

In Friendship's Guise eBook

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CHAPTER I.

The duplicate Rembrandt.

The day began well. The breakfast rolls were crisper than usual, the butter was sweeter, and never had Diane's slender white hands poured out more delicious coffee. Jack Clare was in the highest spirits as he embraced his wife and sallied forth into the Boulevard St. Germain, with a flat, square parcel wrapped in brown paper under his arm. From the window of the entresol Diane waved a coquettish farewell.

"Remember, in an hour," she called down to him. "I shall be ready by then, Jack, and waiting. We will lunch at Bignon's—"

"And drive in the Bois, and wind up with a jolly evening," he interrupted, throwing a kiss. "I will hasten back, dear one. Be sure that you put on your prettiest frock, and the jacket with the ermine trimming."

It was a clear and frosty January morning, in the year 1892, and the streets of Paris were dry and glistening. There was intoxication in the very air, and Jack felt thoroughly in harmony with the fine weather. What mattered it that he had but a few francs in his pocket—that the quarterly remittance from his mother, who dreaded the Channel passage and was devoted to her foggy London, would not be due for a fortnight? The parcel under his arm meant, without doubt, a check for a nice sum. He and Diane would spend it merrily, and until the morrow at least his fellow-workers at Julian's Academy would miss him from his accustomed place.

Bright-eyed grisettes flung coy looks at the young artist as he strode along, admiring his well-knit figure, his handsome boyish features chiseled as finely as a cameo, the crisp brown hair with a slight tendency to curl, his velvet jacket and flowing tie. Jack nodded and smiled at a familiar face now and then, or paused briefly to greet a male acquaintance; for the Latin Quarter had been his little world for three years, and he was well-known in it from the Boulevard St. Michel to the quays of the Seine. He snapped his fingers at a mounted cuirassier in scarlet and silver who galloped by him on the Point Royal, and whistled a few bars of "The British Grenadiers" as he passed the red-trowsered, meek-faced, under-sized soldiers who shouldered their heavy muskets in the courts of the Louvre. The memory of Diane's laughing countenance, as she leaned from the window, haunted him in the Avenue de l'Opera.

"She's a good little girl, except when she's in a temper," he said to himself, "and I love her every bit as much as I did when we were married a year ago. Perhaps I was a fool, but I don't regret it. She was as straight as a die, with a will of her own, and it was either lose her altogether or do the right thing. I couldn't bear to part with her, and I wasn't blackguard enough to try to deceive her. I'm afraid there will be a row some day,

though, when the Mater learns the truth. What would she say if she knew that Diane Merode, one of the most popular and fascinating dancers of the Folies Bergere, was now Mrs. John Clare?"

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It was not a cheerful thought, but Jack's momentary depression vanished as he stopped before the imposing facade of the Hotel Netherlands, in the vicinity of the Opera. He entered boldly and inquired for Monsieur Martin Von Whele. The gentleman was gone, a polite garcon explained. He had received a telegram during the night to say that his wife was very ill, and he had left Paris by the first train.

The happiness faded from Jack's eyes.

"Gone—gone back to Amsterdam?" he exclaimed incredulously.

"Yes, to his own country, monsieur."

"And he left no message for me—no letter?"

"Indeed, no, monsieur; he departed in great haste."

An appeal to a superior official of the hotel met with the same response, and Jack turned away. He wandered slowly down the gay street, the parcel hanging listlessly under his left arm, and his right hand jingling the few coins in his pocket. His journey over the river, begun so hopefully, had ended in a bitter disappointment.

Martin Von Whele was a retired merchant, a rich native of Amsterdam, and his private collection of paintings was well known throughout Europe. He had come to Paris a month before to attend a private sale, and had there purchased, at a bargain, an exceedingly fine Rembrandt that had but recently been unearthed from a hiding-place of centuries. He determined to have a copy made for his country house in Holland, and chance brought him in contact with Jack Clare, who at the time was reproducing for an art patron a landscape in the Luxembourg Gallery—a sort of thing that he was not too proud to undertake when he was getting short of money. Monsieur Von Whele liked the young Englishman's work and came to an agreement with him. Jack copied the Rembrandt at the Hotel Netherlands, going there at odd hours, and made a perfect duplicate of it—a dangerous one, as the Hollander laughingly suggested. Jack applied the finishing touches at his studio, and artfully gave the canvas an appearance of age. He was to receive the promised payment when he delivered the painting at the Hotel Netherlands, and he had confidently expected it. But, as has been seen, Martin Von Whele had gone home in haste, leaving no letter or message. For the present there was no likelihood of getting a cheque from him.

