is the fate of such a very small number of men to marry a *prima donna*, I shall be doing little harm, or be likely to change plans of life, by enumerating some of the disadvantages. If the words convey a warning, that warning will concern so few that they are not worth considering. Any way, it is an undoubted fact that few gentlemen of position have married distinguished singers who still keep to the boards without eventually regretting it. A marquess may be a bad man, but the interference of a melodious pastrycook with his domestic arrangements must be a trying affair. Yet Allan can scarcely be blamed if he refused to be alarmed by the misfortunes which had happened to other men whose example he was following. Was not Frances different from and better than any other woman in the world ?

So they were married, as related, in the quietest manner possible. Mr Trenfield gave the bride away. Mrs Trenfield and Mrs Melville were in the church, also Herr

Kaulitz, who was let into the secret, and disapproved altogether of the proceedings. To his mind for the next three or four years Frances should have thought about nothing but her art. Her love should only be the simulated passion for the tenor hero of the particular opera she sang in. She should conquer in every great city in the world before she thought of encumbering herself with a husband. This done, she might, if she wished to do so, make a brilliant match—marry a title, and in a blaze of glory and success leave the stage, if she thought fit. But to marry an ordinary country gentleman like Allan; to go over the world with a husband following her everywhere—it was monstrous! He did not dislike the young man; indeed, he was disposed to view him with favour. He was handsome, clever, kind, and devoted to Frances. He did not blame Allan—any one would wish to marry such a girl. It was Frances he blamed.

‘Ach! zhe is but a voman,’ he said disconsolately. ‘I thought zhe vas zomething more.’

He hit the bolt exactly. She was but a woman. She loved Allan, and so she married him.

And why not? She had no one save herself to consult. No one who had a right to say a word, unless it were the astute manager, who had bound her to himself for three years. This gentleman was immensely disgusted when she deigned to inform him of her intentions. He remonstrated and prophesied all manner of evil, but his words were of no avail. He had no wish to interfere with her happiness, but he did not like dealings with married *prime donne*. He had some bitter experiences of husbands, who had been even more exacting in the matter of contracts than the wives. Francesca was his for three years, but he looked on further than that. He even remonstrated with Allan; not that he hoped to gain anything by that, but it relieved his mind.

‘My dear fellow,’ he said—being an important personage in the world, and moving in good society, he had a right to speak familiarly—‘my dear fellow, it’s an awful nuisance for me. Just when I want something of importance done she’ll be having children, and all that sort of thing. I’d give five thousand pounds to stop this marriage.’

The remark was not a refined one, and Allan replied shortly, suggesting people should mind their own business. The manager opened his eyes.

‘My own business! If it isn’t my own business, I don’t know what is. It’s your pleasure, and, I daresay, her pleasure; but it’s my business, and an infernal nuisance it is. I wish you’d stopped down in Westshire, and married some rich old squire or banker’s daughter, as you ought to have done.’

‘Any way, that’s my concern, not yours,’ said Allan.

The manager said no more, but his words had given Allan a foretaste of how Frances’ adherence to the stage might interfere with their domestic life. Yet, if he was denied some of the ordinary happiness a man expects to gain by marriage with the girl he loves, would he not, on the other hand, be blessed above common mortals in everything else? Besides, they were both young; perhaps, in five or in ten years’ time their true wedded life would begin.

The very quiet marriage was not exactly pleasing to him. Although he hated parade and display, it seemed a hole-and-corner sort of a way of giving himself to the girl he loved. Frances had stipulated for this privacy—secrecy even. Her reason was to avoid being made the subject of tittle-tattle paragraphs in the newspapers. After the ceremony was over there was to be no concealment, although there need be no announcement, of the event. A larger and better house in St John’s Road had been taken; a furnished one, of course, for she was not sure what her movements might be at the end of the season. It might be decided she should make a professional tour through England, or she might go abroad—most likely the latter. It would have been as foolish for the newly married people to furnish a house, as for an officer, daily expecting to be called on foreign service, to do so. Yet a furnished house is seldom the home to which a man likes to bring his bride. All young people who can do so prefer beginning house-keeping surrounded by chairs and tables of their own choice, bought, it may be, with their own money, saved up for that laudable purpose.

Their honeymoon, too—that sacred interval during which bride and bridegroom withdraw themselves entirely from the cares and, as they fondly hope, from the curiosity of the world, was an unsatisfactory affair regarded in a conventional light. From the church they went to Bournemouth for three days. On the fourth day Middle. Francesca

was announced to sing in opera. Perhaps in the whole of her professional career she was never so much tempted to break faith or to plead indisposition as on that occasion. But she was too honest to do either; so back to London they went, and Allan sat in his stall and heard his wife sing, and no doubt, sing at him the passionate words of love which were rightly due to the sentimental tenor whose life, for the purposes of the play, was such an unhappy one.

Then away they went again for two days—then back again for a concert at the Hall of Flowers—away again and back again as required. Altogether, their honeymoon was a disjointed, fragmentary, scrambling, hand-to-mouth affair, with little or none of those elements of calm repose and freedom from intrusion which are supposed to be needful to make this rare occurrence in any one person's life properly felicitous.

Yet they were supremely happy, and returned to London, resolved to continue their apology for a honeymoon as best they could at home. So for some week or two the door of the new house was kept closed against all visitors save those whom Mdlle. Francesca was bound to see and confer with.

Mrs Melville had everything prepared, and welcomed them heartily. She was still to remain with them. Frances had grown very fond of her; Allan liked the good lady. The low estimate she formed of the stage in general was no drawback as far as he was concerned; especially as she separated Frances from anything like censure. Besides, there must be some one to look after the house. A *prima donna*, however natural and womanly she may be off the stage, can scarcely be expected to order the dinners, manage the servants, see that the proverbial shirt buttons are in their places, or, in fact, think of any of the details of house-keeping. All these things Mrs Melville did, and did well, so that Allan, as far as creature comforts went, had a very pleasant home.

In one way too pleasant, he thought. It was a large, well-furnished house, so the rent was proportionately high. Mdlle. Francesca was making a large income. The manager's terms had been liberal, and in consideration of her undoubted success even these had been altered in her favour. She saw no necessity for stint. She liked plenty of servants, so there were plenty. A carriage was now indispensable. In fact, the establishment was conducted in

a liberal way. Allan had a fair income, quite independent of his father, but he saw from the first it would not suffice to live in this manner. He told Frances so. She laughed at him.

‘You silly boy,’ she said, ‘I am making lots and lots of money, and shall make more. You shall have it all if you like, and pay for everything.’

This was what he wanted, to pay for everything; but not with his wife’s money. He would have wished that every farthing she earned might be kept and eventually settled upon her. He told her so, and she readily guessed his meaning. He was prouder than she thought.

She persuaded him, but not without difficulty. Was not everything that was his hers, and *vice versa*? What matter from which side the money came? Let them use it, and live as they listed. Some day it might be the other way; he would have to find everything for both. These last words raised such delicious visions that he could do no more than kiss her, tell her she was the sweetest woman in the world, that he loved her, and it must be as she chose. Nevertheless, he wished it could have been different.

Mdlle. Francesca could not keep the door of her house shut for ever, so in a short time it was opened to all who had a right to enter it. It was now getting pretty well known that she was married, and Allan, whenever he went to the haunts of men, was congratulated upon his success. He was an object of great interest to all his friends during those days. Pierrepont prided himself that he had predicted the event all along.

‘Do you ever get your wife all to yourself?’ he asked.

‘Of course I do.’

‘I can’t fancy Francesca Mrs Allan Bouchier. She still goes on singing, I hear.’

‘For a while, at least.’

‘Well, old fellow, I hope you’ll be happy; but you’ll find it a hardish life sometimes, I expect. It’s a regular upheaval of family tradition, isn’t it?’

‘Very much so; but we’re both happy, and that’s all I want.’

‘Just so. I shall call if you will allow me.’

‘Do; we shall always be glad to see you.’

So Pierrepont called, and many other people called. Every one in London seemed to want to make the acquaint-

ance of *Mdlle. Francesca*, as she was universally designated. Great people wanted her to come to their houses. Invitations poured in. Many were refused—many were accepted. With some of them it was an impossibility to do else but accept; so that, leaving her professional duties out of the question, *Frances* found her hours fully occupied. *Allan* accompanied her when and where he could. It was fortunate for the young man that he was known in society, but it was not without some feeling of annoyance that he found his status changed. He was not *Mr Bouchier*, but *Mdlle. Francesca's* husband. Men always object to a distinction of this sort.

That she should be triumphant, sought after, and honoured, pleased him—it seemed but her due. But, oh! if it could only have been as his wife that people asked her to their houses. It was from no selfishness that he wished he had been the notable one. There was nothing he could do for her. Her position in the world was her own. A man likes to think his wife is a more important personage for having married him; *Allan* was entirely debarred from this pleasant sentiment. The very money they lived upon, or the greater part of it, came from her. What had he given her? What could he give her? Nothing but love, and this she returned in full, so that there was no obligation on that tender score.

There were some invitations to *Mdlle. Francesca* which, as they emanated from *Royalty*, were commands. Several of the *Royal* personages in *England* are extremely musical. So, once or twice, *Mdlle. Francesca* was invited to display her talents for their benefit. It was flattering; but the feeling that his wife was at anybody's beck and call, whoever that body may be, jarred upon the husband. But *Frances* was pleased, and he was bound to appear so.

The weeks and months went by, and he found, as *Mrs Melville* had predicted, that it was not such a little thing after all, sharing his wife with the public.

Did he regret? Never; not for one moment. When he had her to himself she was everything he had fancied she would be—simple, kind, and loving as himself. But how little he really saw of her! Regret, no—emphatically no! Only at times he wished things had been different. Happy as they were, they might be so much happier in a private capacity. So he drew charming pictures of *Frances* the

mistress at Redhills, beloved and admired by all, and his very own every hour of his life—Mrs Allan Bouchier; not Mdle. Francesca, with rehearsals, study, and a hundred and one other things to interfere with the course of true love.

He concealed all these feelings from Frances. He never as much as hinted at such a thing as her retirement from the stage. A promise given by Allan was always a promise. The only person who suspected—and suspected because she sympathised with him—was Mrs Melville. She was a quick-sighted woman, and noticed his moodiness and restlessness at times when his wife was absent. She saw, too, that his delight at her triumphs was only expressed to her; that he assumed the appearance of it for her sake; but did not really feel such a keen interest in the matter. She guessed that the day Francesca began to wane in public favour would be the dawn of new and greater happiness to Allan. Mrs Melville, although she understood him and sympathised, was frightened. If it were so now what would it be in some years time.

‘There is always one comfort,’ she said, ‘the public may be his rival, but never any particular member of it. That would be too terrible; but with Frances it can never happen.’

All other members of Allan’s family had behaved much better to his wife than had that poor unhappy little Josephine. Mr Bouchier had begged Allan to bring her to Redhills whenever he could do so, and Mrs Bouchier, who we may presume, had made her inquiries and been satisfied, brought herself to second her husband’s request. Even Mabel, who, for important reasons, had not been to town this season, as soon as this chief and indeed only reason could be left safely alone for a day, came up with her husband and called. Now Mabel was the proudest of the Bouchiers, and it was this very pride which would not permit her to leave Allan’s wife unnoticed. So she came up to do a duty, and found it a pleasure. There must have been some points very much in unison in the two girls’ characters—indeed, when you saw them together they were not unlike in person. If the meeting was for a moment awkward, it was but for a moment: then they were friends, or in a fair way to become so. Mrs Messiter went away

with a conditional promise that Allan should bring his wife to Shortlands.

Both visits were paid. Redhills first, Shortlands afterwards. They were of necessity short ones, and the complaint of each hostess was that Allan so monopolised his wife that no one saw much of her. Who could wonder at it? Was he not anticipating the future he dreamed of? As with Mabel, so with her mother. Naturally a loving, kindly woman, she soon yielded to Frances' sweet manner, and wished she could see more of her. At Shortlands she was also a success, and was admitted to a sister-in-law's full rights with respect to the infant heir and possibly future peer of England. Both Allan and Frances agreed those days were the very happiest they had spent since their marriage.

But Allan had his wife all to himself for another short period before the end of the season. The singer's dreaded foe, sore throat, attacked her. The most able specialist in London was summoned to repel the enemy. As the foe held out after three days' attack the clever man brought into requisition a most complicated arrangement of mirrors, called a laryngoscope, by the aid of which he succeeded in examining the mechanism of that organ which had the power of producing such divine strains. His researches must have been successful, as in a week's time *Mdlle.* Francesca sang again as well as ever. But one day when she was out the specialist called on Allan.

'Now your wife is well again, I thought I'd better call and tell you something. Don't be frightened, but I am not sure her throat is the strongest in the world. Seems absurd to say so after hearing her last night.'

He had gone from professional curiosity to hear her, as he said.

'Is there any chance of her losing her voice?' asked Allan.

He seemed so agitated at the news, that the doctor was sorry he had spoken about the matter.

'I can't say, of course. There is no mischief at present; but some day there may be.'

'And then?' asked Allan.

'Her singing, I am afraid, must come to a full stop.'

Allan was ashamed that his face would flush; he felt the speaker would misread the sign.

'Can anything be done?' he asked.



‘Nothing whatever. It is all chance. Don’t let her strain her voice more than she can help. It might last for ever abroad; it is the English high pitch which will do the harm, if there should be harm.’

‘Thank you,’ said Allan; ‘I will tell her.’

‘To be careful; yes. Not more. Why alarm her about a thing that never may occur? The very fear of it may spoil her singing. I thought you should know, that’s all.’

Allan followed his advice, and only begged his wife to be careful—to husband her resources, in fact. She was grateful for his solicitude.

‘Dear Allan,’ she said, ‘yet if I lost my gift to-morrow would you be altogether sorry?’

He held her hands but said nothing.

‘But I should grieve,’ she continued; ‘so would you also to keep me company.’

Put in this way, he could cordially agree to the proposition.

‘Your turn will come some day, Allan. A singer goes to the top of the tree and then begins to go down. When I am at the top I shall carve my name there, and perhaps leave it. Then I shall try and be as good to you as you are to me now.’

He kissed her passionately, and forgot everything except that he loved her.

Next week the public were told that arrangements had been made for *Mdlle. Francesca* to visit America at the end of the London season; but the public grief at her loss was somewhat mitigated by the assurance that she would be one of the great attractions at the London opera next year.

The house in St John’s Road was given up, and Allan followed his wife to New York.

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## CHAPTER XV

### A STREAK OF LUCK

FOR some months—the time that Allan and his wife were in America—events could hardly be said to march with the Bouchiers left in England; they simply appeared to mark

time. Philip Bouchier remained at Redhills, living a listless, weary life. An invalid with no particular complaint; one for whom doctors felt that nothing could be done as long as chloral was working against them. Let him give this up, and they would undertake to restore him to health. It was a promise a doctor might with safety make, knowing the utter impossibility of one who had drunk so deeply of the drug ever doing without it again. Besides, Mr Bouchier made no attempt to regain his liberty. He was ceasing—had perhaps ceased—to care for much in this world, except sleep and temporary forgetfulness. Chloral gave him these. He took them, and, being no fool, knew as he took them the price he would be called upon to pay for the boons. Perhaps, his greatest desire was that the full penalty should be exacted before the time came when he should see his children turning from him as a murderer. That it must come, sooner or later, had grown to be a fixed belief with him. This was the true nature of his mysterious complaint; it was against this he could not struggle. Many a time he nearly resolved to make himself safe against the event; and by day often looked ominously at the drawer which held his pistol, or at night was tempted to take such a dose of his drug that it would ensure his waking no more. It was only the fascination that knowing the very worst has for every one that prevented him.

Although every hour of his life he regretted the deed of that night, he cannot, even now, be said to have been tortured by remorse, as remorse is commonly understood. The act had been a mistake, a piece of folly, yet had been within an ace of being a complete success. Had it not been for that one mysterious witness as to whose name he was still in utter ignorance it would have been a success. The whole matter would have been his own secret, and one, he believed, he might have borne with ease. Even now the crime would benefit his children, in a worldly way, unless, as he sometimes feared, Allan, if ever he learned the whole truth, would refuse to enjoy what had been bought by blood. That Digby was a rank impostor had long ago been a matter of certainty to his mind.

For some months Mr Bouchier had not been assailed by any outside troubles. His son-in-law had been silent, and made no attempts to extort money—demands which were invariably coupled with thinly-veiled threats. Yet he was

not lulled into any false security on this account, knowing too well that whilst he or Digby lived that gentleman would cling to him as mercilessly as the Old Man of the Sea. He rather dreaded the calm as forerunning a storm.

The truth was, that for some little while Digby Bouchier had been earning, or, rather, making his living—moreover, as long as it lasted, a princely living. From his earliest youth he had been a gambler; in a small way, as a rule—in fact, the only big game he had played had been with Mr Bouchier, and this, so far, had gone entirely in his favour. It was about the time when *Mdlle. Francesca* sailed for America, and while he was waiting to make his last stroke, that Digby found an amount of monotony in his mode of life which made him sigh for some fresh excitement. He had friends or acquaintances of a certain sort, and under the auspices of one of these he was introduced to a small semi-private club—one of those dens of iniquity before which the open and above-board gambling at Monte Carlo appears innocent. There are many little establishments of this kind in London, usually devoted to the pursuit of that very lively game *baccarat*. A large percentage of men will gamble, and as those who make it their business to provide them with facilities for doing so manage to make much money in return for their assistance, no one of a speculative nature need want for opportunities of tempting Fortune.

This will be the more readily believed when it is understood that these clubs are kept open all night; and as each hour after a fixed time strikes, a fine, increasing in something like arithmetical proportion, is levied on the players, and as losers will pay anything cheerfully for the privilege of backing their bad luck, the proprietors of the establishment find no reason to be dissatisfied. It has been calculated by an authority that in nine out of ten of these little clubs the whole capital of the members must, by way of fines and expenses, in the course of three years pass into the pockets of the management.

A friend of mine—he has lost a fortune at gambling, so I suppose he knows—informs me that *baccarat* is the most certain game in the world to win money at, if—you know when to stop. As the game is so delightfully simple in its procedure, no doubt the scientific part of it is that same knowledge, when to stop. This may have come intuitively

to Digby, for night after night he won considerable sums of money. No very large amount at any particular sitting; but forty, fifty, and once or twice a hundred, and once two hundred pounds. He had no reverses of fortune worth mentioning; so in a short time he was envied by every one as an undoubted favourite of the blind goddess.

One of the most regular attendants at the club was a gay young stockbroker, who played high and merrily. He defaulted some months afterwards, and being unable to pay the six-and-eightpence, for which sum in the pound the London Stock Exchange permits its lame ducks to once more re-enter its mystic precincts, he is at the present day a billiard-marker at an hotel. One night, or rather one morning, this young fellow accompanied Digby from the club, and walked for some way with him until a belated hansom was found.

'You're an awfully lucky fellow, Bouchier,' he said enviously. 'Never seem to get hit—never.'

'Yes, I am lucky.' Digby spoke with the air of one who fancies his success is as much due to his own management as to chance. This is a common belief with winners.

'Wonder you don't have a wire-in at the markets while you're in this streak of luck. You might give me a turn, and make a pot yourself.'

Digby was not averse to making money, but he had a fear of operations in stock and shares—he did not know a great deal about them, and he fancied most people burnt their fingers, more or less, in touching them.

'Let me sell some Orinocos for you; they're bound to drop—it's a straight tip.'

'I'll think it over,' said Digby, capturing a cab.

He kept his promise, and thought it over, all the more because another young stockbroker gave him similar advice the next day—and was more certain about the coming drop than the first prophet. So Digby considered the matter, and came to a resolution very creditable to his sagacity.

Orinocos being American securities, he knew that their fluctuations would be controlled by his own countrymen. His countrymen were very smart people, and were fond of getting hold of English money. Had he been the gentleman who controlled the price of Orinocos his greatest endeavour would be to persuade the people he wished to mulct that the movement would be the reverse to that by which

he intended to profit. He was sensible enough to laugh at the supposition that his friends knew anything about the matter, and he was brave enough to get together what money he could, and laying it down by way of introduction before a stockbroker of whose solvency he had no fear, request him, not to sell, but to buy as many Orinocos as the sum deposited would allow him to do for a stranger. His heart did quail for a moment as the respectable stockbroker looked at him curiously.

‘I never give my clients advice,’ he said, ‘but I should like to clearly understand you—you mean buy?’

‘Yes, buy,’ he said, getting away as quickly as possible, for fear of changing his mind. He was very nervous, but comforted himself that he could not lose more than the sum deposited. The stockbroker would take care of that for his own sake.

Lose! Not he! The shares were bought; a great many. A week afterwards some great—well, call him financier—made what was called restitution or concessions. Up went Orinocos like a rocket, and the financier, who had loaded himself with shares, found his conscience cleared, and his pockets fuller than ever. A clear proof that honesty is the best policy.

Digby went almost off his head. He was almost startled when he was paid his gains, and quite patronised his broker, who, when handing him the amount, less commission, was moved to compliment him on his foresight. It was clear that he was a heaven-born operator. The whole thing had come to him in a moment. He saw through all the plots and counterplots of finance. As for poor old Bouchier, he might well leave him in peace. In six months he felt sure he could make such a colossal fortune that he would be able to look back in after years upon the Bouchier episode as a means of earning a living which had served his need, but which was quite beneath a man of his genius. So he haunted Capel Court all day, watched the tapes which recorded every up and down in the price of shares, smoked his cigar, drank quantities of the speculators’ one drink, champagne, and for a while thought himself the smartest fellow in the world.

For a while he was a capital client to the stockbroker, who, however, even at the risk of losing his business, took care to keep enough money in his hands to leave a good

broad margin for possible losses. He had seen many of these sanguine speculators, many ephemeral successes, and the end of each had been the same.

So it was with Digby Bouchier. After a time everything he touched went wrong ; and the day came when the civil stockbroker closed, on his own responsibility, Digby's last venture, and having kindly informed him that although the account showed, after appropriating the deposit, a small balance against his client, he need not trouble to pay it—it might go against the profit made. He should be pleased, if another deposit were made, to continue to do business, but his rule was one to which there could be no exception made.

All this happened very quickly, but not before Digby, in his struggles to regain his recent losses, had lost all he had once possessed ; had even for his last throw discounted at his bankers—with whom his transactions had, since he plunged into speculation, been large—a three months' bill for a thousand pounds, accepted by Philip Tremaine Bouchier.

He was intensely disgusted at losing his money like this, but did not feel much anxiety about the forgery. He had intended to meet or redeem the bill whenever the first successful operation enabled him to do so. The only difference was that Mr Bouchier would have to find the money for him. That, after such a long abstention, he would be able to get the amount seemed beyond a doubt. He was clever enough to understand that he had not quite got to the bottom of Stock Exchange mysteries, as he once flattered himself. So he determined to accept his defeat, get his thousand pounds as soon as possible, and take up the bill. He felt that should the bank have their suspicions aroused, matters might be made very awkward for him. Several weeks must elapse before the bill would become due, but he thought it well to get the matter settled out of hand.

The amount was larger than he had as yet asked Mr Bouchier for at one time, therefore he thought it well to open the attack through Josephine. He expected she would refuse to help him, but determined that she should pay for that refusal.

'Josephine,' he said, 'you must write to your father by the next post.'

'I wrote only yesterday,' she replied.

'Well, write again. He's always glad to hear from you.'

Tell him I must have a thousand—no, say twelve hundred pounds next week.'

'I shall do nothing of the kind,' she said, rising to leave the room.

He intercepted her.

'You do as I say, or it will be worse for every one.'

'I will not. Let me pass, if you please.'

'If you don't write I will go down and ask him myself. He is not well, I hear, and my visit may upset him; but that will be your fault.'

She paused. The thought of her husband going down to her old home to wring money out of the father who had already found him so much was horrible. The very sight of Digby, she knew, was enough to annoy Mr Bouchier beyond endurance.

'I don't see why your father should feel such a dislike to me,' continued Digby; 'and I'm sure I have a perfect right to what money I want.'

'Suppose we say nothing about rights or wrongs,' suggested Josephine, with bitter scorn in her voice.

He looked at her savagely.

'Will you send that letter?' he cried.

'I will, to save him from being troubled by you.'

'At once, mind.'

She made a gesture of assent and left him. The next post took the letter.

'MY DEAR PAPA,

'My husband says he must have £1200 next week. I write not because he requests me to do so, so much as to stop him coming to Redhills and worrying you.'

It was not quite the letter Digby wanted written, but that was nothing to his wife. Her object was to warn her father, in case Digby should go to Redhills as he threatened. She had learnt long ago that her husband was an object of hatred, sometimes she even fancied of fear, to her father. She threw the whole blame upon her own shoulders, accusing her ill-advised marriage of being the cause why Mr Bouchier could not leave Digby to shift entirely for himself.

Philip Bouchier's eyes flashed as he read Josephine's letter. He had been quite right in thinking that his son-

in-law's long silence meant evil. The end of all this must come soon. Twelve hundred pounds this week! It might be twelve thousand next year! It would be as easy to demand one sum as another—just as dangerous and difficult to refuse to pay it. Let him, then, refuse at once in a point-blank uncompromising manner, and face the worst that Digby could do. As we know, when he first yielded to the young man's demands, and introduced him to his family as their legitimate cousin, his intention was to cast him adrift as soon as he fancied the time was at hand when the tale he would attempt to tell would be scouted by every one as an absurd and malicious invention. Subsequent events had modified his plan. Digby's great stroke in marrying Josephine changed the aspect of affairs. He felt his enemy could strike him through his child—that he might make her life an utterly miserable one. Except for this, he believed the time had come when he might venture to defy his enemy; to tell him to do his worst. Allan and Mabel detested the man, and would not be likely to give credence to his tale, or stoop to consider any evidence he might lay before them. Kenneth, his youngest born, had never, so far as he knew, seen Digby. The more he thought about it the more he inclined to defiance. Even this application for money was encouraging. Let Digby do his utmost to blast his character in the eyes of the world or of his children, at least he could reap no benefit as far as money went. The moment he imparted the secret of his power to others that power was at an end. Even the support he had afforded the rascal for the last three years might be explained by his affection for his daughter. No doubt Digby's first act of open warfare would be to ill-use his wife. She could at once leave, and no one knew how glad her father would be to have her once more beneath his roof.

Yes, he would defy him. Let him come down and threaten as he chose, not one half-penny should go into his pockets. The more he thought of it the easier the task seemed. He blamed himself for having remained in this fellow's toils so long, when it was clear that a vigorous effort would free himself once and for ever. He might even turn the tables upon him, and send him to penal servitude as an impostor. Mr Bouchier having nerved himself for the final struggle, felt better than he had felt



for a long, long time. The sooner Digby came to Redhills the better.

So he wrote :

‘MY DEAREST JOSEPHINE,

‘The usual sum will be paid into your credit next quarter day. This is more than your husband has a right to expect, and certainly all I am inclined to do for him.’

Josephine handed the letter to her husband without comment. He read it, and for a moment she thought the whole torrent of his rage was to be directed upon her. But he curbed it, and in a few minutes it settled down, not to a good, honest, glowing fire, but to a corrosive, biting, hidden kind of heat like vitriol.

‘So papa declines to do anything for his affectionate son-in-law?’ He spoke slowly, with a vicious emphasis on each word. ‘Papa is a silly old man, Josephine.’

Josephine turned her head away, but said nothing.

‘He is more stupid than ever I thought him, my dear. An obstinate, arrogant, pigheaded old fool, in fact, my dear.’

His wife gathered up her work and went to the door. The words, ‘my dear,’ would have been sufficient to make her leave him, without the abuse he was showering on her father.

‘Don’t go, my darling wife ; stay and hear me complete my estimate of your papa. He is a —’

The door closed behind, but not in time to prevent her ears being reached by some blossoms of vituperative art which Digby threw after her, and perhaps directed as much towards her as towards her father. She went to her room, and, as usual, locked the door. She had never before known her husband in a mood like this. Not only did she feel that the sharpest venom was lying beneath his words, but that he meant to imply he was able to make use of her for his own ends. She was really frightened, and could do nothing except lie down and weep and bewail herself. Her only comfort was that her father’s letter did not exhibit any fear of his son-in-law.

She had cried herself nearly stupid, or nearly to sleep, when the door was rapped by some one’s knuckles. Then she heard a loud mocking voice.

'Good-bye, Josephine, my dear. I am going down to Blacktown. I shall sleep there to-night, and get over to Redhills to-morrow, the first thing. Shall I take any message for you?'

'No,' she said, shortly.

'Not even to say how well and happy you are?'

She disdained to reply. He rattled the door.

'Won't you let me in to say good-bye, my dear? We are husband and wife, you know.'

She glanced fearfully at the door, wondering if he would try and force it. She was more frightened than she liked to own; she knew he had been drinking. Then her temerity in living the life she had lived with him for the last two years or more flashed before her. As yet she had never been afraid of him; she despised, perhaps hated him, but had never feared him. Now she realised that he was a strong man, and she only a weak woman. She began to tremble.

Her fears were groundless, and she breathed more freely as she heard his retreating steps. But he came back again, and rapped the door to gain her attention.

'Finey, my darling,' she heard him say, and that pet name on his lips made her shudder, 'are you listening? Answer me or I'll break the door down.'

'I am listening,' she said, fearing the consequences of silence.

'I am going down to Redhills, my pet; and I am going to play the deuce with that old idiot, your papa.'

Then he went away altogether. It was not until long after she had both heard and seen the cab bear him off that she ventured out of her room. She was terribly frightened, not knowing what was going to happen. Whatever the true meaning of Digby's threat, she was sure he was gone to do what mischief he could do to her father.

He would not get there before the next morning, so she telegraphed at once to Redhills, that his coming might not take them by surprise. She might have spared herself the trouble. Digby, either having no wish to do such a thing, or merely out of bravado, had telegraphed on his own account, requesting, moreover, that a carriage might be sent to Brackley to meet him. Mr Bouchier, true to his newly-designed war policy, had torn his telegram to pieces, and taken no notice of the request.

‘The old fool is infernally in earnest,’ said Digby, with a black scowl, when alighting upon the Brackley platform he found no vehicle awaiting his orders.

This was going to be a grim affair—a battle royal. This was clearly shown by the fact of Mr Bouchier omitting to comply with what was simply an appeal to his courtesy—and Mr Bouchier was a courteous man. The absence of the carriage impressed Digby greatly. It seemed like a warrior who held his foe in such scorn that he would not extend the common civilities of warfare to him. He meant fighting, and no mistake. Let him fight and do his best—the more stubborn the resistance the more crushing the defeat. Nor in the hour of victory would he forget this petty slight. It rankled in his mind painfully.

But he must get to Redhills somehow. He went to the Brackley Inn and was accommodated with a dingy, dissipated old phaeton, drawn by a disreputable-looking horse. Assisted by these he arrived at what he pleasantly termed ‘his ancestral halls,’ presenting a most undignified appearance. He saw, or fancied he saw, a covert smile on the old woman’s face as she opened the lodge gate—the horse, phaeton, and driver were such a frowsy-looking lot. But, then, it matters little in what way a general reaches the battlefield, so long as he gets there in time, and with his forces in proper order.

That he was expected was evident. The old manservant, Steel, to whom he had always been an object of mistrust, conducted him, without a word, to his master’s presence. Mr Bouchier was writing a letter, and for a minute did not even look up from the paper before him. This was another little action meant to show how hard he intended fighting. Digby had not spoken with Philip Bouchier since that interview so soon after his marriage. He looked at him with some curiosity, wishing to ascertain from a close inspection how long he had to live. His feelings were those of disappointment; the excitement of the impending conflict lending to Mr Bouchier a false appearance of health and strength. He might live for years and years, so he must be the paymaster, not Allan.

‘Very fine weather, Mr Bouchier,’ said Digby, eager to commence the attack.

‘We are not here to discuss the weather. Kindly let me finish my letter.’

He finished it, and laid it aside, evincing neither hurry nor interest in his visitor's errand. Digby began to bully.

'You might have sent your carriage for me, instead of obliging me to get over here as best I could.'

'I did not ask you to come. Your presence is utterly distasteful to me. Why should I send my carriage for you?'

'You know why, well enough.' He spoke roughly and coarsely. Mr Bouchier looked at him steadily.

'It seems to me,' he said, 'your manner has greatly changed—for the worse; although I thought that impossible. You drink very hard, I hear.'

Digby grew white with rage. His enemy was taunting him.

'I did not come here to be insulted.'

'Indeed? Then what may you want?'

'I told you what I wanted. Now I want two thousand; and I'll have it before I leave you.'

'Many people want money, but can't get it,' said Mr Bouchier calmly.

'I'll have it though, and more, too, from you.'

'I think not. I am sorry you have wasted your time in coming on such a fool's errand. I told you in my letter all I intend to do; and that is only for the present.'

Then Mr Bouchier looked straight at Digby, and Digby returned his gaze. The two quite understood each other.

'Oh!' said Digby, slowly, 'that's it, is it?'

'That's it, exactly,' said Mr Bouchier.

Digby turned his eyes away, and for a minute seemed in deep thought. He was whistling softly.

'If you have anything more to say, say it. If not, go,' said Mr Bouchier curtly.

'I've lots more to say—never fear. So you won't fork out this money?'

'Not a farthing.'

'And I'm to do the worst I can? That's it, is it?'

'That's it, exactly,' replied Mr Bouchier, for the second time.

'Wonder if you know the worst I can do?'

'As far as I see, you can endeavour to spread about a cock-and-bull tale which no one will believe. The time you have kept it to yourself stops that, and your three years'

connection with my family will not add weight to your assertions.'

'Ah!' said Digby, 'you are smart.'

'You will, for the sake of wounding me, probably go to my children, and try and get them to believe I am a murderer. I don't think your word—the word of an impostor like you—will count for much. That, as far as you are concerned, is the worst you can do.'

'Seems pretty much so as you put it,' said Digby, nodding his head approvingly.

'I, on my side,' continued Mr Bouchier, 'shall at once apply for a warrant against you, for pretending you are Digby Bouchier, and obtaining money from me under that name. That will mean penal servitude.'

'But there'll be a trial, and things come out.'

'What things? How can you get them out? Even then what difference will it make to you? Unless you can prove you are Digby Bouchier, you are certain to be sent to Portland.'

'Guess you are smart,' said Digby. 'Why didn't you think of this before?'

Why not, indeed? It all seemed so simple now that Mr Bouchier was wondering the same thing.

'If what you say is law,' continued Digby, 'I'd better bolt. I'll go home and thrash Josephine a little first—it will be a satisfaction.'

'You blackguard!' cried Mr Bouchier, springing from his seat.

'Thought I'd have you there,' said the cynical villain. 'Now, suppose I go off quietly, and leave you all in peace, what will you do for me?'

Mr Bouchier's heart leapt. It seemed too good to be true. His impulse was to tell him he would do nothing for him; but it is not well to drive a foe to desperation.

'You execute a deed of separation with Josephine, write me a letter stating you are not the man you pretend to be, hand all the certificates over to me, and I will pay your passage to Australia, and send out two thousand pounds to one of the banks there, to be paid on your arrival.'

Digby chuckled. It was a sound Mr Bouchier did not like. What right had a conquered foe to chuckle?

'What do you say?' he asked sharply, fully prepared to double or even treble the sum he named.

'Oh, I have lots to say. Guess you're no end fond of your children.'

'You fool,' said Mr Bouchier, bitterly; 'it is only for their sakes that I have yielded to you one inch.'

'Ah, I like to see affection like that. There's Allan, now—a fine young fellow, although he hates me.'

'He knows you are an imposter.'

'So do you. Of course, I am not Digby Bouchier.'

'I never thought you were.'

This frankness was alarming.

'Oh, yes; I'm an impostor, and so are you, Mr Bouchier—so are most of us. But we were talking of Allan. I rather like Allan, and mean to do him a good turn.'

Mr Bouchier felt none the less startled because he was quite in the dark as to where all this was tending.

'He's a happy man, Allan is. Married to the loveliest girl in the world. I hear he worships the ground she treads on. Fonder of her even than I am of Josephine.'

His listener fancied he caught the drift of what was coming. Allan's wife was to be used for his purposes. Well, if there was anything against her, Allan must bear it—he chose and married her with his eyes open. Yet Mr Bouchier felt he should be slow to believe anything this jeering villain said in her disfavour.

'I knew Allan's wife intimately for many years, as well as I knew her father, John Boucher.'

'Her father, John Boucher!' repeated Mr Bouchier.

He was beginning to wonder if this man was the devil incarnate, come on earth to punish him.

'Yes, her father, John Boucher—the man you shot. Don't say I'm not a kind-hearted fellow. I shall be able to tell Allan that his marriage makes the estates quite safe.'

Mr Bouchier grew livid. He could not speak.

'Poor Frances has been trying to find me for four years. She knows I can tell her all about her father's death. She is most anxious to hear all about it. Till now I have kept out of her sight. As soon as she returns from America I shall renew my acquaintance with her. How delighted she will be with my news—how grateful Allan will be to the man who took John Boucher out of the way, and how happy the husband and wife will be ever afterwards. Mysteries are bad in families.'