The brightness of the day aggravated Jack's disappointment as he walked back to the little street just off the Boulevard St. Germain. He tried to look cheerful as he mounted the stairs and threw the duplicate Rembrandt into a corner of the studio, behind a stack of unfinished sketches. Diane entered from the bedroom, ravishingly dressed for the street in a costume that well set off her perfect figure. She was a picture of beauty with

her ivory complexion, her mass of dark brown hair, and the wonderfully large and deep eyes that had been one of her chief charms at the Folies Bergere.

“Good boy!” she cried. “You did not keep me waiting long. But you look as glum as a bear. What is the matter?”

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Jack explained briefly, in an appealing voice.

"I'm awfully sorry for your sake, dear," he added. "We are down to our last twenty-franc piece, but in another fortnight—"

"Then you won't take me?"

"How can I? Don't be unreasonable."

"You promised, Jack. And see, I am all ready. I won't stay at home!"

"Is it my fault, Diane? Can I help it that Von Whele has left Paris?"

"You can help it that you have no money. Oh, I wish I had not given up the stage!"

Diane stamped one little foot, and angry tears rose to her eyes. She tore off her hat and jacket and dashed them to the floor. She threw herself on a couch.

"You deceived me!" she cried bitterly. "You promised that I should want for nothing—that you would always have plenty of money. And this is how you keep your word! You are selfish, unkind! I hate you!"

She continued to reproach him, growing more and more angry. Words of the lowest Parisian argot, picked up from her companions of the Folies Bergere, fell from her lovely lips—words that brought a blush of shame, a look of horror and repulsion, to Jack's face.

"Diane," he said pleadingly, as he bent over the couch.

Her mood changed as quickly, and she suddenly clasped her arms around his neck.

"Forgive me, Jack," she whispered.

"I always do," he sighed.

"And, please, please get some money—now."

"You know that I can't."

"Yes, you can. You have lots of friends—they won't refuse you."

"But I hate to ask them. Of course, Jimmie Drexell would gladly loan me a few pounds —"

"Then go to him," pleaded Diane, as she hung on his neck and stopped his protests with a shower of kisses. "Go and get the money, Jack, dear—you can pay it back when your

remittance comes. And we will have such a jolly day! I am sure you don't want to work."

Jack hesitated, and finally gave in; it was hard for him to resist a woman's tears and entreaties—least of all when that woman was his fascinating little wife. A moment later he was in the street, walking rapidly toward the studio of his American friend and fellow-artist, Jimmie Drexell.

"How Diane twists me around her finger!" he reflected ruefully. "I hate these rows, and they have been more frequent of late. When she is in a temper, and lets loose with her tongue, she is utterly repulsive. But I forget everything when she melts into tears, and then I am her willing slave again. I wonder sometimes if she truly loves me, or if her affection depends on plenty of money and pleasure. Hang it all! Why is a man ever fool enough to get married?"

* * * * *

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On a corner of the Boulevard St. Michel and a cross street there is a brasserie beloved of artists and art students, and slightly more popular with them than similar institutions of the same ilk in the Latin Quarter. Here, one hazy October evening, nine months after Mr. Von Whele's hurried departure from Paris, might have been found Jack Clare. Tete-a-tete with him, across the little marble-topped table, was his friend Victor Nevill, whom he had known in earlier days in England, and whose acquaintance he had recently renewed in gay Paris. Nevill was an Oxford graduate, and a wild and dissipated young man of Jack's age; he was handsome and patrician-looking, a hail-fellow-well-met and a favorite with women, but a close observer of character would have proclaimed him to be selfish and heartless. He had lately come into a large sum of money, and was spending it recklessly.