Mr Bouchier kept on saying to himself this must be the

devil. He saw in a second, as by a flash of lightning, Allan's future happiness wrecked the moment this man met his wife; he shuddered as he thought of his son hurling reproaches at him as the destroyer of all he cared to live for. It was too terrible—too awful! This time he was utterly crushed. The end was near, but he must at any cost stave it off for a little while. Not for himself—it had gone past that—but for Allan. At any sacrifice this must be kept from Allan.

'I told you I had lots more to say,' said Digby, with a mocking smile. 'I'm going back now. Think it all over, and send me the money before Allan comes back.'

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## CHAPTER XVI

### SEEKING AN EXPLANATION

A FORTNIGHT after Digby's interview with Mr Bouchier Mdlle. Francesca and her husband returned from America. The expedition had been a highly satisfactory one to all except Allan. The anomalous position in which a country gentleman, sighing for the calm pleasures of married life, is placed as the husband of a *prima donna*, became painfully evident to him during his wife's triumphant tour through the States. The days spent on the voyage out and also those spent on the return voyage were periods of unbroken delight, but to the remainder of the time he ever afterwards looked back with something like a shudder. He had found much to complain of in England, but in America matters were ten times worse. Their private life seemed to have vanished entirely.

Mdlle. Francesca was in the hands of very clever people, people who thoroughly understood the way to insure a transatlantic success. The peculiarity of the Americans appears to be, that although critical enough to refuse to accept mediocrity for genius, however much mediocrity may be puffed and praised, genius without these adventitious aids is apt to be overlooked or decried. This is a curious but well-known fact to all caterers to our otherwise shrewd cousins across the water.

This process of puffing and praising, of going before and

preparing the way, of stimulating the public curiosity by a hundred and one little personal paragraphs, narrating some adventure, extravagance or eccentricity of the approaching star, is an art in itself—an art of which the masters are few and far between, and valued accordingly. Their services are eagerly sought after by those who have a new and great attraction to offer to the American public. The organisers of the present venture had secured the services of one who knew his business to a nicety. So that shortly after his arrival in America Allan might have gleaned enough from the various papers to compile several interesting biographies of his wife. Many of these paragraphs he was able to look at from the comical side, and exchange pleasantries with Frances as to her adventurous life ; but there were others which contained sly hints and veiled insinuations, which made his blood boil and set him longing for the sanctity and seclusion of private life.

The whole affair was most ably managed. It was not until she had sung, and had fully justified the appearance of the laudatory paragraphs, that the fact of *Mdlle. Francesca* being an American was officially announced. This stroke, now that success seemed assured, was a clever one. Enthusiasm rose to a high patriotic pitch. Even the singers born under the wings of the American eagle were going to whip creation as far as music was concerned. One paper gravely announced that *Francesca* would disappoint the Britishers next season, as she was resolved to remain in America in order to sing 'The Star-spangled Banner' to a New York audience on the next 4th of July, and equally absurd statements were published in other papers.

And the interviewers ! Allan began to dread the sight of men lest one of them should turn out to be an interviewer. The new discovery was at its full height. The interviewers interviewed Frances whenever they could, and the organisers of the tour whenever they chose. Allan was not spared ; shining as he did with a reflected light—so they interviewed Allan. It was no use his declining the honour ; in that case they said they had interviewed him, which answered every purpose.

As *Mdlle. Francesca's* husband, he was an object of great interest, and having spent a very commonplace, uneventful life, it was necessary for the sake of the public that the life he ought to have led should be substituted for the real one.



It was but natural he should be depicted as the heir to an immense estate, a leader of fashion, a poet, an artist, a ruined gambler, a successful member of the ring who had won eighty thousand pounds over the last Derby; that he should have wooed and won Francesca in a most romantic way; that he should have killed a couple of rivals in duels, which were described with exquisite accuracy. Had Allan wanted an easy road to fame or notoriety, he had most certainly found it by his marriage with Mdlle. Francesca.

He had sense enough to see he was powerless, but not sense enough to refrain from looking at or troubling himself about the paragraphs and accounts given by interviewers. He read them all, feeling that if he neglected to do so he must fancy they would be more vexing and in worse taste. He read in the papers of every large city they were bound to an elaborate description of his wife, her dresses, her jewels, what she ate or drank, her mode of life from the hour she rose to the hour she went to rest. It stopped there, although one correspondent ventured to delight his readers with a description of the colour, material, and pattern of Mdlle. Francesca's dressing-gown and combing jacket.

And the travelling about, the whirl from one city to another, the theatres and concert-rooms, the living in huge, overgrown hotels—he hated it all. Again and again his thoughts turned to Redhills. He pictured a clear, bright, frosty day; the ride, drive, or walk they would have together; the return to dinner; the pleasant evening spent afterwards. Or he turned to London—saw himself in Parliament, working hard to make a name: saw his wife sharing his ambition, aiding him with her advice—a queen of society, perhaps, but Mrs Allan Bouchier, not Mdlle. Francesca. Would the good time come at last.

Yet, he would have undone nothing. He was, he told himself, amply repaid for all annoyances by the prize he had won; for as yet not a cloud had come between them. In the short intervals of quiet they could snatch they were as bride and bridegroom still.

The American venture, with its trumpetings, puffings, blowings, and successes, came to an end, and Allan felt his spirits rise as he bade a glad but ungrateful adieu to the shores which had welcomed his wife so heartily, made so

much of her, and parted with her so reluctantly. He never wished to visit America again in a like capacity.

They had settled, upon their arrival in England, to go at once to Redhills. No one was more entitled to a holiday than Frances; Allan also deserved one. They were to stay at Redhills a week or two, then pay a visit to Mabel at Shortlands, and then a house must be taken in town, and Frances must prepare for the London opera season.

Her friend, the manager, was delighted to ascertain that, so far as was known, the fear he expressed to Allan was not to be realised. Allan, on his side, was disappointed. He had counted on the maternal affection as likely to be a powerful agent in inducing his wife to abandon her career. So it is that one man's pleasure works another man's pain.

When Mr Bouchier received the letter which, preceding them across the ocean, told him they were coming to Redhills, he was pleased. If happiness and joy in living had left him, his love for his children still remained; and he would at least be able to see his eldest son in the height of newly-found bliss. He had become quite reconciled to the marriage, only sharing Allan's hope that in time Frances would tire of public life, and settle down as the wife of a country gentleman. He believed she would do so, having formed, during the short time he had seen her, a very high, but only a fair, estimate of her character. A man must be indeed evil to be able to discern no good in others; and bad as Mr Bouchier had shown himself to be, he was not entirely bad—like George Manders, for instance. Yet, since the arrival of that letter, everything was changed. How could he meet this girl, sit at the same table with her, hear her speaking to him with the affection due to her husband's father, knowing that his crime had rendered her fatherless, and, worse still, that the moment she and Digby Bouchier—or whatever the villain's true name might be—met everything would be revealed? The only chance of delaying or averting the catastrophe was by complying with his demands.

So the money was sent. Not the two thousand pounds asked for, but fifteen hundred; and as he posted a banker's draft for this amount to his son-in-law, Mr Bouchier felt that it was but a sop to Cerberus, and that, sooner or later, it would be a question between ruin or exposure.

Digby, who felt certain his money would be forthcoming, returned home in the very best of spirits. He told Josephine nothing as to the failure or the success of his expedition, and she did not condescend to inquire; but the way he laughed to himself, and the general air of self-satisfaction he wore, made her long to hear news from home. She wrote, begging her mother to send tidings of her father's health.

Mrs Bouchier replied, and from the letter Josephine was able to gather that there had been a most trying scene between her husband and her father. Mrs Bouchier wrote that her husband had been completely prostrated by whatever had occurred at the interview, and besought Josephine not to allow Digby to visit Redhills again on any pretence. The poor girl smiled as she read this request. What voice had she in her husband's comings or goings?

A few days afterwards her husband broke open a letter, and showed her the order for the money. His exultant and triumphant manner as he did so was hateful to her.

'There,' he said, 'you see that I know how to get over papa. You couldn't have asked him in the right way. He is very easy to manage, if you know how.'

She was surprised and mortified. She felt the money had in some way been wrung from her father, and feared whether her letter had done anything to increase the force brought to bear upon him—whether he had been entreated for her sake.

'I don't understand,' she said. 'To me it seems shameful. I hope you did not demand it on my account.'

'Not in the least—entirely for myself. I shall ask for more some day. Papa will be too sensible, I hope, to refuse again.'

Josephine by this time had grown to loathe her husband. It seemed to her that every day, every hour, revealed some new meanness of character, hinted at some new vice. From the end of the first year after their marriage until lately she had felt more contempt and indifference than anything else. Her idea had been that he was a pitiful schemer, who had married her for his own ends by a subterfuge. She had been deceived and wronged, but the mistake was hers, and it was her place to pay the penalty. Her father had conveyed to her the idea that for some reason he wished her to continue to live with her husband as long as she could

bear it—so she had always looked upon returning to Redhills as a last resource—one to which she must not resort until matters grew beyond endurance.

Now that keen, honest hatred, not unmingled with terror, had taken possession of her, her thoughts again and again turned to flight. But if she fled from him could he compel her to return—would he do so? She fancied that in some way she was needful to him to further the success of his schemes.

This extortion of money from her father troubled her very much. Why should it have been paid? Again and again the thought came to her that it had been done for her sake, to save her from something or other. If she returned to Redhills would it not save her father the annoyance of future applications of this nature—or at least give him the power to refuse them? And what if she could absolutely free herself from this man—free herself by law—be once more her own mistress—perhaps in a few years forget this dreary episode, and be happy again? Her face flushed at the thought. But it must be complete, absolute freedom. No judicial separation, or arrangement of that kind—she must be rid of every turn of the galling bond—every link of her self-forged fetters. Then the way of arriving at this happy consummation became her daily thought.

She had little doubt, indeed she was almost certain, that Digby's conduct since his marriage would not bear investigation. Letters in women's handwriting had come to him over and over again. With cynical indifference, and perhaps with a wish to wound her, he had opened and read them in her very presence. That the needful evidence in one direction might readily be obtained was pretty clear; but this was not enough. So many divorce cases are reported now that few women are unaware that the relief that can be granted is only partial, unless acts of cruelty or desertion can also be proved. As yet Digby had not offended in these respects. Once or twice he had threatened personal violence, but had never really laid his hand upon her. Lately she thought his temper had been less under control, and she felt that several times his hands were twitching to strike her. Sooner or later she felt sure he would do so. Could she wait for it? Could she stay expecting to be called upon to submit to such a degradation? Yes, anything, everything, she could bear for the sake of

the freedom for which she was now beginning to long with a passionate longing.

Digby, delighted to find that his new departure had been so successful in bringing Mr Bouchier upon his knees, went off to the City to change his draft and redeem that bit of paper, which might, under certain circumstances, become troublesome. His proper course would have been to have paid the bank order to his credit at his bankers, and drawn a cheque against it to retire the bill; but a man of his stamp always has a fancy for absolutely handling the money he has gained—the success seems so much more apparent. So he went to the bankers who were drawn upon, and in exchange for the draft, which was at sight, received fourteen one hundred pound notes and a hundred pounds in smaller money. With his pocket full of money and his heart full of good resolutions he went across to his own bankers. The bank was full of customers, and as he waited his turn temptation assailed him—Digby always yielded to temptation. Why should he pay away a thousand pounds or more of this hard-earned money? Hard-earned he felt it to be, as he formed a just and proper estimate of brain work. What did he care about the bill? It would not be due for some time. A few days before it came to maturity he would coolly write Mr Bouchier, and tell him he must provide for it. It would be then just about the time when he should feel justified in making another demand for black-mail. So he turned on his heel, walked out of the bank, lunched at a noted house of entertainment, and, having finished a bottle of champagne, felt very bold and sanguine; in fact, as confident as a man who has an unfailing gold mine to dig at.

His luck seemed to him so good at present that it is no wonder, with fifteen hundred pounds in his breast-pocket, he began to feel once more drawn towards his recent pursuit, 'bulling and bearing.' Although he had vowed never to gamble again in this manner, gamblers, it is well known, have a peculiar facility for absolving themselves from their oaths. He was very shortly dallying with the price lists in the daily papers, and so soon as he experienced the proper invigorating effect of his champagne, found it a very simple matter-of-course proceeding to go over to his stockbroker's, and, having fulfilled that gentleman's requirements, to plunge boldly into the merry old game again.

He bore no malice towards the respectable broker who would give him no length of tether ; he, Digby would have acted exactly in the same way had the positions been reversed. So with revived hopes he made his new ventures. Then he took the train and ran down to a certain place about twenty miles from town, where for some months past he had rented a quiet little house, surrounded by a large but ill-kept garden. He was an object of curiosity in this village; people shook their heads at each other as he walked through the street, and wondered who and what he was. But it was very little that he cared for their looks, and they were welcome to wonder their heads off.

A few days after Mr Bouchier had paid the last hush money, Allan and Frances returned from America. They came from Liverpool to London, where they stayed a couple of days, and Mdlle. Francesca saw the people she was bound to see ; then they went down to the west.

Frances had liked Mr Bouchier very much on the occasions she had seen him. She was greatly distressed to find how ill he was—what a prematurely old man he seemed to have become ; but her greatest trouble was that she could not conceal from herself the fact that the welcome he gave her was strained and strangely cold, and that he appeared anxious to shun and avoid her. He was always courteous and kind, wishing to do everything to make her visit a pleasant one, but she noticed that if she came into a room where he sat alone, he left her in a very short time, excusing himself as best he could. He did not kiss her upon her arrival, his hand lay cold and lifeless in hers. He seemed disinclined to talk to her—in a word, he was evidently uneasy in her society. No doubt much of this might be laid to the door of his wretched health, but much more remained which could only be accounted for in one way—that was, Mr Bouchier did not like her.

She was much distressed—much mortified. To Allan, the way in which she had won the good graces of his loving but stern and austere father had been a source of the greatest gratification. With his mother it was a matter of course. Mrs Bouchier's kind and soft nature made propinquity conquest.

On the occasion of the first visit paid to Redhills, Mr Bouchier had even gone out of his way to show his appreciation of his son's wife. Now everything was different.

Allan, as yet, suspected no change ; for Frances noticed that in the company of her husband and herself Mr Bouchier strove to be the same as of old ; it was only in Allan's absence that the coldness and shrinking from her manifested themselves. What had she done to divert the course of his regard ?

It might be just possible that some of those American announcements, the ones which had annoyed both Allan and her, had reached him. She knew he was a proud man—proud of his position, his family, his name. Blameless as she felt herself to be, she did not blame him for being vexed by the annoyances which were inseparable from a public career. It wounded her to think that the absurd gossip of a sensational American paper should have made any change in his sentiments towards her. If only for Allan's sake, she must know why Mr Bouchier had changed toward her.

So one afternoon, when her husband was away on some masculine sport, she tapped at the door and entered the library where Mr Bouchier sat all alone. He was near the window, gazing listlessly and wearily at the landscape it commanded. Redhills stood very high, and although Redton village, which nestled under the hill, could not be seen, the top of the spire of Redton church was just visible ; it was in this direction Mr Bouchier was gazing when Frances entered the room.

For two or three seconds he did not look at the newcomer, thinking, most likely, that she was a servant who could wait his pleasure. Then he turned and found himself face to face with Frances.

No one was less an actress off the stage than Frances ; she felt the approaching interview was a serious matter, and therefore looked serious ; she was seeking Mr Bouchier with a purpose, so purpose was clearly written on her face. As usual, she was standing erect, making use of every inch of her tall, commanding figure. Seeing her thus, is it any wonder that Mr Bouchier thought that the hour was come, and the sword about to fall—any wonder he shuddered visibly, and turned his head away. Whatever she might be going to say, he felt he could not meet her eyes.

His action was so obvious that Frances paused disconcerted—a red flush swept over her cheek. What could be the meaning of this evident aversion ? Her first impulse

was to leave him, but for Allan's sake she must control herself, and endeavour to remove his dislike, or at least ascertain the reason for it.

Mr Bouchier's innate courtesy came to his rescue. He was bound to greet her, and lead her to a chair. Then he made some trivial remark about the weather, and even thanked her for coming to see him. He saw in a second he had been needlessly alarmed. The worst had not come yet.

She took a chair beside him.

'I may stay with you a little?' she said; 'I am not disturbing you?'

'Certainly not. I was doing nothing except looking out of the window.'

'Of course, I have come to ask you something,' she said. 'You will answer me truly, please, for it is a grave matter to me.'

Yes—as far as he could he would answer her truly in everything except one thing—heaven forbid it should be in reference to that she came!

'You will know best whether I am fanciful or not,' continued Frances, speaking with much earnestness and sweetness, 'but this visit to you has not been so pleasant as the last one was.'

'I am really sorry to hear you say so.'

Mr Bouchier spoke in a way that showed he meant what he said.

'Yes,' said Frances; 'and I have come to ask you why. I was proud to think I was winning the regard of my husband's people, but this time I find you, his father, are—how can I describe it—at least changed somewhat towards me.'

Mr Bouchier scarcely knew how to reply.

'Have I done anything to offend you?' continued Frances.

'Nothing—nothing. You are goodness itself.'

'It can't be that I do not love Allan enough. You must know that.'

'You must put it all down to your own fancy, my dear—or to my bad health and unfortunate manner.'

'I have tried to do so, but I cannot succeed. Please to forgive my questions, but I have been so troubled.'

'There is no cause for you to be troubled. Remember I am not a very lovable man.'



‘You love Allan and your other children. Why not love me? I would be a daughter to you if you would let me.’

She gazed anxiously into his face. He was silent, and shunned her gaze. His eyes were looking through the window, and resting on the spire of Redton church.

‘I have no father—no mother—not a relative in the world,’ she said. ‘I hoped, I thought that I might find them with Allan’s father, mother, and relatives.’

Frances was the petitioner, not Mr Bourchier, as he feared was to be the case when she first entered. He was bound to answer her, bound to do what he could to make her happy.

‘Frances,’ he said, forcing his eyes to meet hers, ‘believe me when I tell you that we all love you, and would look upon you as a daughter of the house. I can but have changed in your fancy. I am not demonstrative, I am ill and perhaps tired of life; but I love Allan, and when I say he has chosen wisely and well I feel that I can say no more, and you will be satisfied.’

He spoke earnestly, and his words carried conviction. She had been tormenting herself needlessly. She rose much relieved; indeed, she felt quite gay and happy.

‘I am so glad,’ she said, ‘but I know you will understand the feeling which made me wish to be reassured. Now kiss me and tell me you forgive me, and I shall go away very happy.’

She put her face towards him; he could not refuse to kiss her after his last words. His lips brushed her forehead for a second, and with difficulty he suppressed a shiver as he thought whose forehead it was. Her glad, true eyes looked into his own, and she seemed to expect he would say something.

‘We will never recur to this subject,’ he said, then with a change of voice, almost to passion, ‘Frances, you will always love my boy—through good and evil report—poverty or riches—glory or shame—through crime, even if crime should stand between you—you will always love him—even if he turned from you—you would still love him.’

‘As I love him now—so I shall always love him.’

She spoke solemnly, wondering at his emotion.

‘You swear it,’ he said.

‘There is no need—but I swear it,’ and, as if to seal the

vow, she leaned her brow once more to him. He kissed her this time without hesitation—then she left him.

He sat for an hour or more looking wearily out of his window—ever in the same direction. But for one thing, he could have loved Frances even as he loved his own daughters; but he knew as he mused and looked the while at the spire of the neighbouring church, that its shadow at this very moment fell upon a humble grave that bore no name to show who or what its tenant was—that grave stood and would always stand between him and his son's wife.

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## CHAPTER XVII

### COUPLED WITH CRUELTY

PHILIP BOURCHIER had never for an instant doubted the truth of Digby's assertion that Frances was John Boucher's daughter. He was gradually becoming superstitious. He saw how, in every way, events had turned against him since that fatal night—how, when everything had seemed hushed up and at an end, this witness, or second-hand witness, to every act of his on that occasion had appeared and spoilt everything—how he had been punished through the only medium that could really wound him—his love for his children. Seeing and thinking of all this he began to believe in destiny; and it appeared the most natural thing that Allan should have chosen for his wife Frances Boucher.

Had his feelings been less those of a fatalist, there was plenty to confirm Digby's words. When Allan married Frances it is doubtful whether he knew anything about her family; he certainly troubled little about it. She had told him her ancestors were respectable tradesmen, but that she was absolutely alone in the world. After their marriage she had related all she knew respecting the mysterious disappearance of her father; had even made Allan promise to assist her in her search for Manders. Allan had seen Mr Trenfield on the matter, and found that gentleman so sure that John Boucher had been murdered for plunder, that he looked upon any researches as hopeless.

Mr Trenfield told him that the man had left his bankers with some valuable property in his possession ; no one knew of what it consisted, but it must have been valuable. Since then he had not been heard of. It may be that Mr Trenfield spoke of James Boucher, of Newham, but the names awoke no suspicion in Allan's mind. He was but a child when the last law-suit took place, and the matter was tabooed in the family. The less such things are talked about the better.

On her side Frances said little about her forefathers. She was too sensible not to know that, as simply the daughter of a tradesman, she was not a proper match for Allan Bouchier. As Mdlle. Francesca, who would, she believed, in time be known as one of the greatest singers of the day, she felt she was any man's equal. Leaving her beauty and great gifts out of the question, and looking only from a pecuniary point of view, she would in a few years be earning a princely income. She was not ashamed of her forbears, but there is often as much vulgarity in flaunting one's humble origin in people's faces as in resorting to pitiful but transparent expedients to conceal it. Had she been asked, the information would have been at once given ; not being asked, she did not volunteer it. To Allan she often spoke of her father, and always expressed the gratitude she felt to him for having given her an education so much above the station in life he occupied.

At Redhills, by common consent, no one now spoke of Mr Bouchier's encounter with the midnight assassin. Soon after it occurred, it became apparent to his family that any allusion to the affair vexed him, so it was rapidly becoming a tradition. Frances had heard that he had once been compelled to shoot a man in self-defence ; but having in her girlhood's days seen several men who had been credited with the same interesting exploit, asked very few questions about the matter. She had been told the event occurred several years ago ; but had she known the very date it would have suggested nothing to her. She knew that her father met his death somewhere in London, having been traced from Newham thither ; so, if Digby could only be kept quiet and away from Frances, the secret might be a secret for ever. Is it then strange that Mr Bouchier sacrificed his money to this end ?

When the second visit to Redhills was paid, he had

asked Allan some particulars about his wife's father. Allan told him all he knew ; and Mr Bouchier, aware of circumstances of which his son was ignorant, saw that his tormentor's narrative was true in every respect. He was also able to learn the self-styled Digby Bouchier's true name. He could be none other than the George Manders whom Frances was so eager to find. But it was little use to him learning who the impostor really was.

'I shouldn't trouble in the matter, Allan,' he said. 'He was certainly murdered ; and after this interval no good can be gained, even if the truth is found out.'

'I am very much of your opinion ; but my poor girl is so anxious.'

'Well, at any rate, if you find this fellow Manders, hear his tale yourself before he sees Frances. Then you can judge if she should know the truth.'

'Yes ; I'll do that,' said Allan.

This counsel cost Mr Bouchier much to give. He was lying to his son—a terrible thing for a proud man to be obliged to do. He hoped, if the truth must come out, it would come to Allan first. He might forgive him and pity him ; Frances, he felt, would never forgive.

The sojourn at Redhills came to an end. Allan and his wife went from there to Shortlands. Frances was not sorry at the change. Do what she would she could not entirely throw off the feeling that something or another lay between her and Mr Bouchier. At Shortlands all went merrily. Mabel found herself every day growing more and more affectionately disposed to her new sister, whilst her husband looked upon her as a being from another sphere. He was a simple, kind-hearted gentleman, with a great reverence for genius. To have such a woman as Mdlle. Francesca beneath his roof, was to him a great honour. Lords and ladies were everyday guests, but a *prima donna* was a rarity. So Frances was made much of ; and Allan would have been quite happy had it not been for the approaching trials of the operatic season. However, bad as they might be in London, they would be nothing as compared with his American experiences.

'I hope you will see something of Josephine in town,' said Mabel to Frances. It was on the day before the visit ended, and the ladies were sitting alone.

'I will try to do so,' answered Frances.

'She is a dear little thing ; but oh ! what a sad life she has. A husband she must abhor, and no baby to brighten her life.'

Here Mrs Messiter kissed the future peer, who lay in her arms, as if he were but an ordinary baby.

'I will write to her as soon as we are settled,' said Frances, 'and beg her to come and see me often. I would call, but Allan does not wish it.'

'No—he is quite right there. Her husband is a bad man. She will understand why you do not call.'

'Try and make her love you, Frances,' continued Mabel. 'She will be happier.'

'I will, if I can,' said Frances, who remembered that Josephine had not been so easy to get on with as Mabel.

Allan also thought of the unhappy Josephine as they were returning to town.

'You will write to Josephine, dear ?' he said.

'Of course, I will ; but Allan, much as I should wish it, I fear she will not be great friends with me—I have tried, but I don't think she likes me.'

'Oh, nonsense ! How can she help liking you ?'

Frances laughed. 'Every one does not see with your eyes, Allan.'

'With Mabel at your feet,' said Allan, 'it is a matter of absolute certainty with that loving little girl Josephine.'

'Very well ; I will do my utmost, but don't be disappointed if I fail.'

'I have not the least fear of being disappointed,' said Allan.

As soon as a suitable house was found, and Mrs Melville drawn once more from her semi-obscurity to rule its domestic fortunes, Frances wrote a long kind letter to Josephine, begging her to come and see her, to stay with her if she would ; in fact, to step into all the rights and sympathies of sisterhood if she felt so disposed. Josephine, who had heard all about the visits to Redhills and Shortlands, felt quite willing to accept these offers, which were made in well-chosen words. Her husband was in the room as she was reading the letter. His quick suspicious glance caught the characteristic handwriting, which he knew almost as well as his own.

'Dear Allan and his beautiful wife back in town, I suppose,' he said.

Josephine started. 'How did you know ?' she asked. 'Do you know her writing ?'

He had made a slip. So long as Mr Bouchier complied with his demands, his greatest wish was to keep out of Frances' way. The explosion which would result from contact would no doubt blow up Mr Bouchier, but would certainly put an end to his power over that gentleman. He was even thinking of leaving London for a few months.

'I saw the signature,' he said.

This was a lie, and Josephine knew it to be one. In no possible way could he have read the signature. The very excuse showed her that he must be acquainted with her correspondent's handwriting. All the distrust which his former remarks had given rise to came back with redoubled force. Her husband and her brother's wife were in some way known to each other. She hoped her suspicions might be groundless, but whilst she had suspicions she could not accept the kindly hand which was stretched towards her—could not accept it unreservedly and with full trust. Poor Josephine, having been so cruelly deceived herself, had entered upon that stage in which the wronged party views every stranger with an amount of suspicion.

She answered Frances' letter, and promised to call. This promise she redeemed in a few days' time, and the kind, frank welcome she received almost lulled her shapeless fears to rest. Digby must have been making insinuations for his own malicious ends; but yet she could not get over his recognition of the handwriting. Could she have forgotten this, she felt she could have loved Frances as a sister—have learned to lean upon her stronger character as upon a tower of strength.

Frances on her side tried her best to win the poor little woman's confidence and affection. She was not accustomed to find such a task difficult. To call any one her friend was always to have the favour she extended readily accepted. And yet she was going out of her way to get at the bottom of Josephine's heart without the success she anticipated. Hers was a proud nature, and she certainly would not have taken so much trouble had it not been for Allan's sake and at his request. She did not fail entirely; if Josephine was hard to win, her doubts were dying a natural death; and after having, at Frances' solicitation, paid three or four visits to Allan's new home, she was in a fair way to succumb entirely to Frances' sisterly and sympathetic manner.

‘Did you ever meet my husband?’ asked Josephine one day when calling on her sister-in-law.

‘Never that I know of. Allan asked me the same question before we were married.’

Josephine blushed slightly, well knowing at whose instigation the question had been put.

‘Why do you ask?’ said Frances, noticing the blush.

‘From something he once let drop, I fancied he must have met you.’

Frances shook her head.

‘Of course, I have met and spoken to more people than I can remember; but his name is quite strange to me.’

‘He came from America,’ continued Josephine. ‘I thought you might have known him there.’

‘Tell me what he is like. I don’t know him by name at any rate.’

Josephine described him, but the verbal portrait did not betray the original to her listener.

‘He is good-looking, then?’ observed Frances.

‘I used to think so; I don’t think so now.’

Josephine smiled bitterly as she thought how her husband’s appearance had changed to her; contrasting the real man as she now saw him with the noble young hero associated with her first dream of love.

‘Let me see a photograph of him,’ said Frances; ‘I seldom forget a face.’

‘I have none. Isn’t it strange, he never would have his likeness taken? Although when we were just married I used to beg of him to have it done, he never would.’

‘I suppose I shall have him pointed out to me some day; then, perhaps, I shall recognise him. But I am afraid from what you and Allan tell me, he is not an acquaintance to be proud of.’

‘I should be very sorry to find you ever knew him,’ said Josephine, sadly.

Frances put her arm round her waist.

‘Are you very, very unhappy with him, my dear?’

‘After I found him out I was unhappy for a time; then my life, as far as he was concerned, was a blank. I ceased to care what he did or where he went. Latterly——’

‘Well, “latterly”?’ echoed Frances, glad to encourage her confidence.

‘Latterly—don’t think me wicked—I hate him—hate the

sight of his wicked face and the sound of his sneering voice. Now that I hate him, I am, I think beginning to be afraid of him.'

'Why not leave him and come to us, or go to your father?'

'I shall soon—I am waiting for one thing.'

'And what is that?'

Josephine could not or would not tell her. She felt the confession must be degrading; but after this conversation the two girls seemed much more drawn to each other. Yet even then, after parting with Frances, Josephine's thoughts could not keep from dwelling on her husband's words. She told herself that Frances was kind, true, pure and noble—that Digby, by leading her to believe he ever had any acquaintance with Allan's wife, was acting, if not speaking, a lie. Yet she could not see his object. That he lied when it suited him she knew by experience, but there had always been some method in his untruths. Unless it could be from a wish to annoy her by traducing her brother's wife, she saw no call for falsehoods. The matter was vexing her very much, so she formed the resolution of undertaking the most distasteful task of telling her husband that Frances denied all knowledge of him, and insisting that he should explain his words, and say when and where he had met her.

Some days went by before she found an opportunity of speaking to him on the subject. About this time he spent more days and nights away from home than he spent at home. She knew, moreover, that he was indulging in drink more freely than ever. When he slept at home she could hear his staggering steps on the stairs long after she had gone to rest; and as a natural consequence of the overnight debauch, the next morning he was scarcely in fitting trim to attack. But she was determined to put her questions whenever she saw a chance of his answering them.

It was about midnight. Josephine was sitting alone, reading. Digby had informed her when he left home in the morning that he should not come back that night; so she sat in fancied security. Her book being an interesting one, she was in no hurry to lay it down. Poor Josephine still clung to her novels, although she now read those of a more human and natural type. As she read she cut the pages with a small pointed dagger of foreign workmanship. She had bought it the day Digby went down to Redhills.



She scarcely knew why, but she felt much safer in that house when the little weapon was near her hand.

As she read, the front door, which was always by Digby's commands left on the latch, was opened, and she heard the sound of feet and of men's laughter. There was no time to escape ; she closed her book and waited.

The dining-room door was opened clumsily, as though the hand which turned the handle was inclined to wander about ; then Digby, followed by another man, entered.

They were both drunk, but in degrees—his friend positive, Digby comparative, on the high road to superlative. Seeing the state her husband was in, Josephine was not altogether sorry to see another man. She was so completely entrapped that it was better that a third party should be present. Digby, on seeing her, gave a tipsy chuckle, and turning the key of the door, took it from the lock and placed it in his pocket. Josephine felt she was to have an unpleasant time of it, and blamed herself for not having gone to her own room long before.

The master of the house threw himself into an armchair, and looked at his wife with eyes so full of malicious merriment that they might have been a monkey's.

'How do, my love?' he said, with that peculiar strained articulation always noticeable at a certain stage of intoxication—that stage when the drinker is obliged to be careful lest he trip over syllables the most simple—'How do, my love—un'spected honour, I'm sure. So glad I came home early.'

'Introduce me, Bouchier,' said the other man, who had not seated himself. He was sober enough to see the impropriety of doing so whilst the lady remained standing.

'My wife—Bates,' murmured Digby. 'Take seat, Bates.'

Mr Bates sank very willingly into the nearest chair.

'Now we'll all be happy,' said Digby. 'Get the brandy,' he added, turning to Josephine.

She continued to stand, and paid no attention to his words. He grew furious as he saw her calm and scornful.

'Get the brandy, I say,' he shouted, half rising from his chair. 'Get it at once, or ——' She could not stoop to an altercation, so she quietly obeyed, and took the spirit case, glasses, and water jug from the sideboard ; Mr Bates, who was a gallant young man, endeavouring to assist her.

'Mix up,' said Digby. 'Bates, you sit down and enjoy yourself; light a cigar.'

'Perhaps Mrs Bouchier objects to smoking,' said Bates, politely.

'Nothing of the sort—she objects to nothing, do you, my dear? I'm mast'r of my own house—light up, Bates.'

'Do you object, Mrs Bouchier?' asked Mr Bates.

'Not at all,' she answered, coldly—so Bates did as desired.

'Now mix the grog, and don't let's have more nonsense,' said Digby, scowling at his wife.

She did even this. Her husband drained his glass to the bottom, and made her mix another.

'Will you give me the key, if you please?' she said.

'No, my darling, I won't give you the key. We'll have a jolly night of it, and you shall keep us company—eh, Bates?'

'Perhaps Mrs Bouchier is tired—it is getting late,' simpered Mr Bates.

'Tired? She's never tired with me—are you, my darling?'

This was getting intolerable.

'Give me the key,' she said, peremptorily.

Digby laughed and drank some more brandy. Mr Bates saw he had not strayed into a happy household.

'It's rather too bad,' he said, 'to keep Mrs Bouchier against her will. Give up the key, old fellow.' He spoke the last sentence in that soothing, patronising kind of way which is supposed to be highly efficacious under circumstances like these.

'I'll see her ——— first. Give her the key—not I. Yes, I will though. Josephine, my dear, you shall have the key in 'schance for a kiss.'

She looked at him with cutting scorn. He laughed wickedly.

'Isn't that fair, Bates? The key for a kiss. She can kiss very nicely, Bates. That's a fair exchange, isn't it?'

'Seems so,' said Bates, doubtfully; for he fancied there was something between husband and wife of which he was ignorant.

'Come, Jos'phine, put your arms round my neck—or shall I come to you?' Her face grew very pale; but she neither moved nor spoke.

'There's a 'fectionate wife, Bates,' said Digby, in a half-

maudlin, half-jeering voice. 'Yet you'd never b'lieve that once that girl used to hang round my neck and kiss me like anything. It was dear Digby—Digby, my own. See her now—with never a word for me. Don't you get married, Bates—they're all alike. Why there's a little girl I know——'

'Hush!' said Bates.

Josephine drew herself up. Her eyes flashed.

'Don't trouble about me, Mr Bates,' she said. 'I have long known that this man is one of the most cowardly, unprincipled villains on the earth. No insult he can heap on me can be a greater one than forcing me to stay in his society for a moment longer than I choose.'

'Oh, hush! hush! please hush,' said Bates, who saw he was getting into a difficult position.

Digby swore a vicious oath, and, draining off the remainder of his liquor, rose from his seat, and staggered across to her. Her words had raised all the devil within him, and his rage increased when he saw her standing pale but resolute before him. For a moment he was mad.

'You——!' he hissed, and raised his hand.

Bates, who was, from the stress of the situation, growing sober, sprang forward. He was a second too late. The coward's hand fell on the girl—fell on the upper part of her arm, close to the shoulder, with a sounding slap. So violent was the craven blow that it hurled her with force against the wall; indeed, it was with difficulty she kept her feet.

Bates, who, although a friend of Digby, was not a very bad young man, was much horrified and excited.

'You awful cad!' he cried, as he threw his arms round the ruffian. He was much lighter and weaker than Digby, but, as the latter was now in a high state of intoxication, he managed to restrain him, and even pull him back to his seat, into which he pushed him, and then stood on guard over him.

He seemed inclined to renew the attack, and sat glowering at Josephine, and cursing both her and her protector. Bates kept both eye and hand upon him, ejaculating at intervals, 'You awful cad!'

'Would you—you jade!' cried Digby, in a manner which made his guardian turn his head and look at the lady, and for a moment feel much frightened,

Josephine had recovered ; she was standing at the table, with the small glittering dagger in her hand. This, after what had happened, was a startling sight. The ill-used Bates began to tremble lest a tragedy was afoot.

But no—she had no intention of using the weapon as he feared. The sharp point and edge were turned only against herself, and even then not with suicidal intentions. In a moment she had ripped the tight-fitting sleeve of her dress from elbow to shoulder, and the white round arm gleamed out from the dark material. There is no more beautiful sight in the world than the upper part of a fair woman's arm—so what crueller or more moving sight could there be than to see that soft round white surface marred by four red bands left there as mementoes of the fingers which had fallen with merciless intent upon it. Now Josephine had a beautiful arm, so it is no wonder that Mr Bates was moved at the pitiful sight.

'Give her the key and let her go!' he cried. 'Let me go too!'