The long, low-ceilinged room was dim with tobacco smoke, noisy with ribald jests and laughter. Here and there the waitresses, girls coquettishly dressed, tripped with bottles and syphons, foaming bocks, and glasses of brandy or liqueurs. The customers of the brasserie were a mixed lot of women and men, the latter comprising' numerous nationalities, and all drawn to Paris by the wiles of the Goddess of Art. Topical songs of the day succeeded one another rapidly. A group of long-haired, polyglot students hung around the piano, while others played on violins or guitars, which they had brought to contribute to the evening's enjoyment. At intervals, when there was a lull, the click of billiard balls came from an adjoining apartment. Out on the boulevard, under the glaring lights, the tide of revelers and pleasure-seekers flowed unceasingly.

"I consider this a night wasted," said Jack. "I would rather have gone to the Casino, for a change."

"It didn't much matter where we went, as long as we spent our last evening together," Victor Nevill replied. "You know I leave for Rome to-morrow. I fancy it will be a good move, for I have been going the pace too fast in Paris."

"So have I," said Jack, wearily. "I'm not as lucky as you, with a pot of money to draw on. I intend to turn over a new leaf, old chap, and you'll find me reformed when you come back. I've been a fool, Nevill. When my mother died last February I came into 30,000 francs, and for the last five months I have been scattering my inheritance recklessly. Very little of it is left now."

"But you have been working?"

"Yes, in a sort of a way. But you can imagine how it goes when a fellow turns night into day."

"It's time you pulled up," said Nevill, "before you go stone broke. You owe that much to your wife."

He spoke with a slight sneer which escaped his companion.

"I like that," Jack muttered bitterly. "Diane has spent two francs to my one—or helped me to spend them."

"Such is the rosy path of marriage," Nevill remarked lightly.

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“Shut up!” said Jack.

He laughed as he drained his glass of cognac, and then settled back in his seat with a moody expression. His thoughts were not pleasant ones. Since the early part of the year he and his wife had been gradually drifting apart, and even when they were together at theatres or luxurious cafes, spending money like water, there had been a restraint between them. Of late Diane’s fits of temper had become more frequent, and only yielded to a handful of gold or notes. Jack had sought his own amusements and left her much alone—more than was good for her, he now reflected uneasily. Yet he had the utmost confidence in her still, and not a shadow of suspicion had crossed his mind. He believed that his honor was safe in her care.

“I have wished a thousand times that I had never married,” he said to himself, “but it is too late for that now. I must make the best of it. I still love Diane, and I don’t believe she has ceased to care for me. Poor little girl! Perhaps she feels my neglect, and is too proud to own it. I was ready enough to cut work and spend money. Yes, it has been my fault. I’ll go to her to-night and tell her that. I’ll ask her to move back to our old lodgings, where we were so happy. And then I’ll turn over that new leaf—”

“What’s wrong with you, my boy?” broke in Victor Nevill. “Have you been dreaming?”

“I am going home,” said Jack, rising. “It will be a pleasant surprise for Diane.”

Nevill looked at him curiously, then laughed. He took out his watch.

“Have another drink,” he urged. “We part to-night—who knows when we will meet again? And it is only half-past eleven.”

“One more,” Jack assented, sitting down again.

Brandy was ordered, and Victor Nevill kept up a rapid conversation, and an interesting one. From time to time he glanced covertly at his watch, and it might have been supposed that he was purposely detaining his companion. More brandy was placed on the table, and Jack frequently lifted the glass to his lips. With a cigar between his teeth, with flushed cheeks and sparkling eyes, he laughed as merrily as any in the room. But he did not drink too much, and the hand that he finally held out to Nevill was perfectly steady.

“I must be off now,” he said. “It is long past midnight. Good-by, old chap, and bon voyage.”

“Good-by, my dear fellow. Take care of yourself.”

It was an undemonstrative parting, such as English-men are addicted to. Jack sauntered out to the boulevard, and turned his steps homeward. His thoughts were all

of Diane, and he was not to be cajoled by a couple of grisettes who made advances. He nodded to a friendly gendarme, and crossed the street to avoid a frolicksome party of students, who were bawling at the top of their voices the chorus of the latest topical song by Paulus, the Beranger of the day—

“Nous en avons pour tous les gouts.”