'Let's kish and forgive, then,' said Digby, who was growing more than maudlin.

'Leave him alone if you please,' said Josephine. Bates fancied her voice was curiously changed, but she was a plucky little woman!

Seeing that Digby was succumbing to the effects of the brandy, he left him. The wretch had enough strength left to pour himself out more spirit. He looked round hazily for the water, and realised that the jug was empty, so he put more brandy in his glass.

'Ne'r min', he said, with an attempt at jocosity. 'Warrer's a mishtake.' So he drank away at the neat spirit.

And Josephine sat there with white face and lips, with her wounded arm with the fiery red bars across it, still bare ; and Mr Bates, although from time to time he ventured to glance at her, could not muster courage enough to attempt any clumsy consolation. He could only long for the moment to come when his host should fall out of his chair, senseless.

The moment came at last. If Digby did not exactly fall under the table, his head went on one side, his senses left him, and he lay like a log. Mr Bates, and perhaps Josephine, watched him attentively—the former satisfying him-

self as to his harmless state, and relieving his own feelings by bestowing one or two kicks upon his insensible form. The end, as far as Josephine and Digby were concerned, had come.

Mr Bates never understood the half-pleased sigh which escaped his fair companion as she rose and looked down in utter contempt on her drunken lord.

‘Please take the key from his pocket,’ she said.

He did so, and opened the door.

With one accord they passed out and stood in the hall. Mr Bates began to apologise.

‘I am awfully sorry, Mrs Bouchier—it seems a funny thing to say—but please don’t judge me by your husband. I had no idea he was that kind of man. I shall never speak to such a cad again.’

‘Yes,’ said Josephine, ‘he is a cad.’

‘You will forgive any share I may have had in this?’

‘Freely. I am glad you were there; or I don’t know what might have happened.’

Josephine shuddered. How could she ever have run the risk she had been running for so long?

‘Can I do any more for you? I will stay to any time if I can be of any service.’

‘Nothing more, thank you. Good night.’

‘You are sure you are not afraid to remain in the house?’

‘Not at all. But you won’t forget what you have seen, Mr Bates?’

‘Never—the cad!’

‘Will you give me your address?’

Mr Bates wrote it down.

‘I may call and inquire for you, I hope?’ he said.

‘No, please not. I can only hope that we may never meet again. A woman cannot feel glad to meet a man who has witnessed her degradation.’

‘Good night, then,’ he said. ‘You are sure that I can do nothing?’

‘Nothing. But how long will that sleep last?’

‘For hours, I should say. How ashamed he will feel in the morning.’

Josephine doubted this, so said nothing. Then Mr Bates left the house feeling very much ashamed of himself, and

resolving to turn over a new leaf, and cut all loose companions. Let us hope that he did so.

Josephine went back to the dining-room. She had now no fear, nor much grief. Her deliverance was at hand. She gazed for a minute at the prostrate form. Oh! such a pitiful state for her whilom hero to be in! She then turned down the gas, and, going to the top of the house, knocked at the servants' door. The domestics appeared in great trepidation.

'I am sorry to disturb you,' said Josephine. 'I will not keep you a minute. If you are quite awake look at my arm.'

They looked in open-mouthed astonishment.

'La, mum!' said the cook, 'it's finger marks. Has master——'

'Yes,' answered Josephine, quietly; 'he struck me just now. Please don't forget the day and the hour I show it to you. Now go to bed again. I want nothing more.'

She went back to her own room, took all her jewellery and trinkets, and placed them, with any papers or letters she wished to keep, in a little bag. She did not change her mutilated dress, but wrapped a thick cloak around her, put on a hat, and walked downstairs. When she reached the hall a fancy seized her. She thought she would like to take her little dagger with her. It was but a fancy, at first, but she soon saw it would be well to have it. In any subsequent legal proceedings Digby would be villain enough to produce it, and perhaps swear she had threatened him with it. Yes, she would have the dagger.

She opened the door cautiously, and stepped once more into the room. At one glance she saw that she need not be afraid of awaking the sleeper. He lay void of sense or motion—a log, a breathing log—that was all. She took the little weapon in her hand, and, gentle as her nature had once been, felt that if freedom depended upon it she could drive the steel then and there to his heart. She stood looking at him for a while, finding a sort of fascination in his utter helplessness. In this short time she reviewed the part he had played in her life since that ill-omened day when, by her father's invitation, he first came to Redhills. Then she thought of her father, and the mysterious hold this man he detested had over him—a power strong enough to wring large sums of money at will from him. What

could it be? If only she knew—if only she could rescue her father from his clutches. Her face flamed as a sudden impulse urged her to do something she saw dimly might be of service. This man had wronged her, deceived her, ruined her life—if she could not only revenge herself but aid those she loved, why should she shrink from the means which were at hand?

She went near to him, leaned over him, and, shuddering as she touched even his clothes, ascertained that his keys were in the pocket of his loose coat. She had no difficulty in gaining possession of them. Then she went upstairs once more—went to a room she had not entered for years—his room, and hastily unlocked a small iron chest he kept there. There were papers in it, and a roll of bank notes, and many letters in women's handwriting; and, moreover, there was a pocket-book or letter-case full of papers. She opened this, and saw that every paper had on some part or other the name of Bouchier. It struck her directly that these papers must in some way be connected with the sway he exercised over her father. She thrust the pocket-book into the bosom of her dress, and was about to close and relock the safe when another idea came to her, so before she closed it she selected two or three of the topmost, and, therefore, probably the most recent of the letters—they might be useful. Then she locked the safe, and having replaced the keys in the sleeper's pocket, went from his hated presence without giving a backward glance; went out of the door into the dim-lit street—left her husband for ever.

It was now past three o'clock. Where was she to go? Her first idea was to walk about the streets all night, and take the early morning train to the west. Then a man passing her and making a remark which set her cheeks flushing showed her the impossibility of this plan. She must go somewhere. Allan was her natural guardian in London, so an empty hansom fortunately passing she hailed it, and directed the man to drive to Caversham Place, where Allan now lived, and in a short time was weeping in her brother's arms, wildly crying for his protection, whilst Frances was petting, soothing and comforting her.

And Allan, when he saw those red bars on his sister's arm, ground his teeth and swore that some day he would pay them back with interest to the ruffian whose cowardly fingers had placed them there,

## CHAPTER XVIII

## FACE TO FACE

ALTHOUGH he did not at once realise the fact, it was broad daylight when Digby Bouchier's senses began to return to him. When he dimly comprehended the position in which he was lying—his head resting against the leg of an arm-chair, and his feet somewhere in the region of the fender—and found that it behoved him to get out of it as soon as possible, his idea was that it was still night. The shutters and the door were closed; the gas alight. The servants had looked into the room, and seeing the state of affairs had left their master to make the best of them. It was about ten in the morning when he rose from the hearthrug, and with some difficulty, and wondering the while if that splitting ball surmounting his shoulders could be his head, transferred himself to the couch, and slept again. At present he was not equal to the exertion of recalling the events which had placed him in so uncomfortable a state. He had been drunk—very drunk; no effort of mind was needed to arrive at that conclusion; so he troubled no more about the matter, but slept on for two or three hours longer. Then he awoke, sober, but very ill.

He lay blinking and thinking; by-and-bye matters began to arrange themselves in his racking brain. He remembered coming home with Bates—remembered that Josephine was in the room when they entered it. Then he remembered Josephine with a dagger in her hand, and sitting opposite to him with one arm bare; then he remembered he had been angry; that he had struck her in his anger.

'I must have been awfully gone,' he said, 'or she must have been uncommonly provoking. It doesn't matter which.'

His watch had run down, but the clock on the mantelpiece told him the time. He was surprised to find it so late, and being troubled by no sense of shame, rang the bell for the servant.

'Open the shutters,' he said; 'clear the place up, and get me some tea.'

He went to his room, plunged his head in cold water, and presently came down to his tea, feeling a trifle better.



'Where's your mistress?' he asked the servant maid.

'I don't know, please, sir.'

'Don't know! Has she gone out?'

'If you please, sir,' said the servant, mysteriously, 'I think missus has gone away, sir.'

'What do you mean? Where has she gone to?'

'She came to our room last night, sir, and showed me and cook her poor arm. We haven't seen her since.'

'Isn't she in her bedroom—go and see.'

'No, sir; the door was open this morning, and the bed hasn't been lain upon. She's gone away, and I don't wonder at it. And if you please me and cook would like to go as soon as convenient.'

'Go and be d——,' said Digby, politely.

He was not much surprised to find that his wife had left him. He assured himself of the fact by a visit to her room. She had simply gone, leaving no letter or trace behind her. He cared little for her flight, thinking that the time had come when he could do without her. As for the safety of the woman who had left his roof at three o'clock in the morning, there was, he felt, no need to trouble. As a natural course she would go straight to Redhills, where she was welcome to stay until he wanted her. He could claim her when he chose, and this would give him another hold on her father.

Several days elapsed before he discovered that Josephine had not gone empty-handed. Having had no occasion to go to his safe for money, the absence of an important item of its contents was not revealed. He had slept at home each night, and had paid no visits to that cottage a few miles out of town. The reason of this omission was that the fair occupant whose mode of life was such a subject of interest to the quiet village had suddenly quitted it. No doubt she had found the Arcadian life dull, and at the instance of another admirer had left to better her condition. Her successor not yet being installed, the cottage was empty for a time.

About a week after Josephine's flight Digby was waited upon by his servants. They asked him if he expected Mrs Bouchier would return, and upon hearing his surly negative, informed him that having as good as taken other places, they intended leaving his service that day. Their going or staying being a matter of perfect indifference to

him, he contented himself with a repetition of his former polite remark ; and, in reply to their request for wages due, told them to get them where they could. The domestics left in a tantrum, threatening to sue him for the amount : and he was quite alone in his house.

This being such an uncomfortable state of things, he soon followed his servants' example, and, packing up what he wanted, purposed to take up his abode for awhile at an hotel. The last thing he did before he quitted the house was to take his money from the safe. He counted it and found it right ; then he looked for the pocket-book full of papers, which were too valuable and important to leave behind him. The pocket-book was gone. He turned all the papers in the chest out upon the floor, but found it was undoubtedly missing. It was a long time before he could believe it ; nor did he quite give up hope until he had searched every pocket of every article of clothing he owned, wondering if he could have left it in either. No ; he could distinctly remember that the last time he went to the safe the book was there. He remembered seeing and handling it. It was gone—stolen, and stolen for a purpose.

He sat down and used a great deal of vigorous language. There was no one to hear him, so he could indulge without the slightest restraint. He directed many of his remarks to himself, but many more to his absent wife ; for not a moment did he doubt who had robbed him. So far as he knew the key had never been out of his possession—so far as he knew, for he thought of those hours when he lay insensible to touch and deaf to all sounds, dead drunk. That night Josephine had left him, but before leaving had taken the key and had ransacked his private safe. It could be no one else. Another would have taken the money, and left the documents. The act was Josephine's, but the instigation Mr Bouchier's. That was why she had lived so long with him after domestic comfort became a mockery—it was simply to wait for this opportunity, which at last his own folly had made for her. The thing was clear as daylight. He threw the worthless papers back into the box, locked it, and went downstairs to think—with the assistance of brandy and water—to what extent this unexpected loss jeopardised his interest.

He took it for granted that the papers had been straightway taken to Mr Bouchier ; that they were, unless

destroyed, at this moment in his hands. To make the case worse, every paper was there—even the ones which certified his own death and his pretended sister's birth. This, so far as Mr Bouchier was concerned, would affect him but little ; there was nothing more for that gentleman to learn. He was thinking of the time when he might be compelled by circumstances to tell the tale to Allan or Frances, as it best suited his purpose. He argued that the possession and production of these documents would stamp his assertions with truth ; in their absence his tale would be disregarded and laughed at. Even Frances, eager as he guessed her to be to hear what he knew about her father's death, would perhaps disbelieve the statement of a self-convicted impostor. If she loved her husband she would be all the more ready to think his accusation a false one. After all he had nothing to prove his words, except the personal matters which had belonged to John Boucher, and which he had extorted from Mr Stokes. That gentleman had also vanished from sight for a long time.

He might obtain copies of the stolen certificates, but doing so would take some time ; and as to places, names, and dates of one or two he was uncertain. No ; he could not afford the delay. He must find Josephine at once ; and if by any happy chance she still kept possession of the documents, must, by threats, cajoleries, or force, get them from her, or, at least, learn why she took them, and to whom she had given them.

He went straightway to Redhills, and, forcing his way into Mr Bouchier's presence, demanded that his wife should be restored to him. He was incredulous when over and over again he was assured she had not sought asylum beneath her father's roof. He talked loudly about property having been taken, and threatened some nonsense about search warrants.

'Search and welcome,' said Mr Bouchier ; 'she is not here—she has not been here. If she had been in the house you may be sure you would not have been allowed to enter. Your presence here should convince you, even if you doubt my word.'

'You have heard from her?'

'I received a letter from the lady in whose care she now is, saying Josephine had left you never to return. I know no more.'

‘You know where she is ; is she at Shortlands ?’

‘I must decline to answer you,’ said Mr Bouchier, firmly.

‘I shall go and see for myself.’

The speaker was uncertain whether the papers had reached Redhills after all. In that case he fancied Mr Bouchier would have taken a higher hand than he had done during the interview.

‘Go—anyway, Josephine shall never return to you.’

‘I’ll see about that too.’

Mr Bouchier gave a kind of weary sigh. He was looking very ill.

‘Look here,’ he said, ‘before you go, tell me if there is anything you hold sacred—any way of pledging yourself and keeping your word.’

‘I always keep my word—you ought to know that.’

‘Is there any way I can bind you—any way I can make you harmless ? Tell me for what sum you will leave England, and before going will give me all those papers you showed me, and everything else you hold.’

‘You’re beginning to get reasonable,’ said Digby, delighted to find that the papers had not yet reached Mr Bouchier.

‘I am beginning to die,’ said he, with an emphasis which made the villain start. ‘You will die some day and learn what it means. Look in my face and read your work there.’

‘Well, part of it was your own act,’ said Digby, with an uneasy laugh.

‘You fool !’ said Mr Bouchier. ‘If I regret my act, as you call it, a man of your type should know it is not that which is killing me. Rogue, villain, blood-sucker as you are, you must have some feelings of compassion. Hand me over those papers, leave England, and show me some way which will ensure your silence, and I will pay a handsome price.’

Mr Bouchier had never spoken before in this strain. Digby was mentally calculating how to act best for his own interests. He quite believed his companion had not long to live ; still the decision was too weighty a one to be given off-hand.

‘I told you once,’ said Mr Bouchier, ‘you had been too clever. Take my advice and don’t make that mistake

again. I may repent; send for Allan, his wife, and a clergyman—people often feel like that before they die.’

He spoke in a satirical, half-mocking way. The threat was a strange, a horrible one, but Digby knew it was meant in grim earnest, and hearing it, realised that after all Philip Bouchier was a man of stronger will than himself. He knew, with death drawing near him, he could not have talked in that way.

So much impressed was he, that he nearly named the large sum he considered he was entitled to; then remembering that any negotiation whilst the papers were out of his hands must fall through, checked himself.’

‘I’ll let you know,’ he said. ‘I don’t want to be too hard; but you must come down handsomely. I must see Josephine first—where is she?’

‘That you must find out.’

On this point Mr Bouchier was inflexible, but as he did not deny that she was at Shortlands, Digby proceeded to that place as quickly as he could. That the certificates were not in Mr Bouchier’s hands was clear proof that Josephine was not at Redhills.

He went boldly up to Shortlands House and asked for Mrs Messiter. In a few moments Mabel came to him. She had been fully informed as to Josephine’s flight; had, indeed, been up to town to see and advise her. The fugitive felt certain that when her husband discovered his loss he would endeavour to find her. She was now in cold blood rather ashamed of the righteous theft, wishing she had not acted in a way which had something underhand about it. So she resolved to mention the matter to no one until she had seen her father, and asked his opinion on the worth of the papers. She had just glanced at them, but was ignorant as to their value. As soon as she saw her father she would tell him all about the theft. Her great desire was to keep for the present out of Digby’s way.

‘Will you come down to Shortlands, dear?’ asked Mabel.

‘No,’ said Josephine, who had fully considered the matter. ‘He will look for me at Redhills first; then he will try Shortlands.’

‘And then Allan’s, of course.’

‘Yes. But if he comes down to you, couldn’t you make

him think I was with you? But you would not give me up to him?’

‘I dare say we could do so,’ said Mabel, wondering at the astuteness circumstances had brought out in Josephine’s character.

‘It won’t bother you, Mabel?’

‘Not a bit. Dick will take care of that.’

‘Then, please, let it be so.’

So it was that when Digby demanded his wife, and asserted his belief that she was in her house, Mrs Messiter, although firmly refusing to grant his request, scarcely contradicted his assertion. She was polite in her words, but this politeness was full of veiled scorn. After a while her visitor grew very angry, and, as a natural sequence, showed his ill-breeding. He plumped himself down on a chair, for as yet Mrs Messiter had not asked him to be seated.

‘I shall stay here until I see her. She’s here, I know—you can’t deny it. Every man has a right to his wife. I’ll stay here for ever, but see her I will.’

Mabel bent her head about an inch, and left the room.

‘Go and find your master,’ she said to the first servant she met. Mr Messiter, who was somewhere about the grounds, soon obeyed her summons.

‘That man—Josephine’s husband, is here,’ she said. ‘He declares he won’t go until he has seen her. Will you tell the men to turn him out, but let him still think she is here?’

‘I’ll turn him out myself,’ said Mr Messiter.

Mabel begged him not to risk his precious limbs or life; but he insisted on having his own way, and walked carelessly into the drawing-room, with his hands in the pockets of his shooting-coat. He had never met Josephine’s husband, and the scowl with which Digby greeted him did not make his first impressions of the man favourable ones. Mr Messiter did not mince matters; he went straight to the point.

‘Now,’ he said, ‘you be off out of this.’

‘I’ll go when I’ve seen my wife, not before.’

‘You won’t see her; she doesn’t want to see you. So go at once.’

‘Let me see her alone for ten minutes, then I’ll go.’

‘Not for half a second. The only place where you’ll see

her again will be in the divorce court—if you mean to put in an appearance there.'

'Then I don't go,' said Digby, doggedly.

'Well, I'll give you five minutes to go quietly; after that, I'll send some one to turn you out.'

'Let any of your infernal flunkies touch me if they dare.'

Messiter laughed.

'Flunkies aren't much use in such cases. You've got five minutes, so take my advice and go.'

Then Messiter left the room, giving a quick glance at one of the windows as he went. His visitor reseated himself resolutely, but he was not without a feeling that an uncomfortable kind of ejection was in preparation for him. He began to think he was acting like a fool, but meant to see the matter out to the end. He kept his eyes fixed on the door, from which direction he knew the attack must come; so he did not see Mr Messiter walk quietly across the lawn towards the stables; nor could he hear him whistle and call for 'Jack;' nor was he aware that, when the five minutes were nearly over, Mr Messiter was sauntering back with the said Jack at his heels.

Jack was one of the finest bulldogs in the county. His front legs bowed out like those of an old-fashioned chair, and his hind legs were so close together that the impression he gave was that of a dog two feet broad in front and six inches broad behind. His skin was as fine as a lady's, and his tail tapered to the size of a pipe stem. His under jaw projected in a most delightful manner some three-quarters of an inch beyond the upper one, and his beauty and value were enhanced by his nostrils running back at an angle of forty-five degrees. In short, Jack was a dog of that kind which, to all who know not the good qualities it owns, is an object of terror. You might have hung Jack for six weeks by a nail through his ear or his tail without getting a moan from him. Just as the five minutes' grace expired, Mr Messiter opened the little window behind the intruder and chucked Jack into the room. A word from his master made him stand where he fell, and Digby turning round saw this disturbing element in the proceedings.

'Sorry you're not gone,' said Mr Messiter, cheerfully. 'Jack sticks when he bites, so you'll go out in his company.'

Digby's calves were trembling in anticipation of what they might feel.

'Take the brute away!' he cried.

'Not a bit of it; he'll keep quiet till I tell him to act. Then it's your look-out, not mine.'

Digby looked round for the poker. The room was large, and before he could get it he knew the dog would be on him.

'Are you going?' said Messiter, drily, keeping a close watch on his man. Discretion was the better part of valour. He had a pistol in his pocket, but he knew that one movement in that direction would ensure the word of attack being given. What could he do against such a devil of a dog as this? Deep potations, moreover, had greatly interfered with the nerve he once possessed. This dog, with his projecting jaw, slanting nostrils, and general capability for hanging on, was irresistible.

'Yes, I am going,' he said. 'Keep him quiet—I'll go.'

'I'll meet you at the door,' said Messiter. 'I don't think Jack will touch you if you go at once.' Hereupon he withdrew from the window.

Digby lost all sense of dignity—he absolutely bolted, Jack following him at a proper interval. His host walked down the drive with him, Jack at his heels.

'Mind you,' he said, as his visitor passed through the gate, 'Jack's always about. He never forgets a face. Now be off, and never show yours here again.'

Digby did not attempt to invade the house any more, but for a couple of days he hung about the neighbourhood, hoping to see Josephine by some chance or other. He wrote to her begging for an interview. That she was at Shortlands was certain. He would have stayed there until he did encounter her had it not been absolutely necessary for the sake of some of his ventures that he should return to town. The fortnightly settlement was at hand; he must go back and arrange the account—the more needful to do so as the account was a very bad one for him. His second streak of luck had quickly come to an end. He was striving at present to regain, not gain money. Then that forged bill! By the time he had settled his broker's demands he would not have nearly enough money left to meet it. The sooner he came to final terms with Mr Louchier the better. So it was imperative that he should find



Josephine, and, somehow, get back the papers she had appropriated.

He went back to London fully intending to return to Shortlands and wait until he met his wife. She must leave the house sometimes, so if he watched continually he must at last see her.

Messiter's hint about the divorce court did not trouble him much. He was tired of his wife, and would be glad to be a free man again. He might pick up a woman with some money. But if it suited him to keep Josephine bound to him, he thought he might force Mr Bouchier to stay her in any proceedings she might be contemplating.

He was thinking about all these things, when one day, whilst in a hansom, he passed Josephine—passed her so close that he could have been deceived by no chance resemblance. She was dressed in different garments from any he could recall in connection with her; but as she left the house with nothing but the clothes on her back, this was not to be wondered at. Had she been alone he would have accosted her, but she had a companion, a middle-aged lady. He had no idea who she was, but then he knew few of his wife's friends even by sight. Undoubtedly it was Josephine, and in London. He stopped the hansom at once, and looking out cautiously from the side window, saw the ladies pass. Then he told the cab-driver to follow them at a convenient distance. They turned off from Piccadilly—turned again and again until they reached Caversham Place, where he saw them enter a house. He noted which house it was, paid and dismissed his cab, and stood on the pavement considering what course to adopt. Most likely the people who lived in that house were friends of his wife, with whom she had taken refuge. See her he must, and would. He had a perfect right to knock at the door, and insist upon seeing Mrs Bouchier. He had no fear of meeting another 'Jack' in a London house. Yes, he would call boldly and ask for Mrs Bouchier.

He knocked and rang; the door opened.

'Is Mrs Bouchier in?' he asked.

'Yes, sir,' replied the servant. 'Please to walk in.'

It was not an unusual hour for calling, so she conducted him straight to the drawing-room. He chuckled as he thought what a sensation his appearance would make.

'What name, sir?' asked the servant.

‘Say Mr Smith.’

The door was opened, and in he walked. The room he entered was large and luxuriously furnished. With one hasty glance he saw all this, and saw at the further end of the room his wife, in her walking dress and bonnet, talking to another lady. As the servant announced the name this lady turned with a look of surprise on her face, and for the time Digby quite forgot that he had come in search of his wife. The only thing he could realise was that Frances Bouchier and himself were at last face to face.

She knew him in an instant. Her astonishment was so great that she did not notice the look of fear on Josephine’s face, did not hear her little cry of horror. George Manders, the man she had sought for and longed for years to see, was before her—had come of his own accord. Thought is quicker than words or motion; it comes not piecemeal, but in a lump. He had come without being asked—come willingly. She had wronged the man. His reasons for keeping out of her way were no doubt good ones from his point of view. Now she should know all—everything he knew as to her father’s fate.

All this flashed across her at once. She ran towards him eagerly, her hands stretched out.

‘You!’ she cried; ‘you! At last, after these years! Oh, I am glad to see you!’

Of course, he could not refuse to take her hand. Although surprise for a moment took speech from him, he could perform the mechanical action. Josephine, who saw the mutual recognition, gathered her skirts together, and, drawing herself up, left the room. Neither her husband nor Frances seemed to notice her departure. She went to her room and locked the door.

‘She told me she had never even seen him,’ she said. ‘Poor Allan—poor Allan!’

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## CHAPTER XIX

### ALL HE KNEW ABOUT IT

THE greeting which Frances gave the man she only knew by his true name, George Manders, was a purely selfish one. The fact of seeing him once more gave her in itself

no satisfaction ; but she was delighted to think that the time had come when all the uncertainty and mystery would be cleared up. However dreadful the circumstances which had caused her father's death, she was eager to hear the full account, and never for a moment doubted but Manders had called to-day to enlighten her. It never entered her head that the Mrs Bouchier he wanted to see was the unfortunate Josephine. After her first impulsive welcome, her manner changed. The remembrance of the trouble and anxiety he had caused by his wilful refusal to tell her what she had a right to know came back to her, and her first feeling of gladness began to merge into something very much like anger.

'Now you are come,' she said, 'sit down and tell me all.'

He obeyed her command to sit down, but said no word. He was in a situation for which he was utterly unprepared. The very last thing he wanted to do, as matters now stood, was to tell Frances the whole truth. There was no money to be made out of her ; it would, of course, make things very uncomfortable for Allan and Mr Bouchier, and as an act of revenge would be highly successful ; but what good would it do him ? Revenge without money was not worth having.

And even this was dependent upon his being able to convince his hearer of the truth of his tale. To make matters and motives clear to her he must enter upon her own family history, the ins and outs of which he knew she was in total ignorance of. He must make her understand that Redhills, the reputed property of Mr Bouchier, was legally her own—that she and her husband were first cousins. The tale, if only supported by his bare word, would seem to a clear-headed woman like Frances too absurd to be listened to. With the papers he could have convinced her—but that little vixen Josephine had these. He began to wish he had not struck Josephine on that night—or had struck her much harder.

All these difficulties presented themselves as he sat silent, whilst Frances waited impatiently to hear his explanation.

'Tell me,' she exclaimed, speaking as a queen might speak to a subject—'tell me at once. You have hidden the truth long enough.'

But he wanted to hide it even longer. His own idea was to gain a little time—at any cost to keep Frances from disclosing all she knew about his antecedents to Allan or to Josephine.

‘I must think,’ he said; ‘let me think for a few minutes.’

He employed the few minutes he craved in weaving plot after plot—scheme after scheme to ensure Frances’ silence. He knew that the moment she informed her husband who he was his house of cards must fall to the ground. Frances must be cheated or frightened into holding her tongue—at least for a while. To assure this he felt he would stop at no crime—no baseness. So he planned and schemed to this end.

She employed the time in looking at him—in marvelling at the change a few years had wrought in him; for he was beginning to show the visible marks of hard life. The last few months had told greatly upon him. Nothing affects a man’s appearance like unsuccessful gambling for high stakes. The excitement and suspense soon tell their tale. She saw he was well—very well—dressed, and had a general air of well-to-do-ness about him; but his face seemed to have now contracted, as if habitual, an expression which in old times she had only detected there on rare occasions, when he was off his guard. She found herself wondering how she could ever have thought kindly of the man—how he made his living now; well knowing that his possessions when they parted had been but small. He could not have followed the profession he once intended to follow, or she felt sure she must have heard of him somewhere.

‘Now, you have had plenty of time, speak,’ she said.

‘There is so much to consider and weigh,’ he said apologetically.

‘What can there be to consider? What right had you to keep silence for a day, when you had learnt all I was longing to learn?’

‘I thought it best. I think it best now, Frances.’

‘I forgot to tell you my name is Mrs Bouchier,’ she said, coldly.

‘I am quite aware of it. Mrs Allan Bouchier in private; Mdlle. Francesca in public. Let me at least congratulate you on your triumphs.’

‘Thank you. Now tell me everything.’

‘What is it you want to know?’ He spoke sharply, and as if his mind were at length made up.

‘I want to know how, when, and where my poor father died.’

‘He was killed—murdered.’

‘By whom?’

‘That I cannot tell you.’

‘You shall tell me!’ She rose and stamped her foot. She towered over him like a queen.

‘I cannot tell you, because at present I do not know; but I can find out.’

‘You can find out, and have not yet done so!’ She spoke in a way which showed her astonishment.

‘I have not done so. I thought it best not to do so.’

‘And who, sir, gave you the right to judge? Who authorised you to let a murderer go scot free? I would have dragged him to the gallows with my own hands!’

Her form dilated, her eyes flashed. Never on the stage had she looked grander or shown more passion. Manders felt he was quite right in his supposition that it would be a bad time for Mr Bouchier, and even for Allan, when she learned and believed the truth.

‘Where did he meet his death?’ she cried. ‘Was it in London?’

‘I believe so.’

‘You believe so!’ The ring of scorn in her voice was indescribable. ‘You believe so! Tell me what you really know.’

‘I know that he was waylaid and murdered.’

‘And for what reason—a common robbery?’

‘Yes,’ said Manders slowly. ‘I believe it was for the sake of some valuables he carried with him.’

‘“Believe” again! Now, tell me why you believe what you believe; how you know what you know?’

‘I cannot,’ said Manders, sullenly.

‘You will not, you mean.’

‘Well, then, I will not at this moment.’

‘Then tell me, at least, your true reason for your hurried departure—why you wrote that mysterious letter—why you have shunned me until now?’

Manders looked her boldly in the face, and tried to throw an expression of passion into his dark eyes. In this he succeeded fairly well.

‘Do you remember,’ he asked softly, ‘how we parted?’

What I asked for, and what you refused? Or do women forget these things?’

‘I remember,’ said Frances, coldly.

‘I was half mad with passion. I felt I could not live in the same land with you. I was in that state that I might have been tempted to kill you and myself. You have heard of such things being done?’

She bowed her head.

‘My one idea was to place the ocean between us—to stay away until I had recovered my senses. Then, just before I started, I learned something about your father’s death—learnt it in a way that seems miraculous. I was seeking about for an excuse for my cowardly desertion of you in your trouble, and this came to my hand. I seized it, and wrote that letter. After all, I thought, it matters little—we shall never meet again.’

‘So you took the best course to make me determined to find you.’ There was such incredulity in her voice that it was bound to be apparent to her companion. He shrugged his shoulders.

‘I was very young and very stupid then—I always, as you may remember, had a liking for theatrical effects and mysteries. That must explain it.’

Was the man lying or speaking the truth? Throwing her thoughts back, and living again as well as she could through the events of those days when she waited, consumed with anxiety and fear as to her father’s safety—recalling all that Manders said and did at that time, she felt almost certain the man was lying. Could he—John Boucher’s friend—have had any hand in the murder? The idea was horrible—her face grew pale as it came to her. It came and clung to her. Then the blood tingled through her veins, and she spoke on the impulse of the moment.

‘I believe you are lying—you are hiding something from me. I know not what it is or why you conceal it. You say you know that my father was murdered, and you are the only man it seems who knows it. Unless you clear the whole thing up, I will have you arrested for the crime, and force you to speak the truth if only to save yourself.’

His brow grew black. He knew she was making no idle threat, that unless he could satisfy her she would at once execute it. His estimate of Frances’ character was far from being a false one.

'You are talking like a foolish woman—not like yourself,' he said, speaking very coolly, and without any sign of agitation. 'If you will but listen to me, I will show you that I am acting in good faith. Sit down—I hate to talk to any one standing over me.'

She sat down. His coolness persuaded her that she wronged him by her wild suspicion. If she had done so, she was willing, even eager, to apologise.

'Please give instructions that we are not to be interrupted by any one—not even by your husband.'

'My husband is out of town,' she said, ringing the bell, and telling the servant she was engaged on business and could see no one.

Allan's absence was good news for the plotter. If he could only ascertain how long it would last, it might facilitate proceedings.

'I told you just now,' he began, 'that although I only knew broad facts, I could find out every detail. If I did not say so, I meant to do so, when your hasty questions and ridiculous accusations led me away from the subject.'

He laid particular stress on 'ridiculous accusations.' Frances slightly coloured. She had been hasty, and spoken foolishly.

'Now,' continued Manders, 'if you take my advice, you will be content with what I have told you; but if you insist on knowing everything, I will put you in the way of doing so.'

He paused.

'Let me know everything,' she said, decidedly.

'Very well; if you are so determined, I have nothing more to urge against it. But listen attentively, and try and clearly understand what I am going to say.'

He spoke very seriously. Frances made a motion of assent, and waited.

'I think you will understand,' he continued, after a pause, in which he collected the threads of the web he was weaving into the first semblance of coherence, 'that when a private man like myself obtains a clue to a crime which has baffled all detective skill it must be from a peculiar source and in a strange manner—in fact, it may be under circumstances which a man scarcely likes to make public.'

Yes. Frances could easily understand that. Manders paused again—he was weighing every word. He was like

a man cutting, step by step, a path which would lead he hardly knew where, but which would permit of no retracing; so he had need to be careful.

‘In short, I had better say it at once, many a young man, thrown without friends into London, may lead a life which he blushes at afterwards, and may associate with persons he can scarcely name.’

Frances could quite believe in the life he hinted at, but was doubtful as to the subsequent blushes.

‘I don’t want you to think, Mrs Bouchier,’ continued Manders, in charity to himself, ‘that I associated with robbers and murderers; but you will understand me when I say that these may have—well, persons associated with them, and these persons may be a connecting link.’

Feeling his candour must be quite convincing, he went on courageously.

‘There, I won’t say anything more about it. I am ashamed to be obliged to refer to that period of my life. Now, can you by a stretch of imagination comprehend how in some way things could have come to my knowledge without my having been, as you were good enough to suggest, an accessory to the crime? If not, I will sink all sense of shame and give you details.’

‘Please spare the details,’ said Frances, coldly. ‘I understand.’

She despised the man, but could not help believing he was speaking the truth. Unfortunately, she had always under-rated him, and thought him devoid of imagination. A low opinion of a rogue’s abilities is sometimes greatly to his advantage.

‘Thank you,’ he said, gratefully; ‘and now, Mrs Bouchier, one thing more. I have never lost sight of this affair—it has weighed like lead on my mind. I can now put you in the way of learning everything—of hanging the murderer if you wish.’

‘Of course, I wish it.’

‘This knowledge has only been mine within the last few days. I have now got to the bottom of everything—but only under a promise.’

‘What promise—quick!’ cried Frances. She was growing excited.

‘One of the least guilty of the parties concerned must go scot free. I do not even know his name—perhaps I shall



never know it. But he will put us on the track, so surely that no one else will escape.'

Manders, as on a former occasion, was growing quite interested in his romance. He spoke in such an impressive way that all his listener's doubts were vanishing.

'Let him go,' she said, 'if it is indispensable.'

'It is. Now only one thing more. I must ask you to pledge yourself to absolute secrecy. To breathe no word of the matter for, say, a week—not even to your husband. Will you do this?'

'I cannot see why it is necessary,' said Frances, whose boast was that she had never concealed a thought or an action from Allan.

'It is necessary—my word is given. In a day or two I will, if you will promise this, place you face to face with the man I spoke of—the one who is to go free. He can tell everything; but will only tell it to you. From what I learn, the information he can give will be ample. Then he must be allowed a few days' grace to get away, and you may put the whole matter in your solicitor's hands.'

'Why not come to Mr Trenfield, my solicitor, and take his advice?'

'Because I am under the same pledge that I wish you to take.'

Frances sat silent. Secrecy was her aversion. Manders rose.

'It must be as you like,' he said, 'but I can do no more in the matter. Even if you tried all legal methods to make me speak, it would be no good. I can tell nothing except what I have told you—can reveal no names, describe no persons, but the alarm will be given, and all chance of justice at an end.'

A strong, a burning desire to make the murderers of her kind father pay the penalty due came over Frances. After all she had but to keep silent for a few days. With the end in view, there could be no harm in doing so.

'Then, I promise,' she said.

'Faithfully—without reservation?'

'Faithfully and truly—not even my husband shall know.'

'I will put things in trim at once. I will write to you. You must hold yourself in readiness to come where I shall tell you. You are brave, not a coward.'

'I think I am as brave as most women.'

‘Then, when I write come at once; make no delay, as moments may be precious. You need not be afraid, as wherever you go I shall accompany you.’

‘Let it be as soon as possible,’ said Frances. ‘I shall be thinking of nothing else.’

‘Oh, yes, you will. You will change your mind, perhaps, within half-an-hour. You will hear me traduced, abused, and it may be, say I am deceiving you. But I am not in this thing. Anyway, you will get a letter from me within the next two days; if you don’t follow its instructions, I shall know the reason why, and there’s an end of it. It’s your concern, not mine.’

‘I have not the slightest idea what you are talking about,’ said Frances.

‘Of course not. I’ll let someone else enlighten you after I’ve gone. It won’t be long before you understand. Do you remember my name?’