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Victor Nevill heard the refrain as he left the brasserie and looked warily about. He stepped into a cab, gave the driver hurried instructions, and was whirled away at a rattling pace toward the Seine.

“He will never suspect me,” he muttered complacently, as he lit a cigar.

With head erect, and coat buttoned tightly over his breast, Jack went on through the enticing streets of Paris. He had moved from his former lodgings to a house that fronted on the Boulevard St. Germain. Here he had the entresol, which he had furnished lavishly to please his wife. He let himself in with a key, mounted the stairs, and opened the studio door. A lamp was burning dimly, and the silence struck a chill to his heart.

“Diane,” he called.

There was no reply. He advanced a few feet, and caught sight of a letter pinned to the frame of an easel. He turned up the lamp, opened the envelope, and read the contents:

“Dear Jack:—

“Good-by forever. You will never see me again. Forgive me and try to forget. It is better that we should part, as I could not endure a life of poverty. I love you no longer, and I am sure that you have tired of me. I am going with one who has taken your place in my heart—one who can gratify my every wish. It will be useless to seek for me. Again, farewell. *Diane*.”

The letter fell from Jack's hand, and he trampled it under foot. He reeled into the dainty bedroom, and his burning eyes noted the signs of confusion and flight—the open and empty drawers, the despoiled dressing table, the discarded clothing strewn on the floor.

“Gone!” he cried hoarsely. “Gone at the bidding of some scoundrel—perhaps a trusted friend and comrade! God help my betrayer when the day of reckoning comes! But I am well rid of her. She was heartless and mercenary. She never could have loved me—she has left me because she knew that my money was nearly spent. But I love her still. I can't tear her out of my heart. Diane, my wife, come back! Come back!”

His voice rang through the empty, deserted rooms. He threw himself on the bed, and tore the lace coverings with his finger nails. He wept bitter tears, strong man though he was, while out on the boulevard the laughter of the midnight revelers mocked at his grief.

Finally he rose; he laughed harshly.

“Damn her, she would have dragged me down to her own level,” he muttered. “It is for the best. I am a free man once more.”

CHAPTER II.

Five years afterwards.

Jack Vernon looked discontentedly at the big canvas on the easel, and with a shrug of the shoulders he turned his back on it. He dropped his palette and flung his sheaf of brushes into an open drawer.

“I am not fit for anything to-day,” he said petulantly. “I was up too late last night. No, most decidedly, I am not in the mood for work.”

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He sauntered to the huge end window of the studio, and looked out over the charming stretch of Ravenscourt Park. It was an ideal morning toward the close of April, 1897—such a morning as one finds at its best in the western suburbs of mighty London. The trees were in fresh leaf and bud, the crocuses were blooming in the well-kept beds, and the grass was a sheet of glittering emeralds. The singing of birds vied with the jangle of tram-bells out on the high-road.

“A pull on the river will take the laziness out of me,” thought Jack, as he yawned and extended his arms. “What glorious weather! It would be a shame to stop indoors.”

A mental picture of the silvery Thames, green-wooded and sunny, proved too strong an allurements to resist. Jack did not know that Destiny, watchful of opportunity, had taken this beguiling shape to lead him to a turning-point of his life—to steer him into the thick of troubled and restless waters, of gray clouds and threatening storms. He discarded his paint-smeared blouse—he had worn one since his Paris days—and, getting quickly into white flannel and a river hat, he lit a briar pipe and went forth whistling to meet his fate.

He was fond of walking, and he knew every foot of old Chiswick by heart. He struck across the high-road, down a street of trim villas to a more squalid neighborhood, and came out by the lower end of Chiswick Mall, sacred to memories of the past. He lingered for a moment by the stately house immortalized by Thackeray in *Vanity Fair*, and pictured Amelia Sedley rolling out of the gates in her father’s carriage, while Becky Sharpe hurled the offending dictionary at the scandalized Miss Pinkerton. Tempted by the signboard of the Red Lion, and by the red-sailed wherries clustered between the dock and the eyot, he stopped to quaff a foaming pewter on a bench outside the old inn.