‘Certainly—George Manders.’

‘Yes—to you it was. You’ll hear me called by another name soon. That will be my true name.’

She was perfectly mystified; no suspicion of the true facts dawned on her.

‘Very well,’ said Manders, ‘never mind now; but when I write to you, come or not, as you choose. Believe everything bad you hear about me, except that I am an impostor. It’s too long a tale to tell now; I’ll tell it next time we meet. And believe that in this I am anxious to serve you; for hanging the man who killed your father doesn’t matter much to me—does it?’

‘I suppose not,’ said Frances; ‘but it does to me.’

‘Then trust me in this, and I’ll show you how to do it. I’m everything that’s bad—a drunkard and all the rest of it; but you may trust me.’

Then he left hastily, and Frances sat down to think over his words. There was no reason, so far as she could see, why she should not trust him. He had even loved her once; fortunately, he appeared to have cured himself of that folly. He could not have called upon her for sentimental reasons. His tale had been fairly credible; the very hints he had let drop as to the way in which he had acquired his knowledge seemed to confirm his words. She had no doubt but that the life he had led upon his arrival in London had been a vicious one, and she had little belief

in his conventional expression of regret. His explanation of his extraordinary behaviour was a trifle lame, but she wished to believe him—she wished ardently to see her father's murderers within the grasp of the law. Whatever he may have done, whatever she might hear in his disfavour, it seemed clearly in his power to bring this about. Yes, in spite of everything, she would trust the man so far. He could have no motive in deceiving her about this particular thing. Having made up her mind, she went in search of Josephine.

Josephine was in her room, the door of which she had locked and bolted. Frances knocked at it

‘Let me in, dear,’ she said.

‘Who is it?’ asked Josephine, cautiously.

‘It is I—Frances.’

‘Are you quite alone—no one with you?’

‘No; I am quite alone. Open the door.’

‘You give me your word there is no one with you?’

Frances wondered if her guest were losing her senses.

‘Of course I'm alone if I tell you so,’ she said, feeling much annoyed at the doubt expressed.

Josephine opened the door timidly; but before she admitted Frances glanced up and down the landing. Seeing no sign of an enemy, she let her visitor enter, taking the precaution of relocking the door after her.

‘What are you afraid of?’ asked Frances, smiling.

‘Is he gone? Oh, say he is gone!’

‘Is who gone?’

It seemed impossible that Josephine should be referring to George Manders.

‘The wretched man you have been talking to so long.’

Josephine spoke almost scornfully.

‘Yes, he has just left. He was an old acquaintance, whom I have not seen for some years. What is the matter, Josephine?’

For Josephine had risen, and was looking her full in the face with an expression which puzzled her greatly.

‘Oh!’ she exclaimed, ‘Frances, why did you tell me over and over again you had never seen him, never knew him? Yet, as soon as he comes, you are ready to rush into his arms.’

‘Please explain yourself,’ said Frances, quietly. ‘I am not in the habit of rushing into anyone's arms.’

‘I have been doing all I can to keep out of his way, and as soon as he comes here you welcome him, and call him an old friend.’

‘Josephine, you are losing your senses. What in the world has the gentleman who called to see me to do with you?’

‘Everything, unfortunately; being the man I despise most in the world—my husband.’

‘Your husband!’

‘Yes, my husband, Digby Bouchier; the man you had never seen.’

Frances felt incredulous.

‘Josephine,’ she said, ‘it is impossible; you are making a mistake.’

‘I am sorry to say I know him too well to make a mistake. Did he not want to see me?’

‘He never even mentioned your name.’

‘Then what did he come for?’

‘He came to see me,’ said Frances, who was beginning to understand the mysterious words spoken by Manders just before leaving her.

‘Josephine,’ she asked, ‘you are certain you are right?’

‘I am as certain as I am his wife. It’s nonsense talking like this. What did he want?’

Frances did not answer this question.

‘When I knew him,’ she said, ‘he went by the name of —; well, another name entirely. I can’t understand it.’

‘I daresay he’s gone by twenty names.’

‘Yet it was your father who introduced him to you as your cousin, Digby Bouchier.’

‘Yes, but papa may have been deceived. Oh, Frances, I am awfully distressed that you should know him, or have any dealings with him. Tell me all you know about him.’

Frances mused; the whole matter was growing very complicated. She could not explain her connection with Josephine’s husband without telling her everything; and she had bound herself to secrecy, for a few days at any rate. She was thinking over all she knew about Manders, and wondered whether his assertion, that the name she would find he bore was his rightful one, was true. He might be a bad man without being an impostor. He might be the hero of a romance, and have found since they parted that his birth was different to what it was always thought

to be. No, she would tell Josephine nothing—she would even, although she now regretted the promise, tell Allan nothing until the week had passed by. She raised her eyes and looked gravely at Josephine, who was anxiously awaiting her reply.

‘I am more perplexed and astonished than I can describe,’ she said. ‘I have reasons for telling you no more at present, than that this man, your husband, when I knew him, was in a totally different position of life. We were thrown together and knew each other intimately for a long time. By-and-bye I will tell you his history as far as I know it, but I can’t for a while say anything more about him.’

‘Of course, I shall tell Allan he came,’ said Josephine, with a dissatisfied air.

Frances reflected.

‘I would rather you did not mention it ; as for a few days I should be bound to give Allan the same answer I give you.’

Josephine felt the old mistrust, which she had never thoroughly conquered, arising again.

‘I think Allan ought to know exactly who your old friends are,’ she said, in such a way that Frances looked both pained and surprised.

‘Then tell him by all means,’ she said, coldly.

Josephine saw she had vexed her.

‘Oh, Frances !’ she cried, ‘don’t be cross with me ; I am so unhappy, and so afraid of him. You won’t let him come here again, will you ? If I am troubling you by staying here, I will go away to Shortlands or to Redhills ; but don’t let my husband come here again.’

Frances melted at the little woman’s grief. She took her in her arms and kissed her.

‘No,’ she said, ‘be quite easy about that. He shan’t come here again.’

‘When does Allan come back ?’ asked Josephine presently.

‘The day after to-morrow, I hope. We shall get a letter in the morning.’

‘I wish he were here now,’ said Josephine.

‘So do I,’ said Frances ; and Josephine felt easier as she heard her wish echoed so sincerely.

## CHAPTER XX

*'I WILL COME'*

ALLAN was down in Westshire ; not, however, at Redhills. Ever since his return from America he had been thinking and thinking how to commence the journey to eminence ; how to make a career for himself. Only one way seemed clearly open to him, that was Parliament. Hitherto, he had resolved to wait for a few years, or until the seat held by his father was again vacant, it being understood that the member who succeeded Mr Bouchier would not again present himself for election. Allan believed he would be invited to occupy the seat as soon as the opportunity came.

Recently his views had changed ; he was now eager to get into the House for any borough, however small, which would accept him. He had plenty of confidence in himself, and determined to devote himself to politics until he held such a position that he could beg the wife he loved to renounce her task of ministering to the amusements of the people, in order to aid him in graver and more ambitious aims. Urged on by love and ambition, Allan felt sanguine as to his eventual success.

He had made his father acquainted with his wishes, and found him willing to do all in his power to gratify them. As soon as a suitable chance should occur Mr Bouchier promised that he would furnish the sinews of war. So Allan was at present on the look-out for a borough which, as a preliminary step, would accept him as the candidate of the party he favoured.

There being a rumour in the wind that the chief party wire-puller at Hunsford had his member's resignation in his pocket, ready to produce at a convenient opportunity, Allan, at the request of some of the opposition wire-pullers, had gone down to the little town. Hunsford being only some thirty-five miles from Redton, he was no stranger there ; and as neither of the parties was in an overwhelming majority, it was felt that a candidate whose family was so influential in the county would be the very person to reverse the decision given by the constituency at the last election. So Allan was made welcome, and stayed there

for two or three days, seeing influential people, and generally preparing his way for the struggle which might any day commence.

He had heard that his father was far from well, so determined, after his business at Hunsford was over, to go across to Redhills and spend the day there. He wrote to his wife to this effect, saying he should not return till the latter end of the week. Then he felt compelled to be in town, as *Mdlle. Francesca* appeared on the opening night of the operatic season in one of her most celebrated characters.

He had other business also which called him back to town, and it was partly this business which took him to Redhills. When *Josephine* came to his house in the dead of night with the cruel red marks on her arm, he had sworn that she should be freed once and for ever from the villain who had so treated her. It was with great difficulty he had been kept from visiting *Digby* the next day and administering a satisfactory thrashing. *Josephine* and *Frances* at last persuaded him to leave the matter to the law to settle. He had thereupon consulted his solicitor, but had as yet given him no definite instructions. Without seeing his father, he scarcely liked to take such a responsibility upon himself. *Mr Bouchier*, although he was now greatly broken in health, had always been accustomed to lay down the law to *Allan*; and that law had always been a wise, salutary, as well as a kind one. A few days could make no difference, so nothing had been done as yet.

*Frances*, for some reasons, was not sorry that her husband did not intend to return immediately. She was much exercised in endeavouring to form a true opinion about *George Manders*. He had warned her so distinctly that she would hear strange things about him when his back was turned. He had not even tried to defend or explain away his conduct towards his wife. He tacitly admitted the truth of all the accusations brought against him; but, then, his treatment of *Josephine* now had nothing to do with events some years ago. He might be the worst husband in the world, but there was nothing in that to prevent his being able to obtain the information *Frances* was craving for. She felt that now the chance of finding out all concerning her father's death was at hand, she must take it. She thought and thought; tried to persuade herself that he was, for some reason known only to himself, deceiving her;

but after looking at the matter in every possible light, could not help believing that in this at least he was speaking in good faith. Her meditations made her so absent and preoccupied during the leisure moments she had that day and the next, that Josephine could not help noticing her mood, and could only attribute it to the one and, in a way, the right cause—the visit paid by her husband. She was longing for Allan to return. She could not quite decide whether to tell him of Frances' expressive welcome to Digby, and of the prolonged interview between the two, or whether to let Frances inform him at her own pleasure. Still she wished that Allan was home.

She dared not stir out of the house for fear of meeting Digby. She could not for a moment believe that he had come solely to see Frances. In her agitation she had noticed the look of surprise on his face—a genuine look; and knew he had come for her; had most likely followed her and Mrs Melville home. She almost wished she had not taken those papers, feeling sure that he would not make the efforts she knew he was making to gain an interview with her for her own sake. However, no one should see them or know of their existence until she had placed them in her father's hands. She would not even again examine them.

It was the morning after the ominous visit that Allan's letter, saying he should not return for a couple of days, arrived. Josephine who could not help noting every look, every word of Frances, fancied she betrayed little sorrow or annoyance at his prolonged absence. She blamed herself for thinking that the absence of regret meant rejoicing. Had she dared she would have telegraphed and bade him return at once. Fortunately her good sense told her that such an unwarrantable act of interference would be justly resented by Frances and most likely by Allan as well.

Josephine did not see much of her sister-in-law on the day when Allan's letter arrived. Mdlle. Francesca was fully occupied. It was Thursday, and on Saturday her reappearance in opera was announced. She was, of course, rather anxious as to whether the fickle public would continue to be pleased with her efforts, and with her usual conscientiousness spared no labour to ensure a favourable verdict. There was little fear as to the result; all who were competent to judge, and by rehearsals privileged to



judge, asserted that her voice was stronger and more enchanting than ever. Still, with all the many things she had to think about, the promised communication from George Manders was seldom out of her mind. As late as Thursday night she had heard nothing from him.

Perhaps the reason was that he had been very busy since he had left her. He saw clearly that a crisis in his affairs was at hand. Could he have regained possession of his papers he would have gone straight to Redhills, wrung what he could out of Mr Bouchier, and vanished with his ill-gotten spoil, letting everything arrange itself as best it could without his interference. Now his first and foremost task was to ensure Frances' silence. This must be done at any cost, even at any crime. Let him only keep Frances quiet for a month—even a fortnight—then he would have time to settle things. He might even tell Mr Bouchier, if necessary, that Josephine held the certificates—this would be equivalent to placing them in his hands. But as soon as Allan learned he was George Manders, the man his wife had been looking for high and low, the game, as far as golden stakes were concerned, was up. He wished now he had not spared Allan—that he had revealed all to him. Judging him by his own standard, he believed hush money would have been forthcoming. Yes, he had been too clever.

However, if hard work could repair mistakes, he was doing his best that way on the Thursday. He was up at an unusually early hour and down at the little place some twenty miles out of London. He spent several hours in the quiet cottage, and although he was quite alone, and two or three blisters on his hands told that he had been working hard at some manual labour, he appeared entirely satisfied with the result of his unwonted solitude and unusual exertions. He locked up the uninhabited house, and in the afternoon went back to town.

He had just time to see his stockbroker, who by his directions had that day closed all his ventures. The last money he had extorted from Mr Bouchier was coming rapidly to an end. A few hundred pounds only remained. Days were slipping by, and the forged bill had not been taken up. His affairs were indeed getting to a crisis!

In the evening he went back to his hotel, the Langham, and telling the cashier he should want his bill in the

morning, sent a waiter for a Continental Bradshaw. He professed himself intensely stupid with respect to the mysteries of time-tables, and made inquiries of two or three officials at the hotel as to the best and quickest way of getting to Nice. Could one book a sleeping carriage from Paris? Would it be better to telegraph to have one—no, two places kept for him? His questions gave every one who heard them the idea that he started with a friend to-morrow morning with the intention of getting to Nice as soon as possible. He left instructions that any letters should be forwarded to Digby Bouchier, Poste Restante, Nice; and in the morning, having paid his bill, told the porter to call a cab to take him to Charing Cross.

Yet he did not go directly to Charing Cross. Half way down Regent Street he told the cabman to drive to Caversham Place, and stop at the corner.

'Get a boy or some one to take a letter,' he said.

A messenger was found, and was instructed to take a letter to No.—, and wait for an answer. The letter was addressed to Mrs Allan Bouchier, and was duly delivered at the right house; but the answer was so long in coming that the writer of the letter had to pay both messenger and cabman for the time they had waited for it.

But it came at last, and its purport seemed satisfactory, as the occupant of the cab laughed, paid the messenger handsomely, and then told the driver to go to Charing Cross as fast as the horse could travel.

Knowing instinctively a customer who would not haggle about a fare, the hansom was sped along at a rate which almost defeated its impeller's ends, rendering him liable to being stopped for violent driving. Either it went too quickly, or the guardians of the streets were not quick enough to stop its headlong career, as the occupant was able to catch the eleven o'clock train, not, as might be supposed, to Nice, but to B—, the little village, or town I believe it is called, within such a convenient distance of London. So quickly did the cab cover the distance, that Digby Bouchier, or George Manders, whichever name we choose to call him by, had ample time to leave his luggage at the cloak room and go down to B— perfectly unencumbered.

The answer he had waited for at the corner of Caversham

Place was a very laconic one. It consisted of three words; but the words were—‘I will come.’

Brief as the reply was, it gave the writer a great deal of trouble to pen it. The letter which demanded the answer had reached her at breakfast time. As a rule a *prima donna* is not an early riser, but Mdlle. Francesca liked breakfast at a decent hour, unless her exertions of the previous night rendered late rising an absolute necessity. She, Mrs Melville, and Josephine were lingering over their breakfasts when the note arrived. They were toying with a dish of early-forced strawberries, which some noble friend had sent as a welcome offering to the celebrated singer. The tips of all the ladies’ fingers were pink with the juice of the delicious fruit, which they eat in the most sensible manner, taking the berry by the stalk, dipping the apex of the rosy cone in sugar, and then putting it into its legitimate receptacle. Frances read the letter, and, looking very grave, replaced it in the envelope, which lay face upwards beside her plate. In a mechanical way she went on eating her strawberries.

Josephine’s quick eye had caught the writing. She knew well enough whose it was. Why should this man—the worst man in the world—be writing to Frances? What could it all mean? And Frances eat her strawberries, with her eyes it seemed looking into vacancy. Mrs Melville remarked that the servant said some one was waiting for an answer. Frances made no reply—she was thinking what to do. Josephine would have given a great deal to have known the contents of that letter from her husband.

She would not have been much enlightened had the letter been passed to her for perusal. She might, knowing what she knew of Digby’s ways, have been more frightened—nothing else. It ran thus:—

‘I have arranged everything. If you would know all, go to Charing Cross; take the 12·30 to B—. Take the road to the village, and walk on until you meet me. You cannot miss your way. The man I spoke of is ready to see you, and will speak of everything. If you don’t come by the train I name I shall conclude you have changed your mind.

‘D. B.

‘P.S.—Remember, I do not urge you. Even now I

thin': you had better let the thing rest. I need not say, if you come, you must come alone.'

What answer was she to give? To a certain extent she mistrusted the man as much as even Josephine did. Yet, why in this one thing should he play her false? What had he to gain? Nothing—absolutely nothing. He did not urge her to obey his summons—he seemed quite indifferent whether she came or not. No evil could result from her going for an hour or two to a little village like L—, moreover in broad daylight. She was accountable to none but Allan, and he was away. Come what will she must learn her father's fate. And as she thought of the father who had always been so loving, so fond of her, the victim of cowardly assassins, the blood rose to her cheek, and her whole face seemed to imply that she had taken a great resolve. Then she drew the letter once more from the cover and reperused it. Who can blame Josephine, who saw the look, the flush, and the action, misinterpreting, under the circumstances, their true meaning.

Postscripts are important things. It was that careless postscript that made Frances decide to follow the instructions of the letter. It was the off-hand, I-don't-care-if-you-come way that gave her faith in the writer's integrity. With Josephine still watching her, she tore the fly-leaf from the letter, scribbled three words on it, put the paper in an envelope, and without addressing it sent it to the waiting messenger.

'You never get a moment's peace, my dear,' said Mrs Melville, picking out one or two of the ripest strawberries and putting them on Frances' plate.

Frances thanked her with a smile.

'I want a time-table,' she said.

The time-table was brought. She looked at it, and verified the time given in the letter. A B C time-tables are a great boon, especially to women. As Frances passed her finger down the column which told of the departure of trains for B—, the juice of the strawberries made a little rosy mark on the margin of the page. Josephine noticed this.

'Will you want the brougham this morning, ma'am?' asked the servant, who came in to clear away the breakfast things. 'The coachman is downstairs.'

‘Yes ; I shall want it at twelve o’clock,’ said Frances.

The brougham came as ordered. ‘Charing Cross,’ she said, stepping into it. Josephine noticed that she was dressed in the quietest and simplest garb ; that she carried a thick veil in her hand. She felt that something terrible was going to happen. Allan away—the letter coming—Frances’ unmistakable preoccupation—the hastily scribbled answer—the reference to the time-table—the brougham ordered, and the departure alone, with no word as to returning. She grew very nervous, and as soon as Mrs Melville was called away to house-keeping duties, flew to the time-table. Her worst fears were confirmed. On the very page which bore the name of B— was the pink stain which had been transferred from Frances’ finger. And B— was the postmark and even the address of those letters which she had taken from the safe on the night when Digby, her husband, in his drunken rage had struck her. Frances had gone to B—.

Ought she to telegraph to Allan ? She dared not. After all she could not yet bring herself to think ill of Frances. Her very knowledge of Digby’s villainous character made her believe in the absurdity of such an idea. But yet, had she not been deceived by him ? Had she not once—how long ago it seemed to be !—looked on him as the noblest, most splendid man in the world ? Why should not another be deceived by his pretences and glamour ? So poor little Josephine, feeling she could do nothing except hope for the best, and thinking that matters were getting far beyond her comprehension, sat down and cried, and longed for Allan to return.

Uneasy as she felt from the first, she grew more and more so as the afternoon went on without Frances reappearing. Dinner time came, but brought no sign or message from her. Mrs Melville thought she must have been detained at the theatre, but felt no anxiety about her. After waiting an hour, the two ladies sat down to an unsatisfactory meal, one of them expecting, the other hoping that every moment would bring back the absent one.

After dinner Josephine grew thoroughly frightened ; even Mrs Melville felt nervous at such a prolonged absence on the part of Frances. Now that, in her innermost heart, Josephine dreaded the worst that could happen, she began to tell herself that her suspicions and fears were ludicrous.

Frances had met or called on some friends, and had been persuaded to stay with them. Very probably she had gone to Mrs Trenfield's. She was saying, only two days ago, that she must go down and see them. Yes, Josephine and Mrs Melville agreed she must have gone to the Trenfields'. But, in spite of their certainty, they sent to the stables for the coachman to learn whither he had driven Frances that morning. He had driven her to Charing Cross; she had gone somewhere by train—did not know when she should be back—had no further orders to give. That was all the coachman knew.

Josephine's heart sank. Frances would not have gone to Charing Cross if her intention had been to visit Twickenham, where the Trenfields lived. Should she telegraph to Allan? No, she must wait until to-morrow morning. If she telegraphed now, Frances might be back the next moment. Mrs Melville felt little anxiety as to her safety. She sat knitting a pair of mittens, and feeling sure that Frances upon her return presently would explain her absence in a very simple manner. But Mrs Melville did not know certain things with which Josephine was acquainted.

The two women sat up all night. As the hours wore on Mrs Melville began to catch somewhat of Josephine's unspoken fears. The hour for returning from any party or entertainment had long passed; besides, Frances had not left the house attired for anything of the kind. It was much too late to think of telegraphing to any country place. Nothing could be done until the morning. So, weary of watching and waiting, Mrs Melville fell asleep on the sofa, whilst Josephine caught a few fitful snatches of slumber in the recesses of an easy chair.

Morning broke—Frances had not returned. Josephine awoke from the sleep to which, in spite of her uncomfortable attitude, she had at last quite succumbed, and aroused her companion.

'She has not come back—something must be done,' she said.

'Allan must be telegraphed for at once,' said Mrs Melville, who now was as frightened as Josephine.

But they were loth to do so, and once more began suggesting reasons for Frances' absence, and tried to believe she would return by breakfast time. Then they decided

to wait an hour longer—till nine o'clock ; then if they heard nothing from her to telegraph.

Nine o'clock came, but no Frances. The coachman was once more sent for and re-examined, but he could add nothing to his previous statement. He had driven his mistress to Charing Cross, and there had been dismissed. He was positive she had no bag nor personal luggage of any description ; was certain she had no intention of starting on a long journey.

'Josephine,' said Mrs Melville, in an awed whisper, 'do you think it could be possible that any of the other singers who are so jealous of her success could have enticed her away?'

'No, I don't,' replied Josephine, who was busy writing the telegrams.

Two messages were sent—one to Allan's address at Hunsford, the other to Redhills, so that he might by no means be missed. It was fortunate that the Redhills one was sent, as Allan, having finished his business at Hunsford, had gone across there the first thing in the morning. He had scarcely entered his father's house when the message was delivered to him. 'Come back at once—you are wanted—do not delay,' it ran. Being sent by Josephine, he knew that he was wanted back for Frances' sake. Something had happened to his wife, or the telegram would have been sent from her. He turned pale, but said nothing. Glancing at his watch he saw the time was ten o'clock. He had not a moment to spare. He knew the times of the trains from Brackley by heart ; there was nothing he could catch from that station which would enable him to get to town before six o'clock in the evening. He must drive to Blacktown and catch the mid-day express—he had two hours and ten minutes to do it in—the distance a good twenty miles. Every moment was precious.

He ran across to the stables.

'Put the fastest horse in the lightest trap,' he said ; 'don't waste a moment—it is life and death.'

Then he ran back to the house, and in a few hurried words told his mother what had happened. Mr Bouchier not being downstairs, he was saved any explanation with him. In less than two minutes he was in the light dogcart, with the reins in his hands.

'No,' he said to the groom, who was ready to spring up behind; 'I don't want more weight than I can help. You come by the next train to Blacktown. I will send the horse and trap to the Railway Inn.'

He waved his hand to Mrs Bouchier and drove off, not at a headlong pace, but in the manner of one who knows he must get every ounce he can out of his horse, and, moreover, quite understands how to do so.

Allan had driven over that road hundreds of times, but had never found Steepsides so precipitous, or the name of Littlesteep invested with such a grim sarcasm. He dared not hurry his horse up and down these and other terrible hills; but when comparatively level ground was reached, he called upon him to do his best.

He was just in time. Tossing the reins and half-a-crown to the first respectable-looking man he could see who was on the look-out for chance employment, he told him to lead the horse to the inn, and say Mr Bouchier's man would come about it later on; then he entered the express a second before it started, and by three o'clock was at Caversham Place, in a state of mind the worse because he did not know what bad news he had to hear.

He rushed into the house, and was met by his sister and Mrs Melville. He saw by their grave looks that he had been recalled on no trivial matter. Where was his wife?

'Frances!' he cried, looking about as if trying to find her. 'Where is Frances? Tell me? Is she ill? Where is she?'

'She is not ill, I am glad to say,' said Mrs Melville.

Allan felt greatly relieved.

'Where is she? Why did you telegraph me? You frightened me to death, Josephine.'

He looked at his sister, but she said nothing. Allan grew impatient.

'Will you tell me what is the matter?' he exclaimed.

'We are growing anxious about Frances,' said Mrs Melville. 'She has disappeared.'

'Disappeared? What do you mean?'

'We have not seen her since yesterday morning. We don't know where she went to; so thought it better to telegraph.'

'I don't understand you. Where did my wife go?'

'She went off by train somewhere from Charing Cross.'



‘Well,’ said Allan, ‘what of that? She must have stayed the night with some friends.’

‘Oh, no,’ said Mrs Melville, confidently, and shaking her head. ‘She had nothing with her—no luggage of any kind. People like Frances don’t stay away at friends’, with only the clothes they wear on their backs.’

‘She must have gone to the Trenfields’,’ said Allan.

‘We sent to Mr Trenfield’s office this morning. He had seen nothing of her.’

‘Have you seen the manager—perhaps he knows?’

‘He called just now, but had heard nothing from her. Oh, Mr Bouchier, she must have met with some accident, or been enticed away for some purpose.’

‘Oh, nonsense!’ said Allan; but all the same he began to grow very nervous. He heard all the particulars Mrs Melville could give, and for his own satisfaction summoned the coachman once more, and heard the little he knew. He was bound to acknowledge that Josephine had acted wisely in sending for him, and was considering what was the best thing to do to trace his wife. Yet he felt averse to take any steps in that direction, thinking the situation was most likely allowable of the simplest explanation—a letter not posted—a telegram not sent, or misdirected—a message not delivered would account for everything.

All the while Mrs Melville had been the chief spokesman. Josephine had only spoken a few words to confirm her narrative when called upon so to do. She had suggested no theory, nor volunteered any consoling supposition. Mrs Melville had soon made him acquainted with all that was to be known; she had even broached her extraordinary idea as to the form professional jealousy might take, an idea, which, in spite of his anxiety, made Allan smile.

He was fairly puzzled, but not a suspicion of evil entered into his head. He sat tugging at his thick moustache, trying to settle on a course of action, hoping that every moment would bring Frances or some news of her which would make the whole affair end in a hearty laugh. Then he turned towards Josephine, who was looking at him with a tender, pitying expression in her eyes. She was summoning up her courage for the painful task before her. Although she had not breathed such a thought to Mrs Melville, she was now convinced that wherever Frances had gone she had gone with Digby Bouchier.

‘What do you think about it, Josephine?’ said Allan.

He must be told. Her face grew pale.

‘Allan,’ she said, ‘let me say a few words to you alone.’

‘Certainly,’ replied Allan; ‘don’t rise, Mrs Melville,’ he added, as that lady showed symptoms of retreating. ‘We will go into the other room.’

He led his sister into the dining-room.

‘I can’t talk about your affairs with this in suspense,’ he said, kindly. ‘Wait until Frances returns.’

He was beginning to feel a little tired, so threw himself into a chair. Josephine knelt beside him, and put her arms round his neck. He knew that she was crying.

‘Poor little girl,’ he said, stroking her hair. ‘I am forgetting that you have troubles too. Tell me what is wrong; but be as quick as you can, as we are wasting time, and I want to be doing something.’

She held his hands. ‘Allan,’ she said, ‘it is your troubles I am thinking of—don’t hate me for ever if I tell you what I know.’

A deadly chill came over him. There was something coming—he dared not think what. Josephine saw the look of fear in his eyes.

‘Oh, Allan!’ she cried wildly, ‘Frances has gone—gone for ever with that villain, that fiend, my husband!’

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## CHAPTER XXI

### FALLEN INTO A TRAP

UPON reaching Charing Cross, Frances had dismissed her carriage and taken a first-class return ticket to B—. She inquired at what junction she must change trains and being instructed as to the right route reached her destination in due course, and stepping from the station to the high road wondered if she had undertaken a wise or a foolish adventure. However, having come so far, she was not going to return without attaining her object. Besides the great end she had in view, she wished to see Manders again, and receive his explanations as to the change of his name; to learn if he were sailing under false colours, or had a right to claim kinship with her husband’s family. If he were an

impostor, her knowledge of his former condition in life would be useful to Josephine, who was longing to be freed from her cruel and worthless husband. So, intent upon the accomplishment of both missions, she took the road as indicated by Manders' letter, and walked on with a quick and resolute step.

It was a beautiful spring—almost summer day. A walk was a great treat to Frances, who was in splendid health. She rejected with scorn the assistance offered by the one frowsy cab at the little station, and walked on till she came to B—, through the long street of which she passed, followed by many curious eyes. She had nothing to conceal, so her veil was not brought into requisition. As she found what an innocent, sleepy little country place she had come to her doubts vanished. No evil could be intended by bringing her down to this quiet place. She walked on more confidently, wondering how long it would be before she encountered Manders. As soon as she was clear of the village she felt inclined, moved by the sunshine and fresh air, to burst into song. She was quite enjoying her walk. Flowers were growing by the wayside, humble little flowers, but she stooped every now and then and picked one or two, until she had quite a posy of them. She smiled at the absurdity of her action—picking wild flowers when she was bent upon an errand of vengeance. She blamed herself for forgetting her object for a moment; threw the flowers away and walked on with a quicker step.

She must have been half-a-mile from B— when the man she expected to see rose from the bank at the side of the road and came to meet her. He saluted her politely.

'I told you, you could not miss the way,' he said.

They walked on side by side for a short distance.

'Where are we going?' asked Frances.

'Only a few steps further. The house is close by.'

Then they came to one of those palings which seem peculiar to places in the vicinity of London. Gray wood palings, about six feet high; formed by overlapping staves. They look very ugly and out of place round a gentleman's grounds, but no doubt have merits which permit them to exist.

'We must go in here,' said Manders, stopping at the gate which he unlocked and held open.

Frances hesitated. Her mistrust began to awake. To

hear the confession of an accessory to a fell crime, it would have seemed more natural had she been conducted to the slums of London. Manders saw her indecision, and shrugged his shoulders.

‘Turn back, even now, if you like,’ he said. ‘I have arranged everything, but that doesn’t matter.’

‘Is the man you spoke of living here?’

‘He is here at present. He will be gone to-morrow. You see his friends are respectable; although, after all, the house inside is but a cottage, as you will see.’

Should she turn back? Even at the moment when, if she could to this limited extent trust her companion, she was on the threshold of learning all. She glanced at him. He was tapping the key on the gate post, and apparently accompanying a tune he was humming. It appeared to him a matter of supreme indifference how she might decide. No, she would go on.

She passed through the gate, which he locked behind her. She found herself in a large untidy, uncared-for garden, through which a moss-grown gravel path led to what looked like a small, low white house. The path was tortuous, and shrubs grew on each side, so she was only able to see that her guide had been quite right in calling the house a cottage. The whole place had a neglected, dirty, deserted appearance, but this partially reassured her. It might not be at all impossible that the man she wanted to see should be an inmate of this unkempt and slovenly establishment.

George Manders said no more until they were close to the house; then he stopped.

‘Would you mind waiting here, behind these shrubs, a minute, Mrs Bouchier?’ he said. ‘I must go on and prepare them for our coming, or we shall not be admitted.’

This seemed reasonable enough, under the peculiar circumstances. Frances was now growing greatly excited. She assented, but waited impatiently.

She was not long kept in suspense. Manders was only away long enough to unlock the front door and change the key from the outside to the inside of the lock; then, leaving the door open, he returned to her.

‘We must be quick,’ he said, with more excitement than he had yet shown. ‘Some one, I fancy, is trying to influence him. Come at once.’

And Frances, without another thought or glance at where

she was going, followed his quick step across a little lawn, and entered the door he held open. It struck her the house smelt damp, and the passage she stood in seemed dark. Manders threw open a door on the left hand.

‘Please step in there,’ he said. She obeyed. The room was almost dark ; only lit by the light which came through the two open doors.

‘Ah, the shutters not opened !’ said Manders, in a tone of surprise. ‘One moment, I will make that all right.’

Then she heard him slam the front door, and everything was darkness. She heard the key turned hastily, and more than that, heard a low chuckle which accompanied that operation. In a second she realised her position. She had been cheated, fooled, entrapped ! This man was the absolute villain Josephine had asserted him to be. She made a mad rush forward, and in the darkness her shoulder struck with great force against the lintel of the door. She almost fell, and was groping blindly in the darkness when she felt herself caught hold of, and, in spite of her resistance, forced back into the room, the door of which was closed and locked by her assailant. She was alone with this man, locked up in a house, too far, she guessed, from any other habitation for her cries to be heard.

Her one impulse was to escape from his hands. Stumbling over chairs, she reached what seemed to her the farthest side of the room. Not a ray of light from window or door broke the gloom. She could hear her assailant moving about ; she heard him remove the key from the lock, and try if the door was firmly fastened. Then she heard the scraping of a match, and there was light again. She welcomed it—anything was better than that dreadful darkness. By the rays of the vesta she could see George Manders’ dark eyes full of a wicked triumph.

He was still near the door, and she found herself standing by the fireplace. The room was a small one. On her right was a window, or what she supposed was a window, although its semblance was hidden by what appeared to be a carpet several times folded, covering it entirely, and, it seemed, nailed to the shutters. On her left was a folding door, opening, she concluded, into a back room. She saw in a glance that the trap she had fallen into had been laid with diabolic skill, and her heart sank as it told her that

the object which had called for the exercise of such ingenuity must be a serious one.

Strong, muscularly strong, as she was for a woman, she knew the hopelessness of a struggle between any woman and a tall, powerful man like the villain before her. Only by the exercise of strength far beyond her means could she free herself by physical force. Should she scream? Intuitively she knew that his cunning had brought her to a spot where no scream, within the capabilities even of *Mdlle. Francesca*, could attract a passer's notice. The craft this villain had displayed appalled her. What would the end be? Till she knew his true intentions, let her be self-possessed and struggle against fear.

All these thoughts, observations, and resolves came to Frances in a second—before the rascal broke silence.

'Mrs Bouchier,' he said, 'I must apologise for my behaviour, which I will explain by-and-bye. Meanwhile, will you allow me to light the candles behind you?'

He spoke respectfully, so much so, that a nameless dread which was dimly forming in her thoughts was somewhat modified. At any cost she must have light. She said nothing, but moving from her station took the side of the room Manders had quitted, and tried, as a despairing chance, to open the door.

'I tested that lock pretty well yesterday,' he said, without turning round; 'so don't waste your strength on it.'

He lit the two candles on the mantelpiece, then unlocking a cupboard in a piece of furniture, took out several more. Frances was glad to see the action. Anything was better than to be left in darkness with this ruffian.

With the candles he produced a box of cigars, and, lighting one, drew a chair to the table and sat down.

'Take a chair,' he said; 'I want to have a talk with you, Frances.'

She looked at him with scorn too great for words. He laughed.

'Of course you are mad with me. I have brought you down here, and here you stay as long as I choose. But you need not be frightened.'

'I am not frightened. Tell me what your villainy means?'

'I'll tell you what I want presently. But sit down; keep the table between us, if you like.'

She sat down opposite him. For all the good it would do her, it was as well to sit as to stand. Her one idea was to show him she was not afraid.

‘I must keep you a little while, for I have a great deal to say. First of all, I must tell you there is no house within a quarter of a mile of this. It is known to be empty, so no one will call. The window, as you see, is padded; so, if I let you hammer at it, no one would hear, and if you scream, I don’t think you can attract any notice. Anyway, you are my prisoner for the next few days, if I wish to keep you.

‘My husband will find out where I am, and soon free me,’ said Frances.

Manders blew out a wreath of smoke.

‘That dear Allan, my brother-in law,’ he said, ‘shall I tell you what he will do and where he will be to-morrow?’

‘He will be here to reckon with you, if you dare to detain me.’

‘I don’t think he will. They will get alarmed at your absence, and will send for Allan. He will come back, and Josephine, my darling wife, will tell him how I called, how you found I was a dear old friend. Josephine is very suspicious. She will send Allan to the Langham. He will find that I have left to-day with a friend for Nice—left Charing Cross. Then Allan will rage and fume, and will take the first train to follow me and you. He will go hunting about the Continent, and perhaps in a fortnight’s time come back to England.’

Her heart sank. She quite believed he had taken steps to ensure this result. Josephine’s words and manner came back to her. She saw what they meant.

‘Then,’ continued Manders, ‘when he returns he will perhaps find that you have been spending a few days with your old friend here.’

‘He will take a full amount of revenge,’ said Frances.

‘He will try to. I shan’t blame him. You see I rented this pretty quiet place for the benefit of a person who was much kinder to me than Josephine. I am afraid the truth is well known in B—. I daresay Allan will want to shoot me, but you’ll find it hard work to make matters clear to him—or to any one else, I expect.’

Frances grew crimson as she grasped the full extent of his villainy. She rose from her chair.

‘And you!’ she cried, in scathing accents, ‘you to whom my father and I showed nothing but kindness, to plot and intrigue to ruin me in my husband’s eyes. If you have any feeling of manhood left, open the doors and let me go.’

‘You may go free any moment you like after you have heard what I have to say, and promised me something. I only want to show you exactly how you stand. Your fate is in your own hands. Will you listen?’

‘Speak on and let me know the worst a man is capable of.’

‘Oh, I’m capable of anything. But sit down again; it seems more comfortable.’

‘I prefer standing.’

‘All right; stand as long as you like. I am in no hurry, but I shan’t speak until you sit down.’

The question was not worth disputing. She resumed her seat.

‘That’s better,’ said Manders, smoking with an air of enjoyment. ‘Now listen, and you’ll see what I want you to do. It’s very little, but until you promise to do it we must continue to be fellow lodgers.’

‘I suppose you want me to assist you in carrying out your imposture?’

‘Something of that kind. It suited me to believe and state that my name was Digby Bouchier. Every one has believed that for the last three years. It was under that name that I won Josephine’s affections. I told her I was the heir to Redhills, and could turn them all out at any moment. Smart, wasn’t it?’

Frances withheld her approbation—his cynical candour was revolting.

‘Well, as you know all about me, and, I suppose, are burning to tell Allan and all of them that I am not a Bouchier, but the son of poor but honest parents named Manders, I have been obliged to keep out of your way as long as possible. Looking after Josephine, I tumbled against you. That was a mistake on my part.’

‘Then,’ said Frances, slowly, ‘all the tale you told me about the penitent criminal—the tale which lured me down here—was false?’

‘Utterly. That was smart, wasn’t it? Takes a Yankee to devise such a plan as that.’

‘Go on,’ said Frances.



‘I guess there isn’t much more to say. It suits me to keep the whole thing dark for another month—after that I don’t care. You can tell everybody that Digby Bouchier is George Manders. You swear that until this day month you keep silence, and here are the keys for you, you can walk out at once, catch the train, and be in town by five o’clock.’

‘What is the alternative?’ asked Frances, disdainfully.

Manders laughed, and flipped his cigar ash into the untidy grate behind him.

‘There is none,’ he said. ‘It’s only a matter of time—you’ll have to promise before you leave this place; so you’d better be a sensible girl, and make up your mind to do so at once—not send poor Allan right across France after you.’

‘I will never promise—never. If you have taken these pains to ensure my silence, your ends must be utterly evil. You are a liar, an impostor, and, for all I know, a murderer. Let me go!’

‘Better consider the matter a bit,’ said Manders, tilting back his chair and putting his hands in his pockets. ‘There’s no harm done yet; you can be home in a couple of hours. By-and-bye it will be too late to avoid gossip and scandal.’

She made no reply, but, turning her head away, looked carefully round the room—there was no means of escape. She rose and tried the folding doors on her right hand. These were locked. Manders watched every action, but for a while said nothing.

‘Well,’ he asked, at length, ‘have you considered?’

She had considered, and felt convinced that he was weaving some diabolical plot—something that must needs be evil to her husband’s people. By this time she rightly believed that he was capable of any villainy. How could she keep silent for the time he specified, and know that he was working unchecked to accomplish the object he had in view. This might be Allan’s ruin, Josephine’s ruin, Mr Bouchier’s ruin, in fact, every one’s ruin. No, she would never consent; nothing should wring such a promise from her. Besides, she felt if it was to be a contest of will between herself and Manders, she was quite his match; therefore, when he repeated his question, she set her lips firmly and looked him full in the face.

‘I will never promise,’ she said. ‘I will stay here until I am released ; but I will promise nothing.’

Manders muttered an oath.

‘You are a foolish, obstinate woman,’ he said. ‘Now we shall have to see which can tire the other out. Until you swear you keep silence for a month, you stay here, my prisoner. You’ll have to give in sooner or later.’

She said nothing, but sat still thinking what to do. She looked at her watch, and found the hour was nearly three. In that room it might have been any time. There was not a ray of daylight to show it was not midnight. She thought of the distance from the road to the house, and wondered if it were not possible to attract the attention of some passer by a prolonged scream. To be entrapped and imprisoned in this way seemed absurd. A hundred yards or so from the high road, and within a few miles from London. Surely her voice would reach as far as the road, and some one would come to her assistance. She hated the idea of resorting to the feminine extremity—screaming—but what could she do? She could not overpower her jailer ; no one was likely to come by chance or on business to that deserted cottage ; she had seen Manders lock the gate securely. Her only hope of escape was to make her voice heard. She must try, much as she disliked screaming in cold blood. If no one came to her aid, her only chance left would be to tire her captor out, to pit her power of resisting fatigue and watching against his. No, she would promise nothing, unless her life was in absolute danger—nothing.

Having fallen such an easy victim to his craft, she quite believed that he had arranged things so that Allan would be lured away on a false scent. Her heart grew sick with the thought ; her cheeks flushed at the idea of her husband pursuing her and Manders on the Continent. How bitterly she regretted the desire for revenge which had been played on by this villain, and so led her into such straits. She must make some one hear !

So she stood up, opened her shoulders, drew a long breath, and screamed a scream, which, coming without warning, made Manders jump in his chair. He had evidently counted upon this proceeding, as it appeared to trouble him little. He lit a fresh cigar and laughed, while his prisoner sent scream after scream, hoping one might succeed in travelling

the distance. At last utterly exhausted, she sank on her chair, waiting to see if her efforts had attracted any attention.

‘It’s not a bit of good,’ said Manders. ‘You’ll only ruin your voice and tire yourself out. I’ll bet you don’t make any one hear, if you scream for a month.’

From the composure with which he regarded her efforts, she felt he was speaking the truth in this respect. The way he had deadened the windows was with a view of guarding against her cries being heard.

She sat down, and for three hours neither spoke nor moved. It seemed like a horrible dream. It was now past six o’clock. She knew that Josephine and Mrs Melville would be wondering at her absence—she dreaded lest they should telegraph even then for her husband. The idea that for one moment Allan should be led to suspect her of wrong was maddening. Had a loaded pistol been in her hand she would have shot that wretch opposite to her without compunction. Yet she grew more and more resolved to lend herself in no way to his schemes.

He sat all the while in the same chair, smoking continually. The air grew heavy and foul with the fumes of his strong cigars. The room was small, and only ventilated by the chimney and the crevices of the doors. Part of the time he read, or pretended to read, a dog-eared novel, several of which were scattered about; but he kept the while a close watch on his captive. At half-past six he rose.

‘Still determined?’ he asked.

Frances did not trouble to reply.

‘Then I must prepare for the siege,’ he said, opening the cupboard behind him and taking out some provisions, a bottle of brandy and soda water. He made a hearty meal and then replaced everything except the brandy and the soda water. ‘Sorry I must be ungallant enough to refrain from asking you to share my meal,’ he said, ‘but if the besiegers supplied the besieged with provisions the fortress would never fall.’

Till then the thought of hunger and thirst had not occurred to her. He intended, she saw, to starve her into submission. However, she was not hungry or thirsty yet; so put off considering the evil moment.

Presently Manders spoke again.

‘I don’t mind doing what I can to make you comfortable, so long as I don’t injure myself. You ain’t very

cheerful company, so if you like to go into the next room, I've no objection.'

He opened the folding doors, then coming back put a lighted candle on the table near her.

'You can go in there,' he said, 'if you like, and stay there till you are tired; but you must leave the door open so that I can see what you're about, if I want to. If you try to break down things and get to the windows I shall come in and stop with you, or make you come back here.'

Anything was better than his company. She took the candle, and passed into the adjoining room.

It was furnished in the half-bedroom, half-sitting-room style. The same precaution had been taken with respect to the window, and a chest of drawers was placed in front of the door, which was no doubt locked. She could not get at it without removing the piece of furniture and alarming Manders. She could sit in semi-privacy behind the half open folding door, but she knew that if she approached the window he must see her. Screaming in this room she felt would be less likely to aid her than in the other.

Still she was alone—away from those hateful eyes. She could throw herself on a chair and collect her thoughts. She need not check the tears which in spite of her bold bearing were springing to her eyes. She could pray and hope that some chance, or some mistake on Manders' part, might reveal her whereabouts to the friends, who she was certain would be seeking her high and low to-morrow. She felt glad she had not veiled herself as she walked through the little village. Many persons must have seen her, and would be able to put inquirers on the right track. She would be traced to Charing Cross, where some one may have noticed her. Yes, she would hold out for a long while yet.

There was a washstand in the room. She ventured to pour out a little water and bathe her face, not without fear that her jailer would intrude when he heard her movements. But he did not; and, feeling refreshed, she sat down to pass the long and sleepless hours as best she could.

One by one they passed. She drew out her watch and wound it up; it would be terrible not to have the means of knowing how the time went. It was now night; she had touched nothing since breakfast time—nearly twelve hours ago. She drank a little of the brackish water left

in the ewer and assuaged her burning thirst. Manders, she knew, was still smoking, and, she supposed, drinking ; as from time to time she heard the chink of glass and the gurgling of fluid. Would he eventually drink himself to sleep? This was the only chance of escape she could think of, unless the rescue came from without.

Her candle had now burnt down into the socket. She felt she dare not stay there in darkness ; she feared she might drop off to sleep if the light were withdrawn. She must have another candle ; must summon up her courage to go to him and demand it. Moreover, it was better to show him she was not afraid. So she stepped boldly into the front room.

‘Going to give in?’ he asked, as she entered.

‘Give me another candle,’ she said, peremptorily.

‘Help yourself,’ he said, throwing several on the table ; ‘there’s lots here—enough for a week, I calculate.’

She took a couple, and whilst so doing glanced at him. No, he was not drunk yet. But there was a look in his dark eyes which sent a thrill of fear through her—a look she had not seen there yet—a look that made her long for a weapon. She felt, as she retreated to her own domain, that those eyes were following her. What would happen if sleep or fatigue overpowered her? Brave as she was she shuddered at the thought. Should she yield and promise? Never, till in the last extremity! Should she promise, and, considering how that promise was extorted, break it the moment she was free? No, she could not do that. A promise or an oath, no matter how given, must be sacred to Frances Bouchier. Oh, if Allan were here ; her strong, brave husband! She pictured his wrath—pictured him shaking Manders like a rat—and this mental picture gave her great comfort. The reverse of it, unfortunately, was Allan falling, like herself, into a trap, and rushing off to the Continent in search of her. The hours wore on until she found it was midnight.

She was growing very hungry, and the fear began to form in her mind that simple starvation would compel her at last to yield. But not yet ; she could hold out many hours yet. She took another draught of the bad water, and, as she turned round afterwards, saw Manders standing inside the door, with wicked eyes gleaming at her.

She faced him boldly, but her heart sank.

‘I don’t see why I should sit all alone,’ he said, with a thick utterance. ‘You come in and cheer me up.’

‘I choose to stay here,’ she answered.

‘Then I’ll come in here, too; hanged if I don’t. A fellow doesn’t often get such a lovely girl as you to talk to. I’ll come in.’

Without a word she passed him, and took her old seat in the front room. She must not show the fear she felt. Oh, if Allan were here!

Manders followed her, and, obedient to a motion of her hand, seated himself in the same chair he had occupied so long. Then he poured out more brandy, and looked across at her.

‘Now, let’s be jolly and comfortable,’ he said. ‘I can’t bear to keep away from such a beauty as you are, Frances. Everybody hasn’t got the finest woman in the world staying of her own free will with him.’

He seemed about to rise. Frances looked at him—such a look, speaking such volumes that he quailed before her eyes and sank back into his chair. For the time she had conquered. But by-and-by!—Manders muttered something, and took a long pull at his glass, which almost emptied it. He then poured out more spirit.

She saw the action, and trembled. He still had his wits about him, but after a few more glasses he might be madly intoxicated—too wild to listen to or be satisfied by any promise, even if she could bring herself to make it. What would become of her, shut up with a ruffian drunk enough to commit any crime, sober enough to execute it? The bottle which held the brandy was a very large one—originally it might have contained two quarts. He poured as much as seemed good to him into his glass, then, replacing the bottle by his side, turned for water to qualify the liquor. In a second her resolve was made; with a sweep of her long arm she sent bottle and glass from the table—dashed them off with such vigour that both broke into fragments against the wainscotting. It was a rash act, and she trembled for the consequences. But anything was better than seeing the man grow more and more dangerous. At one time she had looked forward to his complete intoxication as a means of her release, but she had not taken the intermediate stage into account.

Manders sprang to his feet, and, dropping the mask

altogether, hurled a volley of curses at her. Then he picked up the bottom of the bottle, hoping to find something left there; but the work of destruction had been thoroughly done. The air was thick and oppressive with the exhalations rising from the spilled spirit, and Frances prayed she might not faint.

For a moment the ruffian seemed inclined to attack her. He glared and swore at her. She feared the worst. Then he went back to his chair, and resuming his cigar smoked sullenly for about half-an-hour.

'You think you have been devilish clever,' he said, looking across at her; 'but it's the best thing you could have done for me. I can't get screwed now. I guess, about this time to-morrow you'll feel like giving in. You'll be begging on your knees for something to eat and drink. You'll have to pay a high price I can tell you.'

'I shall be free long before to-morrow evening. I left word where I was going.'

Manders started and looked at her intently, then turned away with a laugh.

'That's a lie—you'd have told me so before if you had. You're gone to Nice with me, and dear Allan will be off after us to-morrow evening.'

Hour after hour of that long night crept by. The two, the captor and the captive, sat silent but wakeful, eyeing each other. Manders spoke several times, but Frances declined to open her lips again. He went to his cupboard once or twice and eat some of his provisions, chuckling as he did so. Frances once or twice crept into the back room and drank the brackish water. She dreaded that he would deprive her of even that poor resource. But he did not—there may be a depth of brutality to which no man is able to sink.

Hour after hour passed by. It was morning—nine, ten, eleven, and still the watchers sat. Frances for a while began to grow dreamy; yes, she must be dreaming. That reeking room, the close atmosphere, the candles one after another burning down—could it be possible that outside that sealed window was broad, bright sunlight—that birds were singing and flowers open in the hedges? Then she almost feared she was losing her senses. By a great effort she rose, and paced to and fro. She must keep awake—she

must struggle on till the night—then exhausted nature she knew would have her own way, and she must yield.

To think it was broad daylight outside! People passing within a few hundred yards; yet she might as well be in the deepest cell of the Inquisition. She must make them hear—she would try again.

She screamed wildly, and knew her scream to-day was but a pitiful echo of that of yesterday. She soon desisted. If no one heard her before, it was absurd to suppose they would hear now. Forgetting her companion, she fell back on her chair, and covered her eyes with her hands.

Manders leant across.

‘Will you give in and promise?’ he asked.

His voice was hoarse and changed, but the sound of it awoke Frances to a recollection of where she was. She raised her head.

‘Never!’ she said.

He ground his teeth and looked at his watch—it was twelve o’clock.

‘I’m getting tired of this,’ he said, ‘you’re in better training than I am. I’ve had as much as I can stand of it. I thought I could last you out, but now I don’t think I can. I’m just good for a few hours longer; then if you won’t swear to keep your mouth shut, I’ll shut it once and for all. If I’ve got to use this it’s your own fault.’

He opened his coat as he spoke and showed her the butt of what her American experiences told her was a revolver.

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## CHAPTER XXII

### FOLLOWING A TRAIL

WHEN Allan Bouchier heard the astounding assertion made by Josephine, his first thought was that she had taken leave of her senses. She must surely be mad to couple his wife’s name with that of her rascally husband. However, he soon saw that she was as much in her right mind and as responsible for her statements as he himself was, so his suspicions as to her sanity changed into good honest anger. He started to his feet, and released himself from her embrace.



‘What nonsense are you talking, Josephine?’ he asked sternly.

‘None at all. I wish it was nonsense. Let me tell you all that has happened.’

Josephine was weeping so piteously that Allan knew she was miserable at having to impart her intelligence.

‘Speak on,’ he said; ‘but be careful what you say. There are some things a man cannot forgive his sister even. Now, collect yourself, and try and speak sensibly.’

Josephine dried her eyes.

‘I told you that Digby said he knew Frances.’

‘Yes; I asked Frances—she had never seen him. It was one of the man’s lies.’

‘But she did know him. On Thursday afternoon he called here and was shown into the drawing-room, where Frances and I were. Oh, Allan! I thought he had come for me; but it was to see Frances he came. As soon as he entered the room she sprang up, and cried, “At last—after so many years.” She almost threw herself into his arms.’

‘Almost did what?’ asked Allan, so fiercely that Josephine regretted the exaggeration she had been guilty of.

‘She ran forward to shake hands with him. She seemed overjoyed to see him.’

‘Well, what else?’

‘I didn’t see anything else. I was so frightened at his having found me out that I left the room. Neither of them seemed to notice whether I went or stayed. Oh, Allan! I am so sorry to have to tell you this.’

‘Go on,’ said Allan, shortly.

‘Then by-and-bye Frances came out and said she was at home to no one. They sat together in the drawing-room for more than an hour. Then Digby went.’

Allan felt the matter was getting beyond his comprehension.

‘He must have been known under another name to Frances,’ he said. ‘I can see nothing as yet to justify you in making such a wild assertion.’

‘The worst has to come; you have not heard all.’

‘Frances knew he was your husband, of course?’

‘She seemed greatly astonished when I told her so after he had gone. Then she begged me to say nothing about his visit for a few days. She said she would rather you did not know of it.’

Allan was growing frightened.

'You must be mistaken, Josephine; or else Frances had good reasons for silence. Has he been here since?'

'No; but yesterday a letter came while we were at breakfast. I saw the writing—it was Digby's.'

'Go on,' said Allan, hoarsely.

'Some one was waiting for an answer. Frances seemed to consider for a long time; then she wrote two or three words, and sent them by the messenger. Then she asked for a time-table, ordered the brougham, and drove to Charing Cross. Allan! don't be angry with me. What could I think?'

His face was full of fierce wrath. He could not believe evil of Frances; but, in the face of Josephine's tale, could not doubt but she had left her house owing to the letter sent by Digby. He must do something to set his mind at rest.

'Where is that dog of a husband of yours staying?' he asked. 'At the Langham, isn't it?'

'He was there. I think he has been there lately.'

Allan was out of the room before she had finished her sentence. Her first thought was to recall him, and tell him where she supposed his wife had gone to. Yet it might be better to let Allan inquire first if Digby was at the Langham. She ran to the window, saw him jump into a cab, and drive off in the direction of the hotel.

In twenty minutes he returned, and his appearance as he entered made his sister's heart ache—she scarcely knew her brother. His face was pale, and his blue eyes gleamed with suppressed rage. There was an air of relentless purpose about him which boded ill for Digby Bouchier. Josephine thought he looked at least ten years older. He strode into the room and shut the door.

'It is true—too true,' he said.

Josephine's tears sprang to her eyes.

'Oh, Allan! what will you do?'

'Do!' he spoke with a fierceness which startled her—'there is but one thing for me to do. All men don't do it, but I shall.'

She knew what he meant.

'Run upstairs and put a few things in a bag for me,' he said, speaking very calmly, but in a manner utterly unlike him. 'I must have something to eat and drink before I go.'

‘Where are you going?’

‘Where am I going? Why, to find my wife and your husband, Josephine.’

‘But where?’

‘To Nice first; afterwards, God knows where.’

‘Why should you go to Nice to look for them?’

‘Because Mr Digby Bouchier let people at the hotel know that he and a friend were going together to Nice. He started from Charing Cross yesterday morning. He even left instructions for his letters to be sent to Nice. So to Nice I am going. When I come back I expect you will be a widow, Josephine. But you won’t blame me for that.’

He spoke without any inflated threats—simply as one who has made up his mind to do a perfectly natural thing—kill the man who had taken his wife away.

‘Allan,’ said Josephine, ‘listen a moment to me.’

‘I can’t stop; go and do as I tell you.’

‘You, a clever man,’ said Josephine, ‘ought to know that if my husband has gone away, as you fear, the last address he would leave would be the right one.’

Allan started. What if he were to go on the Continent on a fool’s errand, and his absence give this villain time to get off scot free?

‘No,’ said Josephine, ‘he has never left England. Both he and Frances are here, almost close at hand.’

‘Why do you think so? Tell me before I go mad.’

She fetched the time-table which Frances had consulted on the morning she left. She pointed out the stain on the page, and told Allan how it came to be there. She pointed to the very train by which Frances had travelled.

‘B—!’ he said, incredulously. ‘Why should they have gone to B—?’

Josephine hung her head. Her tears were streaming down her cheeks. It seemed so dreadful to be the one to say such shameful things of her brother’s wife—to hint at what she suspected. But it must be done.

‘Allan,’ she said, ‘may Heaven forgive me if I am judging wrong. Do you remember those two letters I gave you?’

‘Well, *what* of them?’ Allan spoke impatiently.

‘They were from a woman—a woman, a friend of my husband. They were dated from B—. Digby has rented house there for some time.’

Allan saw at once her meaning. She had put it as delicately as possible; but it thrilled every fibre of his frame. He sprang to his feet.

‘The name of the house? Tell me?’ he cried.

‘It is called “The Shrubbery.” I know nothing else about it.’

He ran his eyes down the table of trains. There was time to catch the next. He tossed off a glass of wine, and in a minute had re-entered the cab which was waiting for him, and was speeding away to Charing Cross.

As he went down to B—he had leisure to think over what had occurred. He laughed a bitter laugh as he realised the change a few short hours had made in his life. Josephine’s circumstantial evidence seemed without a flaw. Everything showed that her conjecture was the right one—that Frances had disappeared with Digby Bouchier. The denial of any acquaintance with him would not in itself have much troubled Allan, but, taken in connection with subsequent events, it exercised him greatly. The truth is that Allan had a vein of jealousy in his composition; it had never been trenched upon until now. As it was, when he thought of the instantaneous recognition and warm welcome, described by Josephine as given by his wife to Digby Bouchier, the prolonged interview afterwards, the letter in his handwriting, the answer sent, the immediate departure by train, he began to wonder whether it could be possible that the woman who he thought loved him had left him at the call of another. Worse—far worse than anything, was the wish she had expressed to Josephine that nothing might be said about her visitor for a few days. Could it be that he was to be added to the many who had been utterly deceived and wrecked by women on whose loyalty they would have staked their salvation? If so, he would at least take a man’s revenge on the villain who had brought shame on him—a good old-fashioned, thorough revenge. Allan Bouchier set his teeth. He was in that frame of mind in which a man does dark and terrible deeds. Perhaps in all the Bouchiers there was a drop of tiger’s blood which came to the surface when occasion called for it.

Yet, again and again his wife’s face rose before him, as he had last, as he had always seen it—pure, true, and beautiful. Again and again he thought of her as he had always found her—without one thought of evil. No, he

swore to himself it could not be true—it should not be true. Men have been deceived by women again and again, but not by a woman like Frances. She had gone away for some good reason; even if she had gone with Digby Bouchier, it was still for some good reason. She would explain everything when they met.

Then he remembered what in his agitation he had forgotten until now. To-night she was to sing in opera. She who had never yet disappointed the public, and often vowed she never would do so. Yet she was away. For the once her devotion to the stage consoled him. It was more than the evil Josephine had been compelled to hint at that kept his wife away. Yet this comfort opened up a new source of dread. Could any bodily harm have befallen her? Could she be—his blood ran cold—dead? Even Mrs Melville's wild suggestion did not seem so improbable to him.

How slowly the train went! Should they never get to B—? Yet he had not much hope, or rather fear, of finding her there. The new departure taken by his thoughts seemed to forbid it. Why should she have gone to B— with his sister's husband? Oh, what a blight that man had cast on the whole family! He ground his teeth again, and his former frame of mind returned.

B— at last! Now, what was he to do? He must find his way to the village and inquire the whereabouts of 'The Shrubbery.' He walked along the same road Frances walked the day before, and came to the sleepy little village. There he entered a saddler's shop and began his inquiries.

'Can you tell me if there is a place near here called "The Shrubbery?"'

'Yes, sir; about half-a-mile out of the town. Keep straight along the road, and you'll pass it on the left hand.'

Allan noticed the tradesman eyed him curiously as he replied to his inquiry.

'Who lives there?' he asked.

The saddler laughed. 'If you don't know, I'm sure I don't,' he said, with a meaning smile. Allan frowned.

'If I knew I should not ask you. Kindly tell me.'

The little saddler saw he had been taking a liberty, and hastened to atone for it.

'We none of us exactly know who lives there,' he said. Some one who called herself Mrs Montague lived there a

few weeks ago, but she's gone, and the place has been shut up since.'

'Is it shut up now?'

'That I can't say, sir. I saw Mr Montague pass through the village yesterday morning, and I haven't seen him pass back again; so he may be there.'

'Who is Mr Montague?'

'We none of us know exactly who Mr Montague is,' said the saddler.

'Describe him to me.'

The saddler did so, and Allan knew that Mr Montague was Digby Bouchier. The tradesman's manner told him precisely in what light 'The Shrubbery', and its late tenant were looked upon by the B— folk; and Allan's blood boiled as he remembered he was seeking his wife there. It could not be—it must be some horrible mistake.

'Do you think this Mr Montague is there now?' he asked.

'Well—yes, I think so,' said the saddler, with a cunning smile on his face. 'Oh yes, I think so, certainly.'

'Why?' asked Allan, setting his teeth.

'Well, you see, an hour after Mr Montague went by yesterday, I was looking out at the door and I saw a young woman pass—such a pretty creature she was too!'

The saddler shook his head in a way which spoke volumes.

'What of that?' asked Allan, feeling as he spoke his whole body tingling.

'She was a pretty creature! Well, she hasn't passed back again, any more than Mr Montague—that's all.'

All! It was more than enough. His worst fears were confirmed. He could not doubt but the young woman who had excited his informant's admiration and pity was his own wife. She had gone yesterday to 'The Shrubbery.' She had stayed there ever since. She was there now—and her companion was this Montague—this Digby Bouchier under a false name. It was all over! All but vengeance. He would take a man's vengeance. Life was nothing to him now. He could kill this villain, and then—never mind 'and then': nothing mattered afterwards.

He controlled his agitation. 'I want to see Mr Montague,' he said. 'How shall I know the house?'

He drew out half-a-sovereign, which, the saddler being in a very humble way of trade, was thankfully accepted.

'You can't miss it, sir; it's the only house after you get clear of the town on the left hand side. You can't see it from the road, but you can see the palings round the garden.'

Allan left the shop and walked as fast as he could in the direction of 'The Shrubbery.' He would have run at his top speed, but he did not wish to attract the attention of the villagers. He was soon at the fence which surrounded the garden of the cottage. He glanced up and down the road, and seeing no one, placed his hands on the top of the palings, drew himself up, and looked over. He was none the wiser for so doing, as a thick hedge hid everything inside from his sight. He dropped back on to the road, and walked on until he came to the gate through which Frances passed the day before. It was a strong rustic gate, through the crevices of which he could peer and see a winding path, with shrubs on each side. The gate was locked, and he saw no signs of a bell or other means of asking for admission; not that he would have used them had they been there. His object was to enter the house unseen and unsuspected. There was no one in sight, so, placing his foot on one of the cross-bars of the rustic gate, in a moment he was inside the fence.

He walked rapidly along the winding path until it emerged from the shrubs and led up to the house door. Then he paused to reconnoitre, and, as he saw the cottage, a feeling of joy came over him. His fears were groundless—the house was absolutely deserted. The whole garden round it uncared for and full of weeds, the grass on the lawn untrimmed, and every window in the house with shutters up. It was plain that no living creature was about. He felt so relieved at the evidence of emptiness that he had time to wonder who could have built so small a house on so large a plot of ground. It was only a one-storey cottage—a small villa, containing at the most six rooms. He walked up to the front door, and noticed that there was no knocker, and that the bell handle had been removed from its socket. The house might have been untenanted for months. However, to make sure, he went round to the back; every window there was shuttered and closed. He looked at the chimneys—not a sign of smoke

came from either. He pushed open a little door, which led into a small paved yard with offices round it. From this yard he was able to look through a window which had no shutters up—the kitchen window—and see the fireless grate, the clock which was not going, and other evidences of non-occupation. Wherever Frances might be, she was not here. If she came to B—to meet Digby, ‘The Shrubbery’ was not their destination. He must now retrace his steps, and—degrading task—inquire if others had seen the lady whose personal appearance so favourably impressed the village saddler.

He did not even knock at the door. Beyond a doubt the house was empty. Besides, he had no intention of knocking at doors if it could be avoided. So, little guessing he was within a few yards of the wife he sought, he returned to the path through the shrubs, intending to leave the precincts at once.

He was now in a mood more suitable for noticing trivial things. He reached the spot where Digby asked Frances to wait whilst he gave notice of her coming, when a dark object on the side of the path caught his eye. Raising it he found it was a thick black veil, such a one as Josephine had told him she noticed in his wife’s hand when she left the house. In her anxiety to obey her conductor’s command, to come quickly lest the door should be closed against them Frances had let it fall. She had either not noticed the loss, or had not ventured to delay in order to recover a thing of such trifling importance.

Allan looked at the veil, and all hope that it was not his wife who had yesterday passed through B— was at an end. He knew the veil well; it was one he had bought by her instructions in America. He remembered choosing it—the thickest and most concealing that could be obtained. He remembered laughing at the way in which it completely hid Frances’ features. It was so dark and thick that it almost defeated its own ends of freeing the wearer from fear of recognition and observation, by attracting curiosity. He knew it too well!

She had been to that house. Was she there now? Could it be possible that the closed shutters and general uninhabited appearance of the place were nothing but a part of a plan to evade pursuit? He hated himself for the suspicion, but determined he would see the inside of that cottage



before he left. If it should be, as he believed, empty, he might at least find some other traces of his wife.

How was he to get in? If he knocked or kicked at the door it would be useless. If there were people inside, they wished to make outsiders believe that the house was deserted. Hence the closed shutters and fireless kitchen grate. He might knock all night to no purpose except that of giving the alarm. No, he would get in if possible, unseen and unheard—and then! Allan ground his teeth and strode back to the house.

He went to work very deliberately. His wrath was at white heat. He could plan and calculate—and act when the time came. He saw at once that the front of the house was impregnable—four shuttered windows and a stout door would defy his resources. He must gain ingress from the back.

To the back he went once more, but before attempting to force his way in, walked to the end of the grounds and looked over the fence. Broad green meadows stretched away in the rear of 'The Shrubbery.' Here and there, a long way off, he could see white farm-houses. A curious look—not a pleasant one—stole over Allan's face as he saw what an isolated place the cottage was. 'If he is there,' he muttered, 'I shall have him all to myself. We need not be afraid of interruption.' Yet, he did not believe there was any one in the house.

But another thought struck him. Digby Bouchier was out—he could not bring himself to say they were out. It was fine enough to tempt every one out. No one could stay in a hermetically sealed abode. He would be back by-and-bye, in the gray of the evening, and upon entering his house would find an unexpected visitor waiting for him. This supposition was probably correct. Allan felt glad to think he would meet him in the gray of the evening, not by broad daylight like it was now—for it was scarcely six o'clock, and the sun had some way yet to sink.

Now to get into the house. He began to wish for the assistance of an experienced housebreaker. He had little doubt but he could find a way of entering through that kitchen window; but could he do it noiselessly? If he broke a pane of glass he would alarm the inmates if there were any. His object was to guard against this. He went once more into the back yard, and closed the little

door behind him. He was free from all chance of observation and interruption. Then he looked at the window, and tried to think how a housebreaker would set to work.

He discovered an empty wine case, which he placed under the window ledge. Mounting this case, he found his head well above the middle of the window. He made no attempt to raise the sash, as through the centre pane he could see that the hasp was shut. If that centre pane were out of the way he could put his hand in and undo the fastening. Yes, he could get in easily enough. Let him thrust his gloved hand through the glass and the thing was done.

But not without noise. There would be a crash of broken glass, which would give the alarm. He must find a better way than that one.

What made him the more anxious to proceed quietly was the fact of this one window being so slightly guarded. Every other window barred and bolted—this one, the very one a housebreaker would choose, left at his mercy. It made him think that after all some one was inside, or some one would return very soon. The truth, although Allan knew it not, was that George Manders had no fear of an assault from the outside. His closed windows were only closed to keep in the prisoner he had caught, and to make the house appear untenanted. As no one could see the kitchen window without entering the yard, he had not troubled about it, or had forgotten it.

Allan took off his glove, and drew a diamond ring from his finger. 'Her gift on our wedding day,' he said to himself. He could cut the glass with that, but still the pane must fall inside. Then a brilliant inspiration seized him.

Out came his knife, and with it he ripped up the side of his thick dog-skin glove; then from it he cut as large a piece of leather as possible. This he threw into a half-filled water-butt standing near him, and for a minute or two let it soak. He searched in his pockets and found a piece of string, the end of which he fastened to the centre of the sodden leather. Every schoolboy knows the toy, and knows how heavy a stone it will raise if properly applied. Allan spread it out over the pane of glass, pressed all air from under it, saw that it adhered firmly, then,

holding the string in his left hand, went to work with the diamond.

It is not easy for an unskilled hand to cut glass with a diamond ring, but, after a few attempts, one of the edges of a facet caught properly, and Allan contrived to make a long scratch, enclosing an irregular oval round the piece of leather. Replacing his ring on his finger, he struck the glass smartly; the piece fell in at once, and to his delight remained dangling by the string, which he now held very short in his left hand. It was true it jarred a little against the pane below, but only for a second, and the noise it made was not great. He pulled it up, and drew it through the aperture; then swiftly, but noiselessly, put back the catch of the window. The road was clear.

The sash went up easily; he stepped over the windowsill, and stood in the little dirty kitchen. He was without weapon of any kind; but he wanted none. He was a tall, powerful man, and was confident that as soon as his enemy was in his grip, weapons might be dispensed with. He was lightly clad, with nothing to interfere with the free play of his muscular arms.

Yet he paused for a second. Could he, this man who had stolen into another's house, who was ready and eager to proceed to any extremity, could he be the Allan Bouchier who rose this morning with every joy in life his own? He had lived through years since then. No, he was not the same man; it may be he would never again be his former self. However, that mattered little at the present moment. Now to work.

He passed noiselessly over the flagged floor, and found the door was not locked; but upon opening it he saw that another door, one of green baize, at right angles to the kitchen door, barred his passage. It was locked or bolted. For a moment he thought his exertions had been useless, but upon examination he found the wood-work under the baize was a skeleton frame, covered on each side with the thick woollen material. His penknife was called into requisition. A long slit was soon made, through which he put his hand and felt a bolt. Very quietly and cautiously he drew it back—it was the only fastening; the door opened noiselessly, and he looked into a passage with doors on each side—a passage which he knew led to the front door.

He closed the baize door behind him, intending to strike a match and pursue his investigations. He could hear nothing ; but his first impression was that the place reeked of cigar smoke. But it was clear there was no living creature in the house.

The moment he closed the door he was in darkness—no, not absolute darkness. Allan staggered, and leant for a moment against the wall, whilst a dreadful dryness seemed to rise in his throat. His heart throbbed, and his fingers involuntarily opened and closed again, for, from the right hand, stealing through the crevice between the door and the door-post, was a long thin ray of light ; and as he strove to recover himself he heard voices—the voice of a man and the voice of a woman—in the room from which the light came.

It was all over ! He had only one thing left in life to be thankful for : he could take his revenge to the uttermost. Let him place his back against the wall opposite to that door, and one blow from his foot would send the flimsy obstacle flying, and Digby would be in his hands.

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## CHAPTER XXIII

### JUST IN TIME

ONE by one the long hours went by in that extemporized prison where Manders held Frances his prisoner. Still the jailer and the captive struggled for victory, but the protracted struggle was telling on both. It was not till five o'clock in the afternoon that Frances was forced to tell herself that the duration of her power of resistance must soon be measured by minutes, not hours. Allan had not come to her aid, so she could only suppose he had failed in tracing her, or had followed the route laid down by Manders' subtlety. If this craft had led her husband to Nice it would be days before he returned. Josephine must have summoned him long ago—yet when she counted the hours she could hardly see how he could yet by any chance have come to her rescue. There was another thing which made Frances long for freedom. To-night she was to sing. What would happen if she did not make her appearance as

announced? She must be back in London in time to keep her engagement. But how was she to be freed? If free would she have strength to do her duty? Oh, why did Allan not come!

And hunger—merciless—hunger was beginning to make its presence and power apparent. It was now thirty hours since she had eaten anything—since anything save that water had passed her lips. Yes, in a very short time she must give in, lest even worse befall her. Once or twice in the last two hours she thought her senses were going—indeed, she was not sure but for a few moments they had absolutely left her. She had, she believed, lost consciousness and awoke with a start, and feeling unable to realize where she was and what had occurred. It was only the eyes of the man opposite which had brought back her senses. Now a sort of hysterical, light-headed feeling was creeping over her, she struggled against it, but it came again and again. Strange to say Allan, Josephine, Mrs Melville, every one seemed fading from her mind—she was asking herself if they had any real existence, if they were not phantoms of her imagination! The only thing that seemed real to her—the fixed purpose in her brain—was that she must sing and act to night. What kept her from doing so? The man opposite who wanted her to promise something. She had forgotten what it was. She would ask him again presently. Oh, yes; she would promise anything. He would let her go then, and she should be in time. The truth was her brain was getting disordered.

Now, strange to say, considering he had means of sustenance at his command, Manders, although his mental state was all right, was suffering almost as much physically as his companion. Frances' action, which had deprived him of any stimulant, was answerable for this. Brandy had become an absolute necessity to him, and he had now been hours and hours without it. He was in a state that loathed the very sight of food. The watching and absence of sleep were telling on his undermined constitution. He began to feel almost certain that, in spite of the advantages he enjoyed, his prisoner would outstay him. His talk about the impossibility of her being traced to his house was to a great extent braggadocio. Even if Allan were fool enough to follow the false scent, others might look in the right direction. He had not counted on this determined resistance.

A few hours was the outside he had thought possible. He reckoned greatly upon her fear of compromising herself by spending a night away from home. She had spent that night away, and as far as he could see was resolved to spend another if necessary, and her powers of endurance would permit. Why, another night or half of it would make him helpless. He felt he was growing as weak as a cat. It was his old mistake—once more he had been too clever.

Besides, promise what she would, the evil was done—it was too late now—her absence was known. Allan would insist upon its being accounted for. It had been part of his plan to let it be inferred that she had gone away with him. He had no idea that Josephine knew anything about his establishment at B—. But had she been fully aware of its existence, he felt sure it would be the last place in which Allan would expect to find his wife. No, he felt sure that fool Allan would go blundering off to Nice.

Yet Frances might be traced. To-morrow, if he could last out until then, would be too late. Her lips must be sealed at once—this evening. In a fortnight, a week even, he could make his last venture a success. He would go straight to Caversham Place, force those papers from Josephine, then down to Redhills and make his final settlement with Mr Burchier; then away to Spain or any other country with which there is no extradition treaty.

The whole tenor of his thoughts now pointed to a black crime. Frances' silence must be assured. Her promise would be of little good to him now that she must account for the time she had been away from home.

He was thinking how he should for a while conceal the dark deed he was meditating. That sooner or later her fate would be known he did not doubt. He did not think a pistol shot would be heard, and thought it would be easy to bestow his victim in some place, either under or above ground, where she might be undiscovered for many days. The more he thought of it the more certain it seemed to him that Frances must not leave that room alive. He longed for the missing brandy to nerve him to the deed he had resolved upon.

It was nearly six o'clock. He made up his mind that at six o'clock it should be all over. His fingers were stealing furtively towards the breast of his coat. He was wondering, with a horrible curiosity, whether one shot would suffice.

Then he looked across at Frances and saw a change in her face.

Her eyes met his vacantly, but she shuddered a little. Then she pressed her hand to her head.

‘What did you ask me to promise?’ she inquired. ‘I have forgotten.’

‘It’s no good asking now,’ he replied sullenly; ‘the time has passed for promises.’

‘Yes, but you told me I should go the moment I promised. I must get back to-night. Tell me what to say.’

She spoke in a bewildered way, and Manders knew that to let her leave the house in such a state would be fatal to him. His hand crept to his breast-pocket.

‘It’s too late, I say. You won’t go back to town again!’

Dazed as she was, she saw the action, and caught the true meaning of the words. Quick as thought she sprang to her feet, and rushed into the inner room; it was but two steps there, and her movement was such an unexpected one that the villain, although he drew the pistol from his breast, had no time to aim. Besides, why should he run the chance of bungling? She was there, safe enough, and at his mercy.

But as she ran she gave one piercing cry for help—a cry which, startling and pitiful as it was, fell on one person’s ears like the sweetest music, in a flash showing him that the wife he loved was in that room by compulsion, not of her own free will.

Crash! The door was driven in and flew back against the wall, and, before the oath which leapt to his lips was uttered, Manders turned his pistol to the door and fired.

The bullet must have passed within an inch of Allan, but that inch was as good as a mile. Before the trigger could be again drawn Allan was upon the ruffian, and as he came he struck full and square at the wicked face—such a blow as his strong arm had never before struck, most likely would never strike again. All the wrong and the rage that nerved him was thrown into that blow. It took effect on Manders’ temple. The man fell like a log, and added to the stunning consequences of that brave stroke by knocking his head against the chimney-piece as he went down. Taken altogether, it was a highly satisfactory blow.

As Manders’ heels went up, a second chamber of the revolver exploded, but the bullet went harmlessly through

the ceiling. Allan Bouchier took the pistol from his senseless foe, and went to seek his wife.

His quick eye caught and understood everything—the locked door, the padded windows, the ready pistol. Frances had been a prisoner; her absence was explained. But he had yet to learn how far the prostrate ruffian had harmed her. His fingers closed in an ominous fashion on the pistol butt as he went from one room to the other, just inside the door of which Frances lay as senseless as her late jailer.

Crushing down an impulse to return, and then and there put a bullet through his brother-in-law's head, Allan raised his wife and sought for means to restore her to herself. He found the last of the water in the jug; with this he bathed her face. He noticed as he did so she still wore her hat; she had never once removed it. Even as he was chafing her hands and trying to bring her back to life, he kept half an eye on the other room. He had no intention of letting the man escape.

But Manders' senselessness lasted longer than did Frances'. She soon opened her eyes and looked at Allan. She put her arms round his neck and kissed him, but made no allusion to the present situation. He thought she was strangely composed.

'I think I have been dreaming, Allan,' she said.

He kissed her passionately.

'You are awake now, my darling.'

'Yes; but I had a dreadful dream. You only woke me just in time.'

'Tell me, Frances,' said Allan, in a low eager voice, 'has any one harmed you—even laid a finger on you?'

'No; but I dreamed he was going to kill me. Now you are here, I am safe.'

'He never touched you—you are sure?'

Frances looked at her husband very strangely.

'No,' she said, quite calmly, 'he did not touch me. I should have died had he done so.'

The life of the senseless man in the other room hung upon her answer. Her next speech puzzled Allan; there was something altogether strange in her manner.

'Allan, I am so hungry. There is bread in the cupboard in there. Will you get me a piece?'

He did her bidding, wondering. He found the cupboard open, and containing bread and other provisions. Seeing



these, it never entered into his head that the man had been brutal enough to deny his wife food.

He gave her the bread hastily, but did not see the ravenous way in which she began to eat it. His eyes were fixed on Digby, who was showing signs of returning life. He had not yet finished his reckoning with him. While it was going on, Frances had better be away.

'Frances,' he said, 'do you feel well enough to go out into the garden, and wait a few minutes for me?'

'Oh, yes,' she answered. 'I mustn't stay longer here; it is growing very late.'

'You must go the back way—through the window.'

He would not leave his enemy in order to open doors; the window was very low, Frances could easily step out. He had no time to think what her last words meant, for Digby was in a sitting posture, and looking wildly around.

'Get up as soon as you can,' said Allan, covering him with his own pistol. 'Don't come a step towards me, or you're a dead man.'

After a while the fellow struggled into a chair. He gave Allan a look full of hate, but, as he did so, he saw the determination on every feature of his face. Stunned as Manders felt, he knew his game was up; indeed, he believed Allan would shoot him.

He winced as he saw the muzzle of that pistol held point-blank before him. He saw the hammer was at full cock, and, knowing his own weapon, was aware that in that condition—the trigger was a hair trigger—the slightest, perhaps unintentional, pressure of Allan's finger would send the bullet into his heart.

'Turn that pistol away,' he said. 'I don't want to move.'

Thinking a man would be unable to speak collectedly in such a situation, Allan complied; and Manders breathed more freely in consequence.

'Now then,' he said sullenly, 'what are you going to do? Do you mean to kill me?'

'I think so,' answered Allan, with a promptitude and grimness of manner which made his listener's flesh creep.

'Your only chance,' he continued, 'is to make a clean breast of it. Tell me why you induced my wife to come down here—why you have kept her here.'

Manders, although recovering from the effects of Allan's blow, was scarcely in a state to discourse connectedly.

‘Let me think,’ he said, ‘for a few minutes. Keep that pistol away.’

He leant his head upon his hands, and waited until he felt able to decide what to do. He cursed his half-hearted conduct. Why had he not formed his murderous resolution last night! He cursed Allan for having traced his wife. He cursed everything and everybody. By the time he had raised his head he had made up his mind to be even with Allan at any rate. He was actually looking forward with pleasure to the effect of the communication he had to make.

‘Now then—speak,’ said Allan sternly.

‘Yes, I’ll speak, unless you make it worth my while to be silent. I’m going to speak.’

‘I am not the most patient man in the world remember,’ said Allan.

‘You’ll listen patiently enough presently. Now I’ll tell you what I’ll do. Give me, or promise to give me, ten thousand pounds, and I’ll go away and say not a word; if not, I’ll tell you all now.’

‘Are you mad?’ asked Allan scornfully.

‘No; but you will be, I guess. You won’t pay me the money then—to save yourself from hearing what I know.’

‘I wouldn’t pay a farthing to save you from the hangman. Go on.’

‘You’ll ask me to stop presently. First of all I’ll tell you why I got your wife down here. I wanted her to promise to tell no one my right name for a time. She wouldn’t promise, so I kept her here. She was promising when you came. She has a will of her own, but I broke it at last.’

The pistol seemed striving to turn Allan’s hand towards the speaker.

‘Now,’ said Manders, ‘I’ll tell you how I got her to come here. That’s puzzling you, isn’t it?’

It was, but Allan would not say so.

‘I told her I could bring her face to face with one of her father’s murderers. You know her father, John Boucher, was murdered?’

‘Yes, I know it,’ said Allan, glad to find the true reason of his wife’s excursion to B— so clearly set out.

‘Well, now,’ said Manders, ‘I dare say you know that Frances is very keen upon hanging the man who killed her father. I told her some one lived here who knew all about it. She came like a shot. She’s vindictive on that one thing.’

'Go on,' said Allan.

He saw the man was talking to a purpose.

'I wouldn't tell her who it was killed him,' continued Manders, speaking very slowly, 'but I mean to tell you. You will be glad to know, no doubt?'

'I shall be glad to set her doubts at rest.'

'Well, then, I'll tell you what became of John Boucher. He left London and went to Blacktown; it was three years ago last winter. Shall I go on, or will you pay?'

His words suggested nothing except temporary insanity.

'Go on,' said Allan.

'He went from Blacktown to Sleaford Junction. At Sleaford he got into a train for Brackley. Shall I go on, or will you pay?'

'Go on, you villain,' said Allan, who felt his brow grow clammy.

Manders laughed his wickedest laugh.

'He got out of the train at Brackley—then a gentleman offered to drive him to Redton; but he never got to Redton alive. That gentleman, your father, my father-in-law, shot him on the road.'

'You liar!' cried Allan. 'The man he shot was a robber.'

'Robber or not, he was your wife's father. I told you you had better pay.'

Could this fellow's tale be true? His father the slayer of John Boucher! Allan strove to scout it as a malicious invention, but he could not help thinking, whether true or not, the narrator believed it. Let it be true, it was some accident, or Frances' father was not the man she had always thought him to be. He had read and heard of men who had amassed money by highway robbery—yet to their families appeared the kindest and most respectable of creatures. Could her father have been one of these men? No matter—Frances was Frances. Her father's crimes must be kept from her knowledge. He felt how distressed she would be at learning the true nature and pursuits of the father she had loved. This villain must be lying.

'Do you mean to say,' he said scornfully, 'that my wife's father was a highwayman?'

Manders laughed again.

'Oh dear, no—not at all. Your late father-in-law was a respectable, hard-working storekeeper in New York. He

made money there. He was a much better man than my father-in-law.'

'Speak plainly or not at all,' said Allan haughtily.

'I'll speak plainly enough—oh yes! But I am going to astonish you first. I'm going to tell you who your wife is. It is about the strangest thing in the world that you should have married her.'

Allan began to wonder what was coming. He had not the slightest inkling of the truth. Manders looked at him steadily.

'Your wife is the daughter of John Boucher; John Boucher was the son of James Boucher, or Bourchier, who brought three actions against the owners of Redhills, claiming the property.'

Allan grew very pale.

'Just before James Bourchier died, he found the certificate which proved him to be legitimate. This with other papers was in his son John Boucher's possession when he went that night to Brackley. Curious he should have tried to rob and murder your father when he could claim by law every farthing he possessed.'

'You are lying!' cried Allan. The insinuation Manders had made was too horrible to be for a moment entertained.

'Strange to say I'm not lying now. You'll ask for proofs. Go home and say to Josephine, "Give me those papers you stole out of your husband's safe." They're all in her hands—the little devil! Read them over carefully, and you'll find you've married your cousin. If it's any comfort to you, you can't be deprived of the estate—that's your wife's.'

'And who are you?—you fiend!' asked Allan.

'Frances will tell you if you ask her. She's been trying to find me for a long time. Anyway, you'll guess I'm not Digby Bourchier.'

'I never thought you were. I know now; your name is Manders.'

'That's it exactly. You've heard it before. Frances told you I was the only person who knew how her father died. That ought to show you I am speaking the truth. But you go to Josephine and get the papers.'

The pistol was trying very hard to turn Allan's hand—so hard that Manders noticed the struggle and trembled. Allan was in deep thought.

‘Now,’ said Manders, ‘if you like to pay me that money I’ll go and say nothing. Frances or no one else will be the wiser; you can settle down and live at peace.’

Never! If the thing were true, the consequences must be accepted. Yet, until he had his father’s word for it, he would never believe the statements of this perjured impostor. And Frances—how could he meet Frances, who was waiting in the garden for him? How could he face her whilst there was a chance of Manders’ words being true? Her father’s blood on his father’s hands! A burning wish seized Allan to stand face to face with his father and hear him deny it. Till that happened he could find no happiness in life. He would believe his father’s word against any assertion made by this black-hearted villain.

He rose and left the room—left the house without looking again at Manders. Now he knew that Frances had been lured away and detained for the man’s own evil ends, he felt he need not take the deadly vengeance he had contemplated taking. Everything now was merged into that one dread that Manders’ words were true—that his father had killed John Boucher. He would go to Redhills to-night, if he could catch a train. Till his father’s denial took this weight from his heart he could not eat, drink, nor sleep; or he fancied such actions were impossible. He went out of the house, through the window by which he had entered. He stepped out into the garden—for the sun was going down—and looked around for Frances, blaming himself for having left her alone. But the tale he had heard, he felt, was an ample excuse for his neglect.

With a lightened heart Manders saw him leave the house. He opened the front door and watched him looking about the garden in search of his wife. He smiled an evil smile as he thought that how ever much his own schemes went astray, he had fully quitted himself with respect to Allan. The ruffian’s bones and head were aching, and he was pining for brandy.

Where was Frances? Allan sought her all over the place; he even re-entered the house and looked for her. He called her, but there was no reply. How bitterly he blamed himself for leaving her for one moment. The very vengeance he had meant to take had recoiled on his own head. Had he left Manders in silent scorn, and taken Frances away, he

would not have heard a word of the dreadful accusation against his father.

Wherever his wife was, she had left 'The Shrubby.' Perhaps she was weary of waiting and had gone towards home. He would follow her. No doubt she was in the waiting-room at the station.

He made the best of his way there. As he passed through the village the saddler who had given him such valuable information saluted him respectfully. Allan could not bring himself to stop and inquire whether the little man had seen the lady pass; he went on quickly to the railway station. Frances was not there, but an official informed him that a lady answering to her description had taken the previous train to town.

He was glad to hear it; she was safe, and on her way home. He had no wish to see his wife again until he had been to Redhills. Another train would leave B— in a few minutes. He would just have time to drive to Caversham Place, ask Josephine if her husband's statement as to the purloined papers was true, then catch the limited mail for the West.

Allan wondered if any man had ever found such varying emotions and stirring events crowded into one day, as he had found in this one. In it he had lived a lifetime!

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## CHAPTER XXIV

### BROKEN DOWN

FOLLOWING her husband's instructions, Frances left the cottage by passing through the open window, but she walked and acted much as a somnambulist might have done. She was in that state which can only be expressed by the word dazed. The frame of mind she was in was most peculiar. All that had happened since she left her home down to the present moment seemed blurred and confused. She had a dim idea that in some way her life had been in peril—that Allan had made his appearance at a critical moment—that some one had been killed; not Allan, for she had just left him. She grew more and more puzzled, and unable to think about these things in a connected way. Only two things

seemed clear to her—she wanted food and drink, and she was bound to get to London in time to sing this evening. She knew she was in a strange place, yet the way back seemed quite familiar to her. She must go that way at once. Allan would excuse her; he was detained, but would follow her soon. She tried to remember the business that made him linger, but found herself unable to direct her thoughts to that end. The truth is, that Frances' brain was playing her strange tricks. The confinement, the bad atmosphere, the watching, the deprivation of food, and, finally, the horror which had seized her when she grasped Manders' deadly purpose, had to a great extent unhinged her mind. All she could now realise was that she must be at the opera-house by a certain time this evening.

She walked down the winding path until she reached the gate which opened to the road. It was locked. No matter; the ground inside the paling rose in one place until it came within a foot or two of the top. She climbed over and dropped into the road without accident. Then she turned her face towards the village, and walked on with what speed she could muster.

She heard the sound of wheels behind her, and, turning, saw a high dog-cart driven by a gentleman. Almost mechanically she raised her hand and called him to stop his horse.

'I should be glad if you would drive me to the railway station,' she said.

The gentleman, a young man of about twenty-five, looked amused. She had not asked a favour—only expressed a wish, and expressed it as if she expected instant compliance.

'I would with pleasure,' he said, 'but I am not going that way.'

'Still I should be glad,' she said. 'It is a matter of great importance to me.'

He saw she was speaking in earnest. The station was not very far out of his way; and, besides, young men are generally glad to oblige a beautiful woman. He raised his hat.

'Certainly I will. Can you step up?'

She took the seat next him.

'Please to drive quickly,' she said.

He wondered greatly who his companion could be. He attempted to draw her into conversation, but her replies to

his remarks were so strange and far from the subject that by the time he drew up at B— Station he had come to the conclusion she had escaped from some lunatic asylum, and doubted whether he had done rightly in lending her assistance. However, it was no business of his.

She thanked him as she descended from the dog-cart—thanked him quietly, without effusion, as though he had only done what duty called upon him to do. Then the door of the station closed behind her, and he saw her no more. He never knew who the mysterious lady was, or how greatly that dog-cart had been honoured.

It seemed quite in the order of things that a train should be just starting. Frances took her seat. She sank into it wearily, and tried to think and remember things, but that strange stuffy feeling in her head prevented her doing so; besides, the rattle of the train seemed to scatter all her thoughts as she strove to force them into coherence. All except one—she was to make her reappearance on the stage to-night.

The train was a fast one; in forty minutes she was on the platform at Charing Cross. Ten minutes later a hansom drove up to Caversham Place, and Frances stood on her own doorstep.

She opened the door with her latch-key, and walked into the dining-room. It was untenanted. She rang the bell. A servant appeared, and gave a start of surprise at seeing her mistress.

‘Get me food and wine at once,’ said Frances. ‘Anything—but get it at once.’

The servant retreated, and bore the news to Mrs Melville and Josephine. In a minute they were with Frances, Mrs Melville embracing and kissing her, Josephine holding her hand and weeping tears of joy. Frances had returned of her own accord. How she had wronged her. How she would pray for forgiveness and try to atone for the momentary shadow cast by her suspicions.

‘Oh, my dear!’ said Mrs Melville, ‘what a fright you have given us all. Where have you been? Why did you not write or telegraph? Allan is hunting high and low for you.’

‘Where have you been?’ echoed Josephine.

Frances pressed her hand across her forehead, as if trying to brush those cobwebs out of her brain. She looked almost vacantly at her inquirers.



‘I don’t know,’ she said, wearily, ‘I can’t remember. Get me something to eat and drink.’

The servant entered with a tray of provisions. Frances sat down and eat her food in a strangely eager manner. Mrs Melville and Josephine ministered to her wants, but whilst doing so exchanged fearful glances.

The meal was soon finished—every minute Frances glanced at the clock. She pushed away her plate and rose.

‘Order the brougham,’ she said; ‘I must start in a few minutes.’

‘But tell us something, dear,’ pleaded Mrs Melville. ‘Tell us where you have been.’

‘I can’t remember,’ said Frances, almost pettishly. ‘Order the carriage, please.’

Josephine did so. There was something in her sister-in-law’s appearance which frightened her. Her face at one moment was flushed, at the next deadly white. Her eyes looked unusually large and bright, and she noticed her fingers moved nervously.

‘Don’t go to the theatre to-night,’ said Josephine; ‘I am sure you are ill. Send a note and say so.’

Frances smiled for the first time since she had entered the house. The impossibility of such a course amused her bewildered brain.

‘I am well enough to sing,’ she said, turning to leave the room.

What about Allan? He had left the house a few hours ago with a look on his face which had haunted Josephine ever since. She knew what that expression meant. She did not wonder at it. Romance still lingered in her mind, and it seemed only fit and proper that her brother should depart like this to reckon up with the man who, to all appearances, had wronged him. Had she been a man her errand would have been for the same purpose as Allan’s. But she trembled lest anything had happened to him. For a moment Frances’ reappearance had stilled her fears. There was nothing to revenge, so there was nothing to be afraid of. But Frances’ strange manner, and inability or disinclination to account in any way for her prolonged absence, were startling. She arrested Frances as her hand was on the door.

‘Have you seen Allan?’ she asked.

‘Have I seen Allan?’ She put her hand to her head as

she echoed Josephine's words. 'Yes, I saw him—somewhere. I forget where.'

'Why did he not come back with you? When will he be here?'

'Something detained him—some business.'

All the recent events seemed mixed up without being capable of sorting themselves in her brain.

'He will be here soon,' she continued; 'I suppose I could not spare the time to wait for him. That must have been it.'

There was a curious puzzled look in her large bright eyes, the pupils of which were dilated to an extraordinary extent. The hand Josephine held was dry, hot, and feverish. She must know something more!

'Did you see my husband—Digby?' she asked.

Frances turned her eyes upon her; the question suggested something.

'I think I saw the devil,' she said in an awed whisper. 'Yes, it must have been the devil. I have been dreaming, I suppose. I dreamt Allan came and killed him.'

Then she drew her hand forcibly from Josephine's and left the room. What had happened? What tragedy had taken place? It seemed impossible to get any sense from Frances. Josephine grew much frightened. Her only comfort was that Frances had assured her that Allan would soon be here. She could not believe that any bodily ill had befallen him. If any one had suffered violence it was her husband.

She turned to Mrs Melville, who was looking very pale. She had also been much troubled by Frances' queer mood and unsatisfactory words. Josephine's allusion to her husband she did not understand.

'She is ill,' said Josephine. 'We ought not to allow her to go.'

'My dear, how can we keep her? It is only force that will prevent her.'

'What can have happened?' groaned Josephine. 'She must not go alone,' she continued, turning to Mrs Melville.

'No; I will go with her.'

Josephine did not attempt to dissuade her, nor did she volunteer to be the one to accompany Frances. She must stay at home and wait for Allan. If he did not return in an hour's time she must go, or send in search of him, to the place for which he had started.

Mrs Melville followed Frances upstairs, and, after putting on her bonnet and cloak, went into her bedroom. Frances had bathed her face and hands, changed her attire, and was now standing with her jewel case in front of her, selecting the adornments for the part she was to play. She turned her head as Mrs Melville entered, but made no remark. Upon that lady once more begging her to change her mind, she shrugged her shoulders and frowned.

‘Please don’t worry me any more,’ she said, so peevishly that the colour rose in Mrs Melville’s cheeks. Frances had never before spoken to her like this.

She said nothing as she entered the brougham—said nothing when she found Mrs Melville seated beside her—neither thanked her for her company, nor objected to it. They reached the theatre, through the stage-door of which she passed quickly, taking no notice of the companion who followed her, marvelling that fate should have led her of all persons to such a place as behind the scenes of a theatre. But the end in view sanctified the departure from her former rigid code, and her conscience was at rest.

The first person to greet Mdlle. Francesca was the manager. ‘I knew you would come—would not deceive me and put me such a hole.’ He spoke in a tone of such heart-felt relief, that the puzzled look came again into the singer’s eyes.

‘Of course; why should I not come?’ she said; then she passed swiftly on to her dressing-room, leaving the manager a happy man again, and able to go to Madame Mirabella and inform her that her services as stop-gap would not, he was thankful to say, be required after all, toning down the disappointment his communication inflicted by expressing his undying gratitude for the prompt and kindly way in which she had offered to help him in his difficulty. Never would he forget it, etc., etc.

Since yesterday morning he had felt himself to be a particularly ill-used man. There were several things about which he wanted to see Mdlle. Francesca, and she was invisible. Neither Mrs Melville nor Josephine was silly enough to give any outsider a hint that Frances had disappeared. He was told she was out, and the hour of her return was uncertain. Accustomed as he was to the eccentricities, vagaries, and pleasant little ways of many of his *prime donne*, he could only shrug his shoulders and wait patiently; but not without wondering if Mdlle. Francesca,

who had hitherto been a paragon of consideration for a manager's exigencies, was going to fall into fidgety ways. It was only when the best part of Saturday had gone by that he began to get alarmed, and insisted upon knowing what had become of his star. The confused replies given him by the ladies told him that something was wrong, and, by asking them pointblank and expatiating on the difficulties any concealment on their part would lead him into, he learnt that Mdlle. Francesca's whereabouts was a thing unknown. Still he trusted her, and waited almost till the eleventh hour; then all he could do was to find a substitute—the best that could be obtained at so short a notice. But it was a terrible thing to be forced to do on the opening night of the season. It is no wonder that even his seasoned heart leapt within him when, just as all hope had vanished, Mdlle. Francesca appeared.

'I should never have heard the last of it,' he said, as Frances left him; 'never! Hang it, if I don't think they'd have hissed the roof off!'

Now all was right. The excusatory speech he had been framing was superfluous. The fictitious hoarseness and cold, for which he intended to entreat his patrons' indulgence and sympathy, need not be described. She was here, and the peril was past.

He had noticed she did not look quite herself, but attributed her changed appearance to natural excitement. She was still a young hand—not quite stage proof. He had found no time to inquire as to her health: the moments were too precious to waste on such conventionalities. If she had been ill he knew she would find strength to do all that was needed. He was no stranger to the fortitude displayed by the profession, when suffering from the severest bodily and mental ailments. If she was well enough to come at all, playing her part properly was a natural sequence. He heard the overture commence with a contented spirit.

Meanwhile Frances, accompanied by Mrs Melville, had reached her dressing-room. Everything was in readiness. Her maid had looked to the smallest detail. Her nimble fingers were ready to equip her mistress. There was little time to spare, so the Abigail could waste none in talking. But even she wondered at the strange look on Mdlle. Francesca's face—at the preoccupied, mechanical way in which she let herself be robed—at her unusual silence—at

the absence of any kind word. But no doubt the hurried toilet she was compelled to make accounted for everything.

The last fold was barely adjusted when she was called. Without a word or a sign she left the room, and in a few moments Mrs Melville heard the storm of applause which greeted the re-appearance of the favourite of last season.

The opera was that good old popular Philistine, *Il Trovatore*, that marvel of melody linked to a ludicrous libretto—hackneyed, barrel-organed, but ever living. Let the advanced school shudder at its vicious construction and inartistic method; let them condemn its solos, duets, and trios; let them persuade us for a while, that page after page of monotonous declamation is the only true form of art—that a *leit-motif* is all the melody we are entitled to ask for; still our old friend will survive. Make it penal to produce him, say for ten years; fine and imprison every one who hums a bar of him—then bring him out and see the effect. His strains will fall upon ears which have heard nothing but harsh sounds, as the song of the birds would strike a man who had just emerged, after a long day's work, from a saw-pit. Ah, what a good time composers are having now! It takes a clever man to write a fine, original melody. What a good thing that melody is not in demand!

The dear old stock opera was child's play to Mdlle. Francesca. During the last twelvemonths she had played it many times—every bar of music, every word of the libretto, every necessary action and gesture, was as familiar to her as the alphabet. If, when she stepped on to the stage, she felt as one in a dream; if that feeling continued with her when she left the stage; the whole time she was facing her audience her brain seemed to be clear and in proper working order; although that power of working was limited, and lasted only as long as she was Leonora, the loving and luckless heroine.

After the end of the first act it was clear that Mdlle. Francesca's previous successes were to be confirmed. The opinion expressed by every one was that she had never sang or acted better. The absence from England had not injured her voice. A few persons in the stalls thought she was not looking in the best of health—or not in such splendid health as when she last trod these boards. Among these close observers was the eminent specialist who had once been privileged to peer into the mechanism of the throat which

produced those silvery notes. He had made a point of attending to hear her to-night ; as, for scientific reasons, he took a great interest in her career. As he heard the wonderful power and range of her voice, he was glad to believe that for once he was mistaken. It seemed absurd for any one, scientist or layman, who heard her singing like this, to think for one moment there could be even incipient mischief at work.

But when Leonora left the stage and for a while became *Mdlle. Francesca*, she seemed to leave her senses and vitality behind her, like a handkerchief to be picked up again when she returned to the place where it was dropt. It was not long before it began to be whispered about behind the scenes that something was wrong with the *prima donna*. If spoken to she either made no reply or answered in words which had little relevancy to the question. She leant wearily and apathetically against the wall of the greenroom. Every one saw she was not herself, but no one dreamt what the real truth was. The manager began to grow alarmed and wished the opera was at an end. His kindly inquiries and offers of any assistance obtainable were met with the unvarying and mechanical words, 'I am quite well enough to sing.' She was ready the moment her cue was given ; on the stage she was full of life and purpose, but each time she left it seemed to sink more and more into that strange unaccountable state. So much so that at the end of the second act the manager doubted whether her part would be played out.

Poor Mrs Melville, who was initiated by the maid into the mysteries of the ways behind the scenes, and placed in the proper spot to receive Frances when she made her exit, was growing more nervous every moment. Instead of getting better, her charge was getting worse. Any remarks she could get from her seemed more and more incoherent. Moreover, she was astonished that Allan had not yet appeared. She felt it must be something extraordinary which kept him from the theatre on this particular night. She asked the manager if he did not notice the condition Frances was in ; and begged him to ask the public to excuse her from further exertions. The manager smiled at her simplicity.

'But she is so ill,' pleaded Mrs Melville.

'Take her home directly it is over, and send for a doctor. I will come round the first thing in the morning. The opera will soon be finished now.'

Leonora was singing her last song, she had almost come to the end of it; in a few minutes her task would be completed; the rich notes seemed coming, almost without exertion from her grand chest, when nature, which had until now been very merciful and forbearing, suddenly refused to suspend its laws in her favour any longer. All at once she stopped her song, and an uncomfortable feeling ran like lightning through that large audience. The conductor looked up in dismay, but his baton continued to move, and the accompaniment went on, sounding cold, thin, and cheerless without the magic of the voice. It was but a slip, she would take up the strain again in a moment. She did; by a great effort she crushed down the lump which seemed trying to choke her, and for a few bars her voice rang out again. then stopped as dead as it stopped before. There could be no doubt of it now, Mdlle. Francesca had broken down. Many of the audience sprang to their feet in surprise, even horror, as they saw her eyes flickering, saw her struggling as with something unseen, saw her look wildly round and then fall a dead heap on the stage.

The curtain came down with a bang. Willing arms bore her inanimate form to her dressing-room, and medical aid was at once summoned. The manager went before the curtain and made the best he could of the matter, telling the alarmed but sympathetic audience that Mdlle. Francesca had been far from well lately; that, against all advice, she had insisted upon appearing to-night—she would not disappoint her patrons. Her strength had been overtaxed, but no doubt a few days' rest would make her all right again.

The opera being very near its end, the audience soon departed, the eminent specialist in the stalls remarking to his next door neighbour, perhaps not without a feeling of satisfaction, that his prediction seemed likely to be fulfilled.

'We are lucky to have been here to-night. Mdlle. Francesca will never sing again. I told her husband a year ago her career would be a short one.'

Then he went behind the scenes to see if he could render any aid, but others were before him. As a doctor he knew the sudden loss of voice was brought about by some bodily ailment. Very likely, as the manager said, she had overtaxed her strength, and her throat had given. It was just as he had prophesied.

And Frances? She was now lying with her eyes open,

calling wildly on Allan to save her from some horrible fate. Allan! Allan! Allan! was her continual cry.

She was taken home as speedily as possible. Josephine, when she saw her carried in thus delirious, wondered what more of horror and mystery that day had to bring forth. It was only about an hour after Frances had left for the theatre that things seemed to have taken a turn for the better. Allan had come back. His sister hurried to greet him. Her satisfaction was short-lived. The look on his face was as painful a one as it bore when he started. His first question was for Frances, and he seemed somewhat relieved at hearing she had been home and then gone to the theatre. His next question, or rather command it may be called, was for certain papers which he had been informed were in Josephine's possession.

His manner was so peremptory that she did not attempt to resist his demand. Without a word she brought him the pocket-book. He tore the papers out of it with feverish impatience, looked at them all, then replacing them, leant his head upon his hands, a prey apparently to the deepest emotion. Springing to his feet, he told his sister he was going to the West to-night. He did not know when he should return. He would write to-morrow. Then he was gone like a whirlwind.

The only thing Josephine could clearly comprehend was, that although the two men had met, she was not a widow. This was sorry comfort, although she was glad Allan had not her wretched husband's life to answer for.

And, now, Frances was brought home delirious, with fever raging in her brain, and all the night long lay calling for Allan! Allan! Allan!

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## CHAPTER XXV

### IN SUSPENSE

It was past midnight when Allan reached Blacktown. The fatigue, emotions, and events which had been crowded into the day were beginning to tell upon his strong frame. Indeed, for the best part of that hundred miles which the limited mail runs without stopping he had been sleeping.



It was well he could do so, for the horror of Manders' accusation against his father could hardly be borne. All the way from B— to London he had told himself it was nothing but a malicious invention—told himself this so often that he fully believed that this explanation was the right one. It was only when Josephine handed him the papers, only when he found that they corroborated one portion of the ruffian's tale, the dread crept over him that the remaining part might not be without foundation. In its full meaning he could not bring himself to credit it for a moment. Nothing except his father's own avowal should persuade him that for the purpose stated by Manders he had shot down in cold blood an innocent man. There must be some fearful mistake or misapprehension. Yet Allan knew he would find no peace until he had heard his father distinctly deny the crime. His one object was to get to Redhills as soon as possible. Let it be by day or night, what did it matter? Till this weight was taken from his mind day and night were alike to him.

It was not until he reached Blacktown the thought struck him that his frame was but mortal. He could scarcely remember how many hours had passed since he had tasted food. He could not afford to play tricks with himself. He should want his strength. So he ordered supper at the Railway Inn, and surprised the good people there by asking for a carriage and pair of horses to drive forthwith to Redhills. As the limited mail did not stop at Sleaford, Blacktown, distant as it was from his home, was the nearest point to which he could get.

He could not wait at Blacktown until the morning train. His passionate desire was to reach his father's house and learn the truth. By driving he could be there some five or six hours the sooner, so he must drive. The carriage and horses were forthcoming, and a discontented driver was found. It was no joke for a man after his day's work to be knocked up and ordered to drive in the dead of night rather more than twenty miles. The only thing that consoled the unfortunate man was finding that his employer was young Mr Bouchier, who was an open-handed gentleman, one of the right sort, who would not forget what was due at the journey's end.

So Allan started on his dreary drive—dreary in itself, but doubly so from the uncertainty as to what awaited him at the end of it.

It was the second time within twenty-four hours he had traversed that country. Twenty-four hours! He smiled incredulously as he remembered the fact. It seemed twenty-four years ago—twenty-four years of a busy life. He wished at times, as he thought over all that had occurred, he had followed the impulse of the moment, and put a bullet through the head of the man who had undoubtedly tried to take his life. All this grief would then have been avoided. Then he thought of Frances being his cousin—his wife the owner of Redhills. For Allan was lawyer enough to know the value of the papers he carried. Except for this one thing—the crime of which Manders accused his father—how fortunate his marriage would have been. Then another fear shot through him. What if Manders should go to Frances, or write to her, telling her the same tale he had told him! Allan little thought that at the present moment his wife was lying unable to recognise a person or understand a word—that on Monday morning every paper would give details of the sudden illness of that gifted singer, Mdlle. Francesca. This was another arrow on the way to him, but not yet arrived at its destination.

Slowly, very slowly, the miles were passed over. If the fast train from London seemed to travel on leaden wheels, there is no simile which will express the tardy pace at which, to Allan, the carriage travelled. The moon was shining, so, knowing every landmark, he could calculate the distance from Redhills. They pass village after village. Now they are at Brackley, now going down Littlesteep, now painfully dragging up Steepsides. Allan shuddered and turned his head away, as, in the light of the pale moon, a dead fir tree stood out among its living and dark-green kin. He knew it marked the very spot where his father had nearly four years ago shot the man whom until now he had always looked upon as having been nothing but a highwayman. He knew the place well. He had even, at the time the deed was done, felt proud of his father's presence of mind and promptitude. He had never passed that spot with a companion but he had paused and pointed out that withered tree, and narrated the circumstance it recorded. Now he could not look at it. Was it not his wife's father who had fallen dead on the road at this very place? Was it not his own father who had shot him?

He would soon be at Redhills and know all. His great

hope was to find Mr Bouchier as ignorant as he himself had hitherto been as to the name of his victim. The horses had struggled to the top of Steepsides, and in a very short time he would be at his father's house. It was past three o'clock in the morning, but he felt no hesitation about knocking the inmates up and arousing his father. Such a question as the one he had to ask was too important to need any apology. He looked out of the carriage window—he was now so near to the goal that he believed he would be able to see, even through the night, the large house. He was not mistaken. It rose black against the sky—black and threatening. He dreaded the look of the gloomy pile. It was the first time in his life that the sight of the house which would one day be his own was not a welcome one.

As he sat and looked at it, he was surprised to see that lights were moving about inside, that something unusual was going on ; that the household had not yet retired to rest. It could mean only one thing : his father was ill, perhaps dead or dying, with the words he must hear unspoken. His heart beat at the thought. He called on the driver to urge his tired horses to a gallop ; every moment was precious. The horses and driver did their best, and very shortly the carriage drew up at the lodge gates. Allan was too impatient to wait while the lodge-keeper was summoned. He sprang out of the carriage, and telling the man to go to the stables and put up, climbed the gate and ran at full speed up the carriage drive.

The house door was soon opened to him—opened by the respectable Steel, whose face and general appearance betokened catastrophe.

‘ Mr Allan, is it ? ’ he said. ‘ You are badly wanted here, sir. ’

‘ What is it ? ’ cried Allan. ‘ Tell me quickly !—my father— ’

‘ He's very, very bad, sir. We are all much alarmed. ’

‘ Not dead ! Say he is not dead ! ’

‘ No, sir ; but quite insensible. A stroke, I'm afraid, if I may make so bold, sir. ’

‘ Where is my mother ? Tell her I am here. ’

Steel departed to do his bidding, and Allan, opening the first door he came to, sank upon a chair, and waited in darkness until Steel returned with a lamp

‘ You look worn out, Mr Allan, ’ he said, with the solicitude of an old retainer. ‘ Shall I get you anything, sir ? ’

‘Yes—some wine.’ The truth is that Allan was about worn out.

Then Mrs Bouchier entered, clad in a dressing-gown, and evidently equipped for night watching. She threw herself into her tall son’s arms.

‘Oh, Allan, my boy! thank God you have come! How did you hear of it? But never mind how, as you have come.’

‘I have heard nothing—know nothing. Tell me all, mother.’

There was not very much to tell. At nine o’clock the night before Mr Bouchier had been found insensible in his chair, breathing heavily. They had carried him to his room, and sent for the nearest doctor. Allan had been telegraphed for, a groom having ridden over to Longmere for that purpose; but, of course, he had not received the message, being on his way to Redhills before it was sent. Everything had been tried to restore consciousness to Mr Bouchier, but, as yet, without success. His breathing seemed quieter and his general condition more easy, but he had not yet spoken.

‘But he will speak—he must speak again!’ cried Allan. He shuddered as he thought of the chance of death robbing him of the explanation he had come for. Great as the shock of his father’s sudden illness was—much as it grieved him—this dread doubled the blow and the sorrow he felt.

Mrs Bouchier, who believed his anxiety was only from a natural wish to hear his father’s voice again, and be recognised by him, kissed her son fondly.

‘We hope so—we trust so; but the doctor cannot say. We shall telegraph the first thing in the morning to Blacktown for the best doctor there. Oh, my son, thank Heaven you have come!’

‘Has anything happened to upset him since yesterday morning?’

Allan did not know what awful surprises might have occurred since he left Redhills. After all that had transpired he would be astonished at no calamity which had overtaken any member of the family.

‘He seemed much troubled by your sudden departure. He had been wondering all day what was the matter. Indeed, we both looked out anxiously for a telegram from you to say it was nothing serious.’

There was a little gentle reproach in the mother’s last words,

'I had no time to send it,' said Allan. 'It was a troublesome and unpleasant matter which made them send for me. I was just able to avoid evil consequences.'

Then Mrs Burchier, in spite of her grief, found words to inquire for Frances and Josephine. Allan satisfied her as well as he could, but not sufficiently well to set her mind entirely at rest. She felt something had occurred in London as well as at Redhills.

'May I see my father?' asked Allan.

'Yes, of course. I should like you to see him; but he won't know you, Allan.'

She led him to the room in which Mr Burchier lay. She had described his condition truthfully. For the time he was oblivious to all that went on around him. The hope his son had entertained that he would recognise him sank to the ground as he saw the pale drawn face and closed eyes. It was as though he slept a dreamless sleep. Allan groaned, and, kneeling by the bedside, took his father's hand in his own and pressed it. No, he would never believe that blood, blood shed murderously, was on that hand. But he prayed, as he knelt by the senseless form, that this sleep might not be an endless one; that, if but for a minute, his eyes would open and consciousness return, that he might ask him that one question, and hear him deny the deed. His father's word—and, moreover, spoken with death close at hand—should outweigh a thousand oaths of such a villain as George Manders!

He rose from his knees, and turned to the doctor, who was in the room.

'He will wake again?' he asked, in a hoarse, eager whisper.

'I hope so—I can't tell yet. Anyway, there is no immediate fear of a change for the worse. It may be it is better he should lie like this. Half the ailment, I am inclined to think, may be mental.'

Allan shivered. Could anything—he feared to think what—be preying on his father's mind?

The doctor looked at him inquisitively. His pale face and jaded look told him that unless proper care were exercised, he would have another patient to look after to-morrow.

'Now,' he said, with kindly authority, 'you go to bed—you can do nothing here.'

Go to bed, and perhaps lose the precious moment when it

came! Never! So long as he could keep his eyes open, his post was here.

'I shall stay with my father,' he said, firmly. Nevertheless, he threw himself into a chair with a weariness which did not escape the doctor's eyes.

'You won't do anything of the sort,' he said, stepping over to Mrs Bouchier, and begging her assistance in coercing this stubborn young man.

When he heard that Allan had been to town and back during the last twenty-four hours, he was even more determined to carry his point. Mrs Bouchier lent her aid readily, but it was a long while before Allan could be induced to accede to their wishes. When at last he gave in, it was only upon the solemn assurance that the moment his father showed the slightest sign of returning animation he should be called. Again and again he made them repeat this promise. Except for the peculiarity of such a proceeding, he might have put them on their oaths. He only yielded when his mother, with tears in her eyes, said—

'My boy, do you think I am not as anxious as you that your father shall see and speak to the son he has always loved and been so proud of? Do you think I do not also fear it may be the last time he will do so?'

Then he went to his old room, and, as he lay down, everything faded from him—trouble, dread, uncertainty, all fled before that powerful spell of utter fatigue. He slept for hours and hours—slept until the Redton Church bells were calling people to resist the outdoor temptations of that bright May morning, and devote themselves to the religious duties demanded, at least once a week, from all respectable people.

The moment his eyes opened, everything came back with a rush to him. Hastily throwing on some indispensable clothes, he crept across to his father's room, and listened. Hearing nothing, he tapped gently at the door. His mother opened it. She was looking wan and haggard from the night watching. She read the question, 'Is he sensible?' on his eager face before he asked it in words. She only shook her head sadly, and kissing him, moved aside and let him enter. At a glance he saw that his father lay in **exact**ly the same state. When would he return to his **senses**? How long must Allan endure this dreadful suspense?

Mrs Bouchier was alone with her husband. The doctor had left the house for a short time. He had other patients to see. Another physician was soon expected from Blacktown, also a trained nurse. Nothing could be done but to wait patiently.

'You are tired out, mother,' said Allan, tenderly. 'Let me take your place.'

'No; go and dress yourself, and have breakfast. I will wait here until the nurse comes.'

Women never like to trust an invalid entirely to a man's care, although men are often found who are as tender and careful nurses as women. So Allan went back to his room.

He threw open the window. How beautiful and fresh everything looked! How green the trees! How at its very best the whole country! What a glorious prospect! Far away he could see the row of elm trees which in that direction marked the boundary of the Redhills estate. It was a fair domain. Its owner should be a happy man. Yet how could he enjoy it, although now doubly his own, if he found it had been purchased by the blood of an innocent man? The man whose grave, without a name upon the humble stone, lay under the spire of that church whose bells were chiming so sweetly. Now the fact of his father having gone to the expense of giving the dead and unknown man a decent grave was not without a certain significance. Allan sighed, shut the window, and drew down the blind—he could not look out without seeing the spire of the church, and thinking of what lay so near to it.

He was dressing himself, when Steel knocked at the door, and handed him a telegram. It had come by messenger from Longmere. A telegram sent to and from a provincial town on a Sunday morning is apt to be delayed on the road, when that road measures several miles. Allan took it from the servant's hand with a grim smile.

There was nothing he did not expect by this time. After the tricks fate had played him, the news that Frances had killed herself, Josephine had murdered Mrs Melville, or Mrs Melville had killed both his wife and his sister, would not have surprised him. He opened the yellow envelope, prepared for the worst.

From Josephine again—'Frances very ill—brain fever—delirious. Come at once if possible. Doctor says no immediate danger.'

'Not bad news, I hope, Mr Allan?' said Steel, who had ventured to remain.

'My wife is very ill,' answered Allan, quietly, but in a dry, husky voice. Steel looked extremely sorry.

Allan laid the telegram down on his dressing-table, and tried to think. His father certainly dying at Redhills—his wife possibly dying in London. Under ordinary circumstances he would scarcely have hesitated. A man's wife has the first claim on him—a greater claim than either father or mother. His first impulse was to rush to town as quickly as he could, but he remembered, being Sunday, there was no train to take him there until the evening. Even had there been one, he might lose the hour when his father recovered his senses—an hour which might mean future happiness or misery to both himself and Frances. He felt thankful that for a while he was constrained to stay at Redhills. He thought of Frances' curious manner when she left him at the Shrubbery yesterday evening. It had greatly troubled him, until Josephine had informed him that she had gone to the theatre with Mrs Melville. He felt he had neglected his wife, but the horrible tale told by Manders had driven almost everything else from his thoughts. He must stay at Redhills till the last moment.

'Has the messenger gone?' he asked Steel.

'No, sir. I thought he had better wait in case you wanted to telegraph.'

Allan wrote a note to the postmaster at Longmere, begging him to keep some one at the office all day at his expense. He then ordered a groom to ride over in an hour's time and wait for any more messages that might be sent. Then he answered Josephine's telegram. He told her what she already knew, that Mr Bouchier was seriously ill; he begged her to telegraph the slightest change for the worse with respect to Frances—to telegraph in time for him to catch the mail that night. Then he strove to resign himself to wait.

All that day Mr Bouchier remained without sense or motion. The Blacktown doctor shook his head and expressed the gravest fears. But there was no immediate danger, and could the pressure on the brain be relieved, the patient would no doubt return to his senses. But even in that case he feared the worst. Should G——, J——, any one else be sent for? He could see no use in doing so at present,



unless it was for the satisfaction of the family. He thought it better to wait until there was some evidence of a change about to take place. In his opinion Mr Bouchier might lie for hours, even days, in the same condition. He was in good hands; his friend, Dr Brown, of Longmere, had done exactly as he should have done. By-and-bye, if a great man is brought down from London, you may be sure he will say that his friend, Dr Green, of Blacktown, has done everything, etc., etc. This is professional etiquette.

Mabel was written to. A letter would reach her almost as soon as a telegram. The youngest son, Kenneth, was also bidden come home. The truth is that both Allan and his mother had from the very first felt certain that Mr Bouchier would never again rise from his bed. They knew how ill he had been for the last two or three years—how his constitution had been sapped and undermined. For many months Philip Bouchier's friends had been telling one another that it was all up with him; that death was written on the man's face; and other gloomy predictions. So it is scarcely to be wondered at that even those who loved him most gave up hope at once.

In the afternoon another telegram came for Allan. This he tore open with feverish haste. Frances was no worse, but the fever was still at its height. No immediate danger.

He could bear it no longer. The thought of his wife lying miles away—ill, delirious—almost drove him mad. See her and know the worst he must. Even if he returned by the next train he must go to town to-night. To-morrow Mabel and Kenneth would be at Redhills, so his mother would have plenty of aid. Moreover, his father had not spoken.

Praying that he might be at once apprised of any change, he went up to town by the mail, and found his wife with her rich hair shorn away, and ice laid upon her burning head. Found her crying for him.

In a way she knew him. Her brilliant eyes turned ever to his. With her hot hand in his, or with his arm around her, she seemed quieter. If he moved from her side for a moment she was distressed, and the violence of her delirium increased. Ever and anon she prayed him to protect her, to save her from some awful fate. Hour after hour Allan sat by her side. Seeing her like this he could not believe that her life was not in imminent danger, although assured by the highest authorities that as yet there was nothing

to tremble at. Josephine, who was longing to go to her father, stayed with them. It was the greatest act of self-sacrifice she had ever made. — Perhaps it was the thought of the way in which she had wronged Frances by her suspicions that nerved her to perform it. She would do what she could to atone.

All day on Monday messages came from Redhills, each one in a similar strain. There was no change either for worse or better. Towards the evening the last one came. 'He is sensible—come if you can.'

All the importance of seeing and speaking to his father came before Allan once more as he read it. Yes, he must go at all risks, at all cost to his own feelings. Was it a special mercy from Providence that about this time Frances grew quieter?—that she did not seem to be so needful of his presence—that he could even draw his hand from hers and leave the room without hearing her piteous cry of 'Allan! Allan! Allan!'

Much as he regretted that imperative call which took him from his wife's side at this moment, he dared not disobey it. Commending Frances to the care of Josephine and Mrs Melville, he started for the West by the first train in the morning. He found that Mabel and his brother were at Redhills—that although Mr Bouchier's senses had returned to him, the doctors gave little hope that he would recover.

'Will you go to him at once, Allan?' asked his mother.

'Yes, at once. Who is with him now?'

'Mabel and the nurse. I will come up with you.'

'No, I have something for his ear alone—something I must say. Ask them to leave him, if only for five minutes.'

'You will not say anything to vex him?' asked Mrs Bouchier, anxiously.

'Not if I can help it. But what I have to say must be said. Tell every one to leave his room.'

Allan's manner was so peremptory that poor Mrs Bouchier, whose custom it was to yield when commanded, followed his behest, and her son, with noiseless tread, passed through the door of the sick-room, and with a beating heart found himself alone with his father.

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## CHAPTER XXVI

## 'TRUTH DWELLS ON DYING LIPS'

MR BOURCHIER opened his eyes as Allan entered the room. Seeing who it was, a faint smile of welcome spread over his pale face. He was strong enough to return in a perceptible manner the pressure of the young man's fingers. He was propped up in his bed, so that when Allan knelt beside him their heads were nearly level. He looked eagerly into his father's face: it was calm and serene, hardly the face of a man who finds himself in his last moments tortured by remorse.

'I hope you feel better to-day, father,' said Allan.

'Yes,' answered Mr Bouchier, quietly; 'I am better—but I am dying, my boy.'

Allan bent his head and tried not to sob.

'I am glad you have come,' continued his father. 'I was afraid I should not see you again. Mabel is here, and Kenneth; but I should like to see Josephine. Where is she?'

'She cannot leave my poor Frances, who is very ill. When I go back I will send her to you.'

'I dare say that will be too late, my boy. Frances ill, you said? I should like to have seen her too,' he added, as if thinking aloud.

Allan dreaded the ordeal before him. The idea of troubling his father's last hours with the question he must ask was terrible. He only brought himself to the point by thinking that a man meeting death as calmly as Mr Bouchier, could have nothing to trouble his conscience. The question must be asked; and as he looked at that quiet white face, his heart leapt as he guessed that the answer would be an entire denial.

He knelt for a few moments longer in silence, ever holding his father's hand in his own; then he leant forward until his lips were close to the dying man's ear.

'Father,' he whispered, 'I have something to ask you. Forgive me asking it at such a moment; but my happiness and my wife's happiness depends upon it.'

Had he been looking into his father's face he would have seen a startled expression flash into the eyes. Could he

have read his father's thoughts he would have learnt the terror his words caused—would have known that Philip Bouchier was crying in spirit—'At last, at last; when I hoped to die and carry the secret of the crime with me.'

But he said not a word, although he knew what Allan's question would be. He neither encouraged nor forbade. He saw that the sword was about to fall, and lying there with his life ebbing away, his strong keen mind was casting about for a means to mitigate the wound it made. Not for his own sake—he cared nothing for that—but for the sake of Allan; for the sake of Frances; for the sake, though to a lesser extent, of his wife and other children. He said not a word, but the weak clasp tightened round his son's fingers. Then Allan spoke again.

'Father, it is only to hear you deny it, and set my mind at rest, I ask you. That man—the man you killed that night—did you know his name—who he was—what his death or life meant to us all; and, oh—God! forgive me for asking you!—did you shoot him thinking he was but a ruffian, who had designed to rob and murder you? Tell me, for my whole life hangs on your answer!'

It was out—a moment would decide all. The tension on Allan's nerves was so great that he buried his face in the pillow beside his father's and sobbed convulsively.

Yet Philip Bouchier spoke not. Allan felt the clasp of his fingers relax, and then, lifting his head, he looked at him. To his horror and dismay his father lay, to all appearances, senseless, as when he had seen him for the first time after his sudden illness.

'Father! father!—speak!' he cried passionately; but not a sound came from Philip Bouchier's pale lips. Allan groaned—the question was unanswered. Could he hope to have the chance of repeating it? Could he dare to do so if the opportunity came again?

He called for aid and then left the room. Hour after hour he paced up and down the library—the most unhappy man on earth. He dared not leave the house. He dared not return to town. He must, for the sake of honour, for the sake of all, have an answer to that question. And the remainder of that day passed, and the night passed, and morning broke once more, but Philip Bouchier gave no sign, although the doctors did not think he was unconscious

all the time. The case in this later stage was puzzling them terribly.

The only gleam of sunshine that fell upon Allan was Josephine's morning telegram, which told him that Frances was decidedly better. There was an abatement of fever. She was much quieter and was now sleeping. Glad as he was to have this good news, under the present circumstances he was more than thankful, as it enabled him to stay at Redhills without going quite mad with the fear of his wife dying in London.

Yet all that time, whilst Allan waited for consciousness to return to his father, that father was as conscious as the son himself. At any moment during those long and dreary hours he could have spoken as intelligibly as ever he spoke in his life. He was living through all that life again—through all its sorrows, joys, successes, failures, and sins—culminating in the heartless and carefully calculated crime which had utterly wrecked it. A ghost of his old satirical smile played on his lips as he thought he had been punished sufficiently for it in this world. Did the terrors of the next life appeal to him—perhaps. He knew he was dying. In a few days, if not hours, he would be judged for his crime, and he felt that, having never attempted to excuse it even to himself, whatever the constitution of that Highest Tribunal be, he must fare ill. Philip Bouchier was dying one of those rare deaths, in which the mind lasts clear and workable almost to the very end—not, as is usual, mind and body keeping step on the last mile or two of life's journey. A more terrible death for a man with such a crime on his conscience cannot be imagined.

He lay there hour after hour looking death in the face, and by the force of his strong will defying its terrors, or the terrors death is usually supposed to present to sinners. Yet there was one he could not shrink from—could not defy. He groaned as he thought of his son's future happiness wrecked by his crime. His one burning eager wish was to avoid this. How was it to be done? If he died and made no sign would not the doubt be as distressing as the certainty? Would not the very manner in which he had received Allan's appeal confirm Manders' tale? He well knew the information could only have reached his son through that one channel.

Towards morning a change came over him. It may have

been that in one direction his mind was growing weaker. Anyway, the thought of a future state grew more and more engrossing—more and more fearful. Old dogmas cast aside with childhood ; old lessons as to the ultimate consequences of right and wrong ; old faith as to the existence of eternity, came back to him with painful force and distinctness. Half sceptical as he had ever been, he could not believe that such a deed as his was done with for ever, when his eyes should close to open no more. Often it is to the most criminal and the most miserable that the future existence seems most indisputable. The criminal, because it is but logical he shall be punished for his earthly crimes—the miserable, because he feels that he ought to have some recompense hereafter for the wretched life he has led.

But perhaps, with the approach of death, other thoughts not based so much on self came to Mr Bouchier. Perhaps, as the watches of the night went by, the treachery, the cruelty, the selfishness of the cold-blooded murder came vividly before him. Perhaps a better nature lying hitherto dormant at last awoke. Perhaps, for the first time, he regretted the act itself, and felt that if he were standing this moment alone with John Boucher on that deserted road, that although certain the deed would be known to no one, suspected by no one, he would not do it ; even to confirm himself and his children in the possession of Redhills.

Who can tell—doctor, priest, or weeping friend—what is a true death-bed penitence ? Who can say what it is worth, or how much of it is simply the outcome of the fear of death ? Whether the man who makes confession with a contrite heart, the throbs of which he knows to be numbered, would not, if by a miracle restored to health, live again the life he has always lived ? It is well for us that it is not our province to decide on this point. It is well that it is not the dying man's province to decide. It is well that he can die feeling that the evil of a lifetime has been forgiven during those hours he lay waiting for the end. Read, if you care to, about the last moments spent on earth by the next murderer who is to be hanged for his crime. Read how the chaplain attends and exhorts him ; how he receives the sacrament just before the noose is adjusted ; how he says he is ready for death ; how he confesses his crime, and writes, the night before the execution, a pious letter to his mother, father, or some one he loves. Often as

I read about these penitent and saved felons, it seems to me that murder is the shortest way to heaven. Yet I wonder how would it be with them if a full pardon arrived just as the ropes were round their necks. Yes, it is well and it is merciful to us that we can believe in the efficacy of repentance at the last moment; can believe it is freely given, not wrung from us.

It was towards morning that the full strength of this feeling came over Mr Bouchier—the desire to make his peace with Heaven. To confess his great crime to some one; to a clergyman—even to the daughter of the murdered man. To humble himself and entreat her forgiveness. To die after having heard those words of pardon. To be able, if hereafter he must face his victim's accusing eyes, to say to him, 'She has forgiven; cannot you forgive also, and, it may be, plead for me, your murderer?' Every moment his desire grew stronger, until it reached to a passionate longing.

His change of mood had been a sudden one; but it endured. He dared not die with this weight upon his mind; yet he might, he knew, die at any moment. If he was to make confession, not a minute must be lost. So completely did this idea pervade him that he turned on his pillow, resolved without delay to make his wishes known to the watchers. He would summon the rector of Redton, a man who had known him from his earliest years. He would be the fitting person to receive his confession—to hold out what hope of forgiveness he could. He would have sent for his son's wife, but Allan had told him she was ill. He could not hope to live long enough to see her. The rector must bear her his message; he must tell her everything—tell them all everything.

The nurses, who saw his movement, were at his side in a moment. The words he wished to speak were trembling on his lips, when the consequences of what he was about to do flashed before him, and Philip Bouchier closed his eyes again and sank back, knowing that the comfort vouchsafed to the greatest criminal—repentance and confession—was denied to him. The crown of his punishment was at hand.

Never in the flush of health had his reasoning powers seemed clearer; never had the deductions they drew appeared more logical; never had the affection and honour

of his children been valued more dearly; never had their happiness and well-being ranked more paramount. Yet, for the sake of himself, he was going to throw a blight on their lives—to condemn Allan and the wife he loved to be unable hereafter to look into each other's eyes without thinking that one's father was the murderer, the other one's the victim. How, under such circumstances, could love exist between them? And Mabel, Kenneth, Josephine, his wife—what a cloud would be cast on all their lives! Cast by the last words of the father and husband they had always loved and honoured—a man who could find nerve enough to do a deed of treachery to which there was scarcely a parallel—a coward who could not, most likely from the fear of death, die keeping his own counsel.

He remembered, as he lay there, how years and years ago, without a thought of the danger he was incurring, he had saved two of his children from what seemed certain death. How little he had recked his own life when it was a question of saving theirs. How often he had told himself he could make any sacrifice for their sakes. Yet, now it came to the test, now when his own act had placed him in such a position that he must sacrifice that burning, devouring desire to ease his mind by confessing the sin which weighed upon it, he hesitated. How little Philip Bouchier thought, when he took those minute precautions to hide all evidence of his crime, that the hour would come when his greatest wish, so far as his own peace of mind was concerned, would be to reveal it, in all its blackness, to the whole world if necessary.

It could not be. For the sake of the living, confession was out of the question. He only knew how he repented; but of what use was repentance without its natural sequence, confession? And he was doomed to die silent.

Then strange and fine-drawn fancies seized him. Men had been known—many men—who had sacrificed themselves physically for the sake of those they loved. He could have done it without a second thought. But had there ever been one known who was willing to make a spiritual sacrifice to bring about the welfare of others?—who in his last moments had deliberately cut away what slight chance he may have had of forgiveness?—who had endeavoured to atone for a crime he repented of, not by sacrificing worldly goods, or his body, but by something outweighing all earthly considera-



tions—his soul? This curious idea possessed him and clung to him with extraordinary tenacity. He worked the problem out over and over again; looked at it in every light until he began to wonder if this was the atonement really demanded. That, happily, it was ordained that he alone, the guilty one, was to be the only sufferer. That if he could nerve himself to leave this life without a shred of hope to cling to, the punishment would be complete. He was not to pay the material penalty demanded from nearly every murderer. The sentence passed upon him was of a higher, more intellectual, and, to a man in his present state of mind, far, far more awful kind than human lips could decree.

A grim purpose formed itself within his active brain, the very existence of which in a dying man's thoughts should make one shudder, although it bore no evil to any save himself. But could he carry it out? Could he, when the moment came, command himself sufficiently? He believed he could die silent—could, if needful, lie from now until the death agony seized him without letting a word pass his lips. But, in order that any benefit might be reaped from what his reasoning had persuaded him was the means offered him of saving those he loved, he must do more, far more than keep silence. He believed he would be equal to the act he premeditated, and endeavoured to gather up his waning strength for the effort.

No doubt these hours and hours of acute thought were telling upon him, as shortly after he had formed his resolution his mind must have slightly wandered. The turn it took was to bring a phantom of a thick-set man to his bedside—a man whom he had never seen but once in his lifetime. No looker-on would have noticed his lips moving, but to Mr Bouchier it seemed that he was talking to his ghostly visitor—that he pleaded for pardon, or at least that his crime might die with him. He thought that at last he said to the phantom, 'It is as much for your daughter's sake as for the sake of my own children I am going to do this—going to renounce every hope.' And as he spoke he seemed to feel that he was speaking the solemn truth.

But this visitor of his own creation answered not. Yet Mr Bouchier shuddered as he met its eyes and read there only one expression—not triumph, vengeance, hate, or even forgiveness, but pity, deep, hopeless pity, for the man who pleaded to him. And with that shudder it seemed to Mr

Bourchier that his mind regained its balance and took up the thread of his purpose, whilst the phantom faded from his sight.

The time he had lain like this, really insensible, had been longer than he thought. He opened his eyes and found his wife standing over him. She put her lips to his and kissed him.

'Tell me the time,' he said in a whisper.

It was four o'clock in the afternoon. He knew by the hour that he had been insensible again, and the next attack of that kind might be the end of everything! He also knew that his bodily strength was leaving him.

'Give me brandy,' he said.

The stimulant was given.

'Send Allan here,' was his next command. 'Leave him alone with me.'

'Not if he agitates you, dear,' said Mrs Bourchier. 'Nothing shall trouble you now. I will not allow it.'

'Send Allan to me,' he reiterated. 'I have something to say to him—to him alone.'

Mrs Bourchier rose to obey. She had obeyed him all her lifetime, why should she cease doing so now? As she left the room he recalled her.

'Let the others come first, but only for a moment, to wish me good-bye—and, Adelaide, wish me good-bye yourself.'

She kissed him with tears streaming down her cheeks; then she went to summon Mabel and Kenneth.

Their interview with their father was a very short one; in a minute or two they were dismissed, and Allan, with a face as pale as his father's, stood by the side of the bed.

'Are we alone?' asked Mr Bourchier.

'Yes,' answered Allan, kneeling beside him; 'we are quite alone.'

'Allan,' said Mr Bourchier calmly, 'death is near—very near me now.'

The son took the father's hand and pressed it. The statement was such sad truth, that he could not contradict it.

'You asked me some question yesterday, my boy. I fainted, I think, while you were speaking; but I believe it was something of importance. If so, ask me again, before it is too late.'

Allan's throat felt so dry he could scarcely gasp out the words he must speak.

‘Oh, father! tell me if you knew the name of that man—that man you killed!’

Mr Bouchier drew a quick breath; well as he knew the question he was to be asked, fully prepared as he was to meet it, no forewarning could quite take away its sting. But his voice, as he replied, was calmer, if feebler, than his son’s.

‘I learned it—long afterwards. I learned it from the villain who palmed himself off as his son and my cousin.’

Allan’s heart leapt. ‘You knew nothing of his claim—his right to Redhills?’ he asked.

‘Nothing. To me he was but a midnight thief. I shot him, as I thought, to save my own life, Allan.’

Could any son doubt the dying words of his father? Yet he must ask something more.

‘Did you know that Frances was his daughter?’

‘Not until quite recently. That wretch who told me who he was, who swore he himself was the man’s son, informed me a short time ago.’

‘Who is that man? How did he ever come here?’ asked Allan.

‘He came with papers which seemed to prove his identity. He knew in some way that the man was John Boucher. Allan, at first I believed him. When I discovered the imposture, it was too late—he had married Josephine.’

‘But even then,’ urged Allan.

‘Even then. Tell me, Allan, what thought it was urged you to come here in hot haste—what keeps you here now? Why my answers to your questions were of such vital importance?’

Allan was silent. He was now ashamed that he had for a moment believed in the possibility of such a crime lying at his father’s door.

‘I will tell you,’ said Mr Bouchier. ‘In some way you heard this fellow’s tale; you saw what John Boucher’s death meant to me and to all of us; and you dreaded lest in a moment of temptation I had committed a foul crime. Is it so?’

Allan bowed his head in shame. How he had wronged his father! The whole affair had been a terrible accident, not a crime.

‘Give me more brandy,’ said Mr Bouchier; his strength was fast ebbing. Allan gave him the brandy—its effects

were almost instantaneous. 'I have been weak, of course,' said Mr Bouchier, more firmly, 'but if you, my own son, can suspect, what would it have been with others? This impostor has traded on my weakness. I have tolerated and bribed him instead of denouncing him. Now listen, Allan—it may be to my last words. You will believe a dying man—'

As he spoke the sound of carriage wheels was heard outside—some one had arrived in hot haste. Perhaps Josephine—the only one of his children he had not seen. If so, he must see her at once.

'Look out and see who it is, Allan,' said the dying man eagerly.

Allan obeyed. It was not Josephine who stepped out of the carriage—it was her husband, Digby Bouchier, or George Manders. Allan was firmly resolved that this miscreant should not vex his father's last moments.

'It is not Josephine,' he said quietly, returning to his station near the bed.

'Who is it?—tell me,' said Mr Bouchier. Allan was silent.

'Is it Josephine's husband?—that cheat, impostor!'

There was such eagerness, almost pleasure in his manner, that Allan felt he must tell the truth. A strange smile crept over the dying man's face, a smile which might have been a triumphant one had not the situation precluded such a possibility. Everything seemed to be arranged according to the subtle theory he had devised as he lay for so long apparently unconscious. It may even be that the thought of defeating his foe at the last moment brought a certain amount of comfort to Mr Bouchier.

'Allan,' he said, 'raise me up in the bed. Then bring him up here. He has come at the right moment; he was never welcome until now. Let him stand before me, and mark him quail at the truth. Go down and bring him here, or he will not be allowed to enter the house.'

The desire was so plainly expressed that Allan could not hesitate. He went down to the hall and found Steel at the front door, prepared to contest the visitor's passage.

Manders started and fell back as he saw Allan—he had no wish to feel the strength of his arm again. Allan threw the door open and waved Steel aside.

'Come in,' he said quietly; 'my father wishes to see you at once.'

Manders was much disconcerted at hearing this announcement. Although he came down to Redhills determined at all hazards to force his way into Mr Bouchier's presence, he did not like this absence of opposition. He had heard at Brackley that he was very ill, but had no idea his life was in such jeopardy.

'Come,' said Allan fiercely, as he noticed his hesitation, 'come, or it will be worse for you.'

He knew that. It would be much worse for him unless he saw Mr Bouchier to-day. That forged bill was at the first of its days of grace. Unless he could take a thousand pounds back to town with him, things might go very badly with George Manders. So he followed Allan without a word; promising himself that once in Mr Bouchier's presence he could in some way gain his ends. All the same he blamed himself bitterly for having for vengeful reasons revealed certain things to Allan. But most likely Mr Bouchier was still in ignorance as to the extent of Allan's information.

'Not that man, Allan!' said Mrs Bouchier piteously, as she saw her son conducting Manders to the sick room.

'My father wishes it,' said Allan shortly but decisively, as he held the door open and followed Manders into the chamber.

The villain started and turned pale as he became aware of Mr Bouchier's condition. Yet he noted that he was sensible. There might be time to get what he wanted. He walked round to one side of the bed, whilst Allan stood at the other. He carried a strong odour of ardent spirits into the room with him, and no wonder, as since the time Allan left him he had scarcely been sober an hour. It was only the imperative nature of the case which brought him to Redhills in a presentable condition at the present moment. 'Sorry to see you so bad, Mr Bouchier,' he said, with a clumsy attempt of appearing at his ease. 'I am sorry to bother you, but I have come upon a bit of business which won't admit of delay.'

'No,' said Mr Bouchier, looking him full in the face and speaking with a distinctness and power which surprised Allan. 'No; you are here to listen to the last words—the dying words I am going to speak to my son. Listen; for they may concern you.'

'Oh, I say—' stammered Manders.

'Don't dare to interrupt me. I am dying.' The speaker threw such a glance on his son-in-law that he quailed and felt shrinking within himself. He could not find another word to say. Mr Bouchier turned to Allan and took his hand.

'Allan,' he said, 'remember this. I have been weak, and fearing how I should be condemned for an accident, have yielded much in order to keep that man's tongue silent. When I shot John Boucher I had no idea as to who he was or what he claimed. To the best of my belief he meant to assault me. I may have made a mistake—I may have acted too hastily. If so, I have paid dearly for my error. This man has traded on my fears. He has wrung money from me, and would wring more. Defy him, Allan—make no compact with him. He is an impostor and a liar. I killed John Boucher in self-defence. It was an accident. No thought of who he was—no thought of crime, was in my heart. These are my last words—I swear to their truth on the—oath—of—a—dying—man.'

It was over. His strength had not failed him. His purpose was accomplished. He had found resolution enough to frame his last words into a lie. But it was a lie that saved Allan. Every suspicion was swept away from his mind. Had the least one lingered it would have been dispelled as he saw the appearance of George Manders. He was white and trembling—such an ending as this to his plots had never occurred to him as being possible. Wretch as he was, his blood ran cold at the words he had heard. Mr Bouchier was a greater man than himself. He could not have done this thing.

'Is he dead?' he stammered, with fear and awe in his face.

Allan heard him, and dropping his father's hand, rose and came towards him.

'Go,' he said, with a look on his face which told what a refusal would entail.

'He has lied—died with a lie on his lips,' said Manders.

Allan's eyes blazed. The sanctity of the sick chamber and Manders' hasty retreat were the only two things that kept him from proceeding to extremities. He sent the nurse to his father, and accompanied Manders until he saw him inside the carriage which had brought him to Redhills. Then he looked through the window, and said in a voice which made the occupant shudder—

‘My wife is dangerously ill. If anything happens, you know what I will do to you.’

The carriage drove off, and Allan returned to his father.

Mr Bouchier was not dead—yet he prophesied truly when he said those words would be his last. For some days life lingered, but not again did a syllable pass his lips. The watchers could not say whether he was conscious or unconscious. He had done all he had nerved himself to do—far more than dying in silence. After that solemn and stupendous lie, which had made even the hardened villain stand aghast, why should a man want to speak again in this world?

So when after two or three days Philip Tremain Bouchier died—and died with apparently little pain—those words still remained his last ones.

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## CHAPTER XXVII

### JOSEPHINE IS FREED

GEORGE MANDERS, after his departure from Redhills, told the driver to take him to the Redton Inn. He dismissed his conveyance and bespoke a bedroom and a sitting-room. He must stay in the neighbourhood until Mr Bouchier's death made it certain that his plots must be at an end. To no one else could he turn for money—the very furniture in the house at Shepherd's Bush was settled upon his wife. Even if he could borrow money upon it, the amount would be too small to be of any service. For the first time, flight, bootless flight, entered into his head. He was not exactly sure as to the very day on which the forged bill would become due, nor was he clear as to what steps would be taken when its true nature was discovered. His great hope was that Mr Bouchier would recover, or even partially recover, from his illness. He could not believe he was so near to death. He could not have spoken like that if he had thought of dying. What a good plucky one he was, after all—what a lie he had told! For a moment Mr Manders felt almost indignant at the success of falsehood. Or he may have felt like the eagle struck down by the arrow feathered from its own plumage.

He must stay near Redhills as long as possible. He

decided this over a glass of strong brandy and water, and ratified that decision over many more. So he stayed at the Redton Inn, and having nothing else to do, whilst waiting events, drank all day long. He had now got past the stage where liquor sends its votary senseless under the table. He could even continue drinking until he grew what may, in a complimentary sense, be called sober again. In fact, the next warning the brandy would give him would come in the guise of *delirium tremens*.

Meanwhile Allan had been to town. He had found Frances so much better that he was able to return the next day to Redhills, bringing Josephine with him. She was in time to see her father alive, but not to receive the farewell which he had, on a previous occasion, given to the others. She stayed at Redhills but a few hours, then tore herself away, not liking to leave Frances for longer. Allan was very grateful to her. Although all danger had gone by, he longed to be with his wife; but knowing all he knew, it seemed to him it was his duty to stay at Redhills. He was perfectly aware that Josephine's husband had taken up his abode at the Redton Inn, and feared to leave the neighbourhood whilst Manders continued there.

It was the third day after Mr Bouchier had spoken those important words that a clerk from the Westshire Bank, Longmere Branch, called at Redhills, and asked to see Mr Bouchier, or, failing him, Mr Allan. He was the bearer of a bill accepted, ostensibly, by Mr Bouchier, and payable in London to the order of Digby Bouchier. It was due the day before, and as no funds had been deposited to meet it, and as Mr Digby Bouchier's banking account had nothing to place against it, it had been sent down for presentation to the acceptor. Allan examined it. The forgery was palpable.

'That is not my father's signature,' he said; 'it is forged.'

A fierce delight swept through him. Retribution was coming on the rascal. He need lift neither hand nor foot—others would see to it all. George Manders would have the pleasure of spending the next year or two in fitting company.

'It is a forgery,' he said, 'and forged by the drawer, whose right name is George Manders, and who is at this moment staying at the Redton Inn.'



The bank clerk left, and telegraphed the news to London.

The next morning, waiting at Sleaford Junction for the Brackley train, was a gentleman who had in his pocket a document which would necessitate George Manders bearing him company back to town.

It happened that on this particular morning Mr Manders had grown nervous and uneasy. He did not think events would have marched so quickly, but he felt it behoved him to be careful. Mr Bouchier, he had learnt, still lingered on in the same hopeless condition—oblivious to promissory notes or acceptances, whether rightly or wrongly drawn. From Allan he had no mercy to expect. In fact, the game was all but up. He dare not linger at Redton any longer. Tomorrow it might be too late. Fortunately he had two or three hundred pounds left in his pocket-book. He must fly and try to strike out a fresh career. Once safe in a land where there were no extradition treaties, he could look round and try to better himself. He could threaten Allan just as well by letter as by word of mouth. So it was that, at the very moment the gentleman from London was waiting at Sleaford Junction for the Brackley train, Mr Manders was on the same platform waiting for the train to take him to Blacktown; and he saw the gentleman from London.

At this particular time Mr Manders was keeping as sharp a look-out for strangers as his besotted senses would allow. Moreover, he had seen this stranger's face before. For a while he could not remember where. It was not until he had watched him enter the Brackley train that his mind grew clear upon this point. It was a remarkable face, rather an unfortunate one for a member of his profession to be gifted with. Once seen, it was impressed on a man's memory. As the train whirled it away, Mr Manders remembered where he had seen it, and remembered to whom it belonged. He felt truly thankful he had been so cautious—that he had left Redton without paying his inn bill and without his portmanteau. He would now be able to baffle pursuit. If needful he might lie hidden for days in a large town like Blacktown. But the best plan would be to start for his destination at once. The innkeeper, in the face of his unpaid bill and unremoved luggage, would inform the gentleman from London that his guest would certainly return ere long; and the gentleman from London would

wait—wait perhaps until late at night. Oh, yes, he had plenty of time.

Spain must be his destination. He had looked into the matter, in case of painful contingencies, and settled that years ago. Blacktown being a large seaport, he might find a steamer sailing from there that very day for Spain. If not, he must go elsewhere.

Nevertheless, he felt strangely out of sorts, and craving for stimulant when he reached Blacktown. It was a craving easily supplied. Having for the time stilled it, he went to work to make inquiries. He felt there was no need to be too particular; if he could not get away at once, the chance was he would be compelled to stay. So he walked boldly down to the quays, and inquired at a shipping agent's if a steamer left to-day for Spain. He found there was none. His disappointment was very great, and he needed several doses of his indispensable medicine to bring him into working order again. At times he felt very queer, and dashed his hand across his eyes as though he wished to banish sights which ever and anon came before them. Once or twice he stopped dead in the street and shivered as he waited for something which he felt must remove itself from his path before he could proceed. Still more brandy—it was the only cure for his complaint.

Now came the question: Should he lie hidden in Blacktown until the next steamer left for the Peninsula? Could he risk it? He thought not. He was sure to be traced. He had noticed that people looked at him curiously as they answered his inquiries. He must try elsewhere. Then the large Welsh seaport—in many things Blacktown's rival—came to his mind. The idea pleased him. He had never heard of a fugitive being looked after there. Liverpool seemed to be the port where all were caught. To Carport he would go.

But, if he must leave traces, he would leave them in Blacktown only. Some things were indispensable to him for his voyage. He went to the various shops and bought them—bought a large portmanteau and packed them into it.

All this took up time; so, when he had visited a barber's, and had his moustache shaved off, when he had effected a few other changes in his appearance, the day was gone and the dusk of evening creeping on. By the time he stepped out of the train at the pier, from which a part of the journey

must be performed by water, it was quite dark. He could not hope to leave Carport to-night; to-morrow he must trust in his luck. He walked down the uncomfortable wooden steps till he reached the landing-stage. The wind was blowing very hard, and the steamer was tossing up and down. Sailors were standing each side of the railed gangway to assist passengers on board.

'Now, sir, be smart!' cried one of them, as Manders paused at the entrance to the gangway and gave a slight scream.

There, in front of him, was one of those horrors he had seen several times to-day. He could not move a step until the ghastly thing was out of his path. He was endeavouring to find words to explain his dilemma when the sailors lost patience with him, and, seeing he was stopping the throng of passengers behind him, took him firmly by the arms, and half-led, half-forced him along the narrow way. He sank, pale and shivering, upon the nearest seat. Never in the course of his life had he felt like this. He had sense enough to attribute his strange feelings to the right cause, but under present conditions was compelled to have recourse to the assistance of the foe to enable him to continue the combat at all. In a few minutes he staggered to his feet and found the way instinctively to the saloon.

There was a little knot of persons in front of the drinking-bar, several of whom looked askance at the tall young man with wild eyes who pushed his way to the front and demanded brandy. They watched him drink the modicum of spirit without troubling to augment the dilution it had already undergone at the various hands it had passed through until it reached the consumer's. They watched him turn away, then turn back again and demand another dose of the so-called neat spirit. He swallowed this as quickly as the first, then went up the companion ladder to the deck.

'Rum-looking beggar,' said one of the passengers, following him with his eyes. 'Seems to like his liquor, don't he?'

'Blue-ribbon man, repenting of his errors and making up for lost time,' suggested another.

'Blue-devil man, I'm thinking, indeed,' said a third, a doctor returning to the principality, who betrayed his origin by the intonation of the word "indeed." 'He is not far, indeed, I should say, from D.T.'

Had the doctor known that for the last two or three

nights the man who had just left the cabin had been unable to sleep a wink ; that for the last two or three days he had been loathing the sight of food ; had he been able to connect these facts with the pale dirty-looking face and startled but lustreless eyes, he would most likely have left the cabin and followed the stranger on deck. Even as it was, he might have done so had he not known that an impending attack of the disease he expressed by two letters is very, very rarely accompanied by a craving for drink ; and this young man had swallowed his brandy as if his existence depended upon it. So Dr Morgan Evans sat still in the cabin, and, in spite of the frightful example he had just seen, consented to his own glass being refilled, as a token of good fellowship between himself and a friendly patient who was crossing the Severn in the same boat.

Manders went on deck, and found the last truckful of luggage had been lowered by the lift ; that the great loops of the strong hawsers were slipped from the short sturdy posts which went through them ; that the paddle-wheels were revolving and striking the first blows of the fight they had to make against wind and tide ; that the boat's head was swinging round and pointing towards the opposite coast, but a long, long way above the lights it meant to get to eventually, for the wind was blowing strongly from the north-west, and the tide was about half-ebb.

If you know what a half-ebb spring tide over the Severn Shoots is, you will understand why the boat's head pointed far above that row of lights. If you do not know, go to the ferry at the right time, get down to the landing-stage, and watch the brown water rushing down—watch it whirling and curling into eddies, striking off from each of the great wooden piles which form the pier. Throw your hat, your stick, or what will do as well and be less inconvenient, your newspaper, on to the stream. It goes out of sight like an express train, and you are able to get an idea of what the Severn tide is. If you go there later on the ebb, you will see a little way down the river the black sea bottle-covered rocks known as the Shoots sticking their villainous heads above water. Perhaps not so villainous after all. If navigation was attended by no difficulties like these, pilots would be superfluous ; and there are many honest, brave, sober men who keep wives and little ones by piloting ships up and down the broad but deceptive stream.

Oh, there is a rare fine tide in the Severn. Things may be improved now, but years ago it was a merry sight to go up to Sharpness, and watch the vessels coming into the lock—the lock which gives access to the Gloucester Canal, and which stands almost at right angles to the stream. Such pulling, hauling, and general excitement if the tide was flowing at all fast. It was touch-and-go then. Unless the right moment was seized, or if the wheel was given a turn too many or too few, the chances were that the luckless brig, schooner, or whatever rig the craft might be, was floating broadside up the stream, making all haste to let go anchor and avoid stranding on the sands above, leaving the minor detail of a bowsprit or jib-boom snapped off like a carrot to be seen to at a more convenient time.

It is a merry stream that broad Severn; a fantastic stream. Leaving out of the question the temporary madness which shows itself in the shape of 'bores,' it plays other curious pranks. A man who had a house on its banks thought that a barge filled with stones and sunk opposite his front door would afford some protection to his boats. Rightfully or wrongfully, he carried out his idea, and the consequence was the Severn thought fit to transfer several miles of sand from the opposite coast to the coast on which the sunken barge lay. Whether this was considered an advantage or a disadvantage, I have never heard.

Then the tide does not run straight down through the channel. It goes out of the direct line to scour all round the shore, and, as the authorities say, keep the Roads, where large ships used to lie for weeks waiting for a wind, fit for anchorage—keeps the mouth of another smaller but scarcely less important river from silting up. So that, after all, there may be method in its madness.

The steamer left the landing-stage as George Manders came on deck. He went forward, thinking he should be less noticed. He sat on one of the gridiron-pattern seats affixed to the side of the ship, and he began to look at the dark waves which were tossing the stout boat about. There was no moon up, but the stars were shining, and he could see by their light the water tossing and tumbling about—short fierce waves, for the wind was blowing more than across the tide. These waves had a strange fascination for the gazer; each one seemed to try to reach him—him particularly. They might have been imbued with intelligence, so viciously

they rose and snapped at him. He could not get rid of this peculiar fancy—for a while could not turn his eyes from the angry but baffled foes. At last, by a great effort, he succeeded in forcing himself to look the other way; but a strange nervousness came over him, he longed to find himself safe on the opposite shore. He fixed his eyes as firmly as he could on the lights in the distance, and determined to let them look at nothing else. Yet all the while he thought of the waves at his back clamouring for him.

It takes a very calm, bold man to turn his back to his foes yet not retreat. After a short time Manders felt the position growing intolerable. He must turn and face his enemies. He struggled with the desire until a stronger and a new one came upon him. He must see what the waves on the other side of the ferry boat were doing. So he crossed the deck and, seating himself exactly opposite to his former station, looked again at the water.

Then a thrill of utter horror ran through him—he would have shrieked could he have found the power to do so. All he was able to accomplish was to wring his moist hands, and, with eyes starting from his head, lean over the side of the ship and gaze at what he saw below him.

The waves were fiercer than ever—but, oh, sight of terror! he saw not only waves. There was a devil on each one, riding, dancing, or lying on the crest of it. Large devils on large waves and small devils on small waves, and every one was grinning, mouthing, mocking, and stretching out his arms towards him. Their eyes were all like fire, the very hiss of the water was caused by its contact with their burning bodies. As far as he could see the dark water, it was peopled by devils; and far, far away through the darkness he could see their eyes gleaming. Hundreds, thousands, myriads! And what were those great lights in the distance—those red and white lights towards which he knew the boat was forcing her way? What were they but eyes of large, monstrous, stupendous devils, who were waiting for him to be delivered into their hands?

He gazed and gazed without power of turning away. Although only for minutes, it seemed this sight had been before him for hours. He began to recognise the devilish traits of many of those grim things around him. He saw each rise with the wave, make its spring and fall back baffled, and when that particular one made another attempt

he was able to distinguish it from the crew. But the boldest and most active of all—the one who leapt highest and oftenest, who rode on the greatest wave and came nearest to clutching its prey, had the face of the man he had seen that morning leaving Sleaford Junction in search of him. He felt that this one must reach him at last. Yet, in spite of this, the devil whose appearance gave him the greatest shock of all was one with an awful, hopeless, but malignant face—a face in which he traced his own, feature for feature. There were many others whose faces were those of men he had known, but the two first mentioned were his particular horror.

Even if they did not seize him—were not those immense devils whose eyes were gradually growing larger, brighter, and fiercer, waiting for him—was he not going straight into their clutches?

For a short time it seemed as if that particular fiend with the face of the gentleman from London had disappeared or grown weary with his exertions. He had now missed several turns, and something like self-congratulation swept through Manders' delirium. Then, suddenly as they appeared, all the devils vanished; the waves were leaping as fiercely as before, yet they were but waves. The only devils left were the large bright-eyed ones in the distance. That one with the red eye was his particular dread at the moment. If he could escape him, all might be well.

But there was something else to come. From the black waves by the side of the ship a thing rose—a ghastly, filthy thing, with long arms or suckers. One by one they came in sight and fastened on the hulk of the vessel, and the madman knew, although he had never met with or heard of such a being before this moment, that it was a devil-octopus. It threw out its slimy arms and drew its body slowly from the water. Its body was a face—the face of a man—of the very man he had seen this morning. Then, deliberately, but surely, inch by inch the awful creature crept up the side of the vessel, with a look of triumph on its face or body. Creeping upwards, sure of its prey at last, for its prey could for the time move neither hand nor foot. Now it was almost within reach; the next step, or propulsion from its arms, would enable it to obtain a firm hold on the gunwale, and then! He seemed to feel those slimy suckers strangling him. He seized his stick, which was beside him, and

hammered and beat at the creature—beat its uppermost arms away. Yet he was not safe—he must push it down—down—down until the water closed over it. He knelt on the seat and craned over the side. The devil-octopus was retreating as slowly as it had advanced. He pushed and poked at it—he leaned further over—further yet—as far as he could go, but the thing was not yet submerged—further still he must reach—Ah, now you devil, now!—

A sailor who, although he had noticed him leaning over the side, had attributed that attitude to perfectly natural but uncomfortable causes, made a rush as he saw him disappear, but he was too late to touch even the heel of his boot; but the shout of 'man overboard,' and the cry of that man, as he touched the water, rang out simultaneously.

The life-buoys were hurled from the stern, the steamer stopped, and the boat lowered. But the men who jumped into it knew they were bound on a fruitless errand. The man who had slipped over the side was nearly a mile away by now. It was night, and with this tide and wind it would be as much as the oarsmen could do to look after their own safety. Yet they went readily enough.

They listened intently for another cry, but none came. Manders' end had, after all, been an easy one—easier perhaps than Philip Bouchier's. His last impressions were the struggle with that fell antagonist his delirium had raised up, and the contact with the cold, black water. Then, being a good swimmer, he struck out instinctively, even as one of the revolving floats of the paddle-wheels smote him full on the head, and there was an end of all his finely constructed plots and schemes.

The merry Severn tide took charge of him—carried him all round the Roads, across that basin of soft mud called the Swash, sent him down close past Posset Point and the Blacknore, took him a long way out past gay watering-places, played with him, washed him down channel and up channel, made sure that every breath was long gone from him before it restored him to the land—retained him in its bosom until he was a gruesome sight and scarcely to be recognised. Then it released him, and Cap'en Martin, of the *Mary Ann*, Glo'ster pilot boat No. 13, whilst scanning the channel for a ship in want of his services, saw not far off two black points rising above the water. So the *Mary Ann* went about and



sailed down to those two black points which rode at some distance from each other, and found they were the heels of a drowned man. A rope with a running hitch was soon round them, and the *Mary Ann* seeing the channel, for the while, destitute of a ship, bore away to the nearest sea-coast place with all that was left of George Manders lying on her little deck, decently covered by an old tarpaulin.

There was plenty found on the corpse to make it certain it was that of Manders, but there was not enough evidence to show it was that of the man who fell from the ferry-boat several days before, although there was little reasonable doubt about it. The open verdict, 'Found drowned,' answered every purpose, and saved trouble and expense.

The ghastly remains were hid from sight in a churchyard near where they were brought to land—a plain stone, with the initials 'G. M.,' was placed on the grave, and Josephine was a widow.

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## CHAPTER XXVIII

### IN CALM WATER

PHILIP BOURCHIER had been dead more than three weeks. He had been laid, with all marks of regret and respect, in the family vault at Redton, by the side of the ancestors already enumerated, and other members of the Bouchier family who exercised no influence upon this story. Of all the large assemblage of tenants, mourners, dependants, relations, and friends, which stood round the grave, there was only Allan who knew that the honours paid to his father were rightly due to the man lying in that grave a short way off, with not a letter carved on the grey, plain headstone to hint at his name. Yet the papers in Allan's possession told him the rightful owner of Redhills lay in that neglected grave. With a keen sense of right and wrong, a hatred to all subterfuge and concealment, he was much exercised as to what course to take.

In the first place, it must be clearly understood that Philip Bouchier's solemn assertion had acted exactly as he had calculated it would act. The solemn and repeated denial when death was staring him in the face, the bold summoning of Manders into his presence, that he might

hear the lie Philip Bouchier had found nerve enough to speak with those lips so soon to be stilled for ever, had amply sufficed to sweep away every fear and doubt from Allan's mind. Manders' collapse and abject appearance had well seconded Mr Bouchier's effort to right himself in his son's eyes, and spare him the misery of thinking that he was the cold-blooded murderer of his wife's father. Allan was certain that he had been told the very worst which had happened. He comprehended that some mistake or some accident had cost John Boucher his life; and he could easily understand how a proud man like his father, sensitive to the world's opinion, and knowing how that world would construe his act, was to a certain extent placed at the mercy of the rascal who personated the dead man's son, and who was able to inform Mr Bouchier who it was had fallen a victim to mistake or unfortunate haste. Other things, such as his father tolerating the presence of the impostor at Redhills, of allowing Josephine to live with him a day after the cloven foot had so plainly showed itself, were now made clear to Allan. With such an accusation hanging over him—an accusation to repel which he had nothing but his own bare word, was it any wonder that Mr Bouchier was compelled to make certain terms with this Digby or Manders?—the more so when the first person to whom he would tell the tale would be John Boucher's daughter—Allan's wife.

It was well that Philip Bouchier had declared his innocence at a moment when it is impossible to believe that falsehood can come from the lips. His son was more than satisfied as to his innocence.

Allan was now lord of Redhills, both by the terms of his father's will and by the right of his wife. Old people on the country side were saying 'he'd never make such a man as his grandfæther;' middle-aged people substituted 'fæther' for 'grandfæther;' whilst young people roundly expressed their opinion that 'he'd lick the lot.' No doubt his father was similarly commented upon when he succeeded to the inheritance which had cost him so much to keep. However, in a very few days after Philip Bouchier's death, people talked of Allan as Mr Bouchier of Redhills. The titles of the dead prince fit the new one very naturally.

But Redhills is without a prince at present. It is in the hands of servants. Mrs Bouchier is at Shortlands with the

Messiters; whilst Allan, Frances, and Josephine are at a watering-place in Devonshire.

Frances is convalescent, and will very soon be quite restored to health. To Allan she is looking more lovely than ever, although, terrible as it seems to have to record the fact in connection with her, she wears a wig. But the most beautiful woman is obliged to do that when the hair on her head is about a quarter of an inch in length; and *Mdlle. Francesca*, with her experience, may be trusted to have selected a becoming one.

These visitors—the two fair women and the good-looking young man—are a great puzzle to the inhabitants of the quiet little watering-place they have selected to sojourn at. From the loving demeanour of the taller of the ladies and the young man they might be a newly-married couple, had not the companionship of the third lady, and the fact that all the party were in deep mourning, said otherwise. Yet the two first never seemed tired of each other's society. No husband and wife in the first flush of the honey-moon could have been more devoted. The early summer days went by, and each day the look of returning health grew more apparent on Frances' face, whilst Josephine, free and at peace, began to look much like a softened, toned-down edition of the girl of eighteen before she listened to the specious words of a rascal, and nearly wrecked the whole of her life.

But now the particulars of George Manders' end were known. Although the manner of his death made her shudder, Josephine could not force herself to commit the hypocrisy of pretending to regret him. To have wept or lamented for the man who for the last few years had made her life almost unbearable—the man from whom she was longing to be free, would have been falsehood. She might have wept for the loss of the hero she had once fallen down to and worshipped; but these tears had been wept long and long ago; no more were called for.

She listened to all the details of his death with a pale face but dry eyes—then, as Allan ceased speaking, she rose.

'Allan,' she said, 'he is dead. I will try in time to forgive him for the evil he has wrought. I cannot say one word of regret or shed one tear of grief; but he was my husband, so I will say nothing more against him. Let his

name die. Let us never mention it amongst ourselves again.'

She went to her room and prayed that in time she might be able to forgive him—and forget him.

Now that Manders was dead and could trouble them no more, Allan decided it was better to pay the amount of the forged bill. To their world he had been known only as Digby Bouchier, and Josephine's husband. To explain that he was an impostor and had no right to the name of Bouchier might bring about complications. So the money, which would have left Manders free to scheme and plot at his leisure, was paid when its payment or non-payment mattered nothing to the principal party concerned.

Yet if Allan and Frances were gravely happy during these balmy days, there was something on the mind of each. Allan had deferred a final decision as to what course to take respecting the strange news he had heard until Frances was quite well. He recoiled from the thought that he should, if he made a clean breast of it, be obliged to take his wife's hand in his, look into her earnest eyes, and say, 'You have been seeking for the man who killed your father—that man was my father. It was an accident—a mistake, but the fact remains, John Boucher's blood was on his hands. Will that come between us and our love?' It was a painful task, and, as day by day, it waited undone, staring him in the face, he began to ask himself if it were not a needless one. Innocent in intention as he knew his father to be, the consequences of his hasty act had nearly shipwrecked his happiness. The knowledge of it must always be a grief to him. Why should he ask Frances to share it? Why should he compel her to shudder whenever she heard his father's name mentioned? He thought it all over by day, he lay awake considering it at night, and by this time had fully made up his mind to keep this thing a secret—his only secret—from his wife.

He knew that had Manders lived he must have told **her**. He could not have risked the chance of his informing **her**. But Manders was dead, so that reason for speaking was gone. Josephine, he was sure, knew nothing, his mother or the other members of the family knew nothing. Although he did not suspect that the witness who had given such valuable intelligence to George Manders had died long ago, he could not help thinking it most probable that he,

Allan, was the only person on earth who was aware of the true facts of the case. Why should he speak and make all his people unhappy?

He wronged no one by his silence. If Redhills and everything else really belonged to his wife, marriage had made them his. The very portions bequeathed by his father to his sisters and brother would have to be given by him, as Philip Bouchier had legally nothing to leave. The complication into which affairs would be thrown made his brain whirl. Silence was the only possible way out of the difficulty.

The thing which troubled him most was John Boucher's lying in an unhonoured grave. If he told Frances that her father's bones lay in that lonely spot, her affection would compel her to pay them proper honour, and all the world knew that his father had caused the man he shot to be buried there—and all the world would know if any alteration was made that the supposed highwayman was his wife's father. No, in justice to everybody—in justice to his father's honour he must bear this burden of secrecy. He felt it would to a great extent cast a cloud over his perfect happiness; but that cloud would be nothing compared to the deep gloom which would for ever have shadowed his life had his father not been able to make that last, most important, and solemn declaration of his moral innocence in the terrible deed. With his own mind set at rest by this declaration, Allan, felt that in consideration of the interests involved, he was justified in keeping silence; whereas, had there been crime, or even suspected crime, he would have been bound at any cost to reveal all he knew.

Having so decided he felt happier, but his self-debate had made him at times look moody and sad; but these appearances were easily accounted for by the sincere grief he felt for the loss of his father.

Frances' trouble was of another and entirely different kind. As soon as the fever left her brain, and she was able to recall what had passed, the one thing which stood out most prominently of all was that, at a particular juncture, her voice had failed her. Although she comforted herself by remembering the strange state of mind she was in at the time, the hours she had passed without food or sleep, the strain she had brought to bear on her whole system, never-

theless there was a presentiment ever with her that all this did not quite account for her collapse.

It was long before she could test the truth of this presentiment—long before she could say to herself, ‘I am strong again, and should be able to sing as well as ever;’ but now, when she could assure Allan and Josephine that she never felt better in her life-time, she knew that the day was come when she could frighten or flatter herself no longer. She had positively shrank from testing her voice until this very morning, when, having secured a few moments alone, she had opened the piano and sang one of her favourite and most effective songs. At first all went fairly well; if her performance did not quite satisfy her own exacting criticism, she could lay much of its shortcomings upon her recent illness and subsequent weakness. It was only when she came to the crescendo passages that she knew the effort their execution cost her. She sat silent for a few minutes; then, sighing deeply, placed another song in front of her, and as she sang it, knew that she had succeeded far better with her first attempt than with this second one. Yet she tried one more, and, to her dismay, found herself absolutely unable to finish it. Could this be *Mdlle. Francesca*, who recently had enthralled audiences by those sweet sounds which had cost her little more trouble to bring forth than its song costs the nightingale?

She was feeling perfectly well and strong this morning. There was, she knew, so far as health was concerned, no reason why she should not sing as of yore. Her presentiment had not deceived her. There was something wanting—something gone wrong. She was the same *Mdlle. Francesca* no longer. It was hard, very hard, to be compelled to confess this, after her years of labour, after the brief term of unchecked success, now to be called upon to give up fame and her art.

She leant her face on her hands, and the tears forced themselves through her closed fingers. Her thoughts were very bitter ones. So few women are able by their own gifts and exertions to attain to such a position as hers had been, that her distress can scarcely be wondered at. She cherished no false hope; all along she felt this was coming—felt so certain of it that until now she had shunned the trial. Now she had learnt the worst. This, then, was the end of that famous career she had promised herself!

Frances sat like this for some ten minutes; then the door opened and Allan entered. She knew his step, but did not turn her head. She dropped her hands once more on the keys.

'Will you leave me, dear, for a little while?' she said; 'I am trying over something, and want to be alone.'

Allan, who knew she preferred practising alone, retraced his steps, with a laughing caution not to over-exert herself.

She sat thinking and thinking for another quarter of an hour, but Allan's arrival had somewhat turned the course of her reflections. Gradually she grew more calm; then, rising, she closed the piano quietly but sadly; she put the music back into the portfolio, then standing in a musing attitude, she said with a serious smile, 'Allan will scarcely grieve; perhaps, after all, it will be best for him—and for me.'

With a lingering look she turned away. *Mdlle. Francesca* had bidden adieu to her art.

She went to her writing-case and drew out a letter. It was from her friend the manager, expressing sincere, if interested, hopes that she would soon be well enough to return to her professional duties; also, that the change in her husband's condition would not induce her to abandon at the outset what promised to be the most glorious artistic career of the present day.

The manager, if the truth were known, was having a very bad time of it, so far as *Mdlle. Francesca* was concerned. He considered it very doubtful whether the wife of *Bourchier*, of *Redhills*, a county magnate, with ten thousand a year, would be allowed to tread the boards again. The only way of bringing this about was by appealing to her ambition. If he succeeded in inducing her to return, she would be a greater hit than ever. He was a shrewd man, and had studied 'that big stupid,' as *Thackeray* calls the public, for many years.

This letter she must answer. It would not do to assert on her own authority that her voice had failed her; so she wrote begging that the eminent specialist who had once before attended her, might be sent down into *Devonshire* the next day. And her request made the manager's heart sink into his boots.

Having written her letter, she joined Allan and his sister,

and spent the rest of the day in the usual way. She had swept away every trace of her distress, but she would tell Allan nothing of the discovery she had made until the doctor's visit had been paid. Then she would accept her fate and murmur not. After all, it was not a very hard lot.

Allan, who until she was well, had put aside all consideration as to whether Frances would now leave the stage or not, had been somewhat distressed at finding her practising once more. He had been vainly hoping that she would come to him and say that for the future she was his wife and nothing more. He was trying to keep himself from asking her to yield to his wishes, but at times found the struggle a hard one. His promise had been that she should be free to act as she chose; and even now, if she found that fame was necessary to her happiness, he would fulfil that promise.

Frances, who knew nothing of her husband's former interview with the doctor, was surprised at the expression which came over his face when she quietly informed him of the visit she expected the next day. She could not understand that look until Allan, taking her hand, told her of the prediction made by the clever man when he saw her on a previous occasion. Frances said nothing, but resigned herself to her fate.

The scientist came next day, armed with his mirrors, arranged at various angles to enable him to peep and pry into throat mechanism. Sorry as he was at finding his prognostications verified, grave as he looked with the news he had to impart, he could not help the thrill of professional pride which ran through him.

'And now the verdict?' said Frances, at last released from her strained attitude, and smiling as she looked at his solemn face. The doctor hesitated.

'It is a bad one. Will you hear it?'

'Certainly,' said Frances. 'Tell me in a word. Shall I ever sing again?'

'Yes, you will sing again; but not yet.'

'When? Tell me.'

'You must have months, years even, of perfect rest. Then you may sing again—not unless.'

Years of silence! Why, she knew that in six months the fickle public would have almost forgotten her name.



Yet she was quite calm, even smiling. The doctor wondered how she could take the bad news so quietly. But he was a man wrapped up in his profession, and if he had ever heard, had forgotten, that Allan was so well endowed with the world's gear.

'Shall I ever sing as I sang before?' asked Frances. 'Tell me the truth. I am not afraid to hear it.'

'Most probably you will, but only while you are in perfect health. If anything is amiss with you, the weakness will show itself.'

'And I shall break down again, quite suddenly?'

'As you choose the words I may use them—yes, you will.'

Frances was silent for a few moments. She was thinking of Allan.

'Thank you,' she said, simply. 'I was anxious to hear your true opinion, or I should not have troubled you to come such a distance. Now I must ask you when you go back to town to see Mr —, the manager, and tell him all you have told me. You will do this?'

'Certainly I will; but it is a painful errand.'

The doctor went back by the next train, and as the sun was getting low Frances and Allan walked to a favourite spot where they could sit and watch the waves at their feet, and see far away the sun sink into the sea. They were silent for a long time, but their hands were clasped. Allan did not ask the result of the interview with the doctor. He knew that Frances' silence was owing to it. At last she raised her head and looked him full in the face. Her eyes were moist, but her smile was the sweetest he had ever seen, even on that fair face. They were alone; the sea in front of them, the tall sheltering cliffs at their backs. She threw her arm round her husband's neck and kissed him.

'Allan, dear, when shall we go back to our home, Redhills?'

'Whenever you like, my wife.'

'We shall be very happy, Allan. I think our home is the most beautiful in the world. Shall I be able to play the part of a country gentleman's wife? You will teach me what to do, and not be impatient at my shortcomings?'

He kissed her rapturously. Her words told him that his dream of happiness was to become real life. He told her how he had longed for the time to come when she would

forsake her profession—when he and he alone would be lord and master—when he should see her living and reigning in the old country home. He kissed her again and thanked her for the sacrifice she was making. She smiled.

‘It is scarcely the sacrifice you think. It may be years before I could sing again. At first, Allan, it seemed hard—a woman who has tasted triumph never likes to forego it. But, my husband, believe me when I say that now—now that all is settled—I would not if it were in my power to do so, change things. It is you who shall win the triumphs—it is your name that shall some day be on the lips of men—and I, I am your wife and shall share every success with you. Allan, believe me I am not spoilt by the applause I have had showered on me. I can stand by your side a humble and a dutiful wife, and, my darling, I can love you as no wife ever loved her husband. Let us go back to our home and begin our new life.’

They rose, and the eyes of both husband and wife glistened in the sunset glow. They passed hand-in-hand up the cliff—hand-in-hand along the narrow path which skirted those great Devonshire tors—they were hand-in-hand when Josephine, coming in search of them, met them. And as she scolded them for staying away so long, and laughed at them for their child-like way of walking, a sigh followed her laugh as she contrasted their happiness with her own lot.

But Josephine Bouchier will not be unhappy all her life. She is now little more than a girl. When the remembrance of those years of sorrow has passed entirely or almost entirely from her mind—when she begins to wonder if it were not a painful dream—her innate gaiety will assert itself and she will be known as one of the most bewitching little women in the county of Westshire. So bewitching that many wooers will come to her—and when she chooses again she will choose well, and life will give her husband, children, health, and riches; all, in fact, of the good gifts that life can give. The past will fade away, and, although its bitter experiences may leave her a less romantic woman, she will be better, more earnest, and more sensible.

And Frances will find how little after all being deprived of the breath of fame costs her. How every upward step of her husband on his way to the career of a Statesman is a greater triumph to her than the applause of enthusiastic audiences. How sweet life is when man and wife have but

one common interest! What a fair place England is to live in, particularly when one's home is in that county of England called Westshire, and when Redhills, in that county, is one's home! What an enviable position the wife of a man like Allan holds! And, by-and-bye, she will wonder how she could have thought even this life perfection without that toddling boy and girl who are only less dear to her than her husband. And she will be very, very happy. And, in time, her power of song in all its magnificence will return to her. She will not, of course, be quite sure that her refound treasure could stand the wear and tear of public life, but she will feel that at any moment she could step upon the boards, and, if only for a time, regain her former conquests. She will feel that she has sacrificed something for the sake of her husband, and will be all the happier that it was in her power to do so.

Even her desire to learn her father's fate will be quieted. She will go one day with Josephine to the house at Shepherd's Bush, and as Josephine is collecting little personal matters she wishes to keep, those relics of John Boucher, bought by George Manders from Mr James Stokes, the poacher, will come to light. And Frances, as she sees them, will turn pale, but she will control herself and say nothing, although, coupling this discovery with the murderous nature Manders had so clearly shown to her, she will be fully convinced that he was her father's murderer. His reasons for the crime she cannot, will not, be able to guess at. She will not add to Josephine's dreary recollections by telling her of the suspicion; she will not breathe it to Allan, but in her own mind she will be certain as to its correctness.

And Allan. The career of a young ambitious man aiming at political distinction is hard to predict in these strange times. But he will be in Parliament very soon, not as member for the little borough he first thought of, but, like his father before him, knight of the shire. He may succeed in his ambition, or he may fail. He will bring talent, purpose, hard work and riches to aid him—so should succeed. At present he is looked upon as a rising young man of his party, but, as we all know, his party is out in the cold. When the tables are turned Allan Bouchier's chance will come, and most likely he will be man enough to seize it and make the most of it. But, succeed or fail, he will be the same to his wife.

There is but one cloud on his sunshine. He has a secret from his wife. He has never doubted the wisdom, or even the justice, of keeping that terrible accident a secret; but with the perfect confidence which exists between them on every other point, it weighs upon him, and gives him many a sorrowful moment. He cannot bear to think of her passing that humble grave in Redton churchyard utterly ignorant as to who lies there. He cannot bear to think that she does not know he is indebted to her for everything he possesses. And as the years go by and he sees the love in her true eyes beaming without a sign of growing less, the weight on his mind grows heavier and heavier.

But he knows that nearly every man in this world must have some thorn in the flesh; so he can only sigh and wish that things were otherwise.

But I, who know Allan Bouchier intimately, who can read the man's every thought, share every emotion of his, detect every slowly forming resolution, and tell where every purpose of his mind will lead him to, have no hesitation in saying that when years have passed, when the children are growing up around them, when they who needed nothing but love to bind them, are bound by every chain that time, joy, trouble, fortune, and home can forge, Allan will one day tell his wife all he knows of the fate of John Boucher; will tell her of Manders' accusation, of his father's fears, which placed him at the villain's mercy; of his own anguish when he was told the truth; and last of all of his delight at hearing those solemn words which showed him that the deed was unintentional—and, having told all, the weight will be off his mind for ever.

And Frances, whatever she may feel, however she may in her inmost heart doubt what a son was bound to believe, will bear herself bravely. She will lift her eyes wonderingly and dreamily and look at Allan. She will not even chide him for his silence. She will see away across the green lawn their children merry in their sports. She will take her husband's hand, she will kiss him, and say, 'My love, my Allan, even had it been the worst, it should not have come between you and me.' And Allan will be very happy.

But that evening and many other evenings Frances will steal down to Redton churchyard, and will weep over that grave, on which she dare not put a flower, or cause a name to be inscribed. She will never broach the subject again

to Allan. Perhaps part of the burden Allan has lifted from his shoulders will fall upon hers. It may be she will never be quite so happy as she was before she learned the truth.

But then a woman is always willing and ready, and often expects to suffer something for the sake of the man she loves.

**THE END.**

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