A little later he had threaded the quaint passage behind Chiswick Church, left the sonorous hammering of Thorneycroft’s behind him, and was stepping briskly along Burlington Lane, with the high wall of Devonshire House on his right, and on his left, far over hedges and orchards, the riverside houses of Barnes. He was almost sorry when he reached Maynard’s boat-house, where he kept a couple of light and serviceable craft; but the dimpled bosom of the Thames, sparkling in the sunlight, woke a fresh enthusiasm in his heart, and made him long to transfer the picture to canvas.

“Even a Turner could not do it half justice,” he reflected.

It was indeed a scene to defy any artist, but there were some bold enough to attempt it. As Jack pulled up the river he saw, here and there, a fellow-craftsman ensconced in a shady nook with easel and camp-chair. His vigorous strokes sent him rapidly by Strand-on-the-Green, that secluded bit of a village which so few Londoners have taken the trouble to search out. A narrow paved quay, fringed with stately elm trees, separated the old-fashioned, many-colored houses from the reedy shore, where at high tide low great black barges, which apparently go nowhere, lie moored in picturesque array.

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It was all familiar to Jack, but he never tired of this stretch of the Thames. He dived under Kew Bridge, shot by Kew Gardens and ancient Brentford, and turned around off Isleworth. He rowed leisurely back, dropping the oars now and again to light his pipe.

"There's nothing like this to brace a fellow up," he said to himself, as he drew near Maynard's. "I should miss the river if I took a studio in town. I'll have a bit of lunch at the Red Lion, and then go home and do an afternoon's work."

A churning, thumping noise, which he had disregarded before, suddenly swelled louder and warned him of possible danger. He was about off the middle of Strand-on-the-Green, and, glancing around, he saw one of the big Thames excursion steamers, laden with passengers, ploughing up-stream within fifty yards of him, but at a safe distance to his right. The same glimpse revealed a pretty picture midway between himself and the vessel—a young girl approaching in a light Canadian canoe. She could not have been more than twenty, and the striking beauty of her face was due to those charms of expression and feature which are indefinable. A crimson Tam-o'-Shanter was perched jauntily on her golden hair, and a blue Zouave jacket, fitting loosely over her blouse, gave full play to the grace and skill with which she handled the paddle.

Jack was indifferent to women, and wont to boast that none could enslave him, but the sight of this fair young English maiden, if it did not weaken the citadel of his heart, at least made that organ beat a trifle faster. He shot one look of bold admiration, then turned and bent to the oars.

"I don't know when I have seen so lovely a face," he thought. "I wonder who she is."

The steamer glided by, and the next moment Jack was nearly opposite to the canoe. What happened then was swift and unexpected. Above the splash of the revolving paddles he heard hoarse shouts and warning cries. He saw green waves approaching, flung up in the wake of the passing vessel. As he dropped the oars and leapt anxiously to his feet the frail canoe, unfitted to encounter such a peril, was clutched and lifted broadside by the foaming swell. Over it went instantly, and there was a flash of red and blue as the girl was flung headfirst into the river.

As quickly Jack clasped his hands and dived from his boat. He came to the top and swam forward with desperate strokes. He saw the upturned canoe, the floating paddle, the half-submerged Tam-o'-Shanter. Then a mass of dripping golden hair cleft the surface, only to sink at once.

But Jack had marked the spot, and, taking a full breath, he dived. To the onlookers the interval seemed painfully long, and a hundred cheering voices rent the air as the young artist rose to view, keeping himself afloat with one arm, while the other supported the girl. She was conscious, but badly scared and disposed to struggle.

“Be quite still,” Jack said, sharply. “You are in no danger—I will save you if you trust me.”

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The girl obeyed, looking into Jack's eyes with a calmer expression. The steamer had stopped, and half a dozen row-boats were approaching from different directions. A grizzled waterman and his companion picked up the two and pulled them across to Strand-on-the-Green. Others followed towing Jack's boat and the canoe, and the big steamer proceeded on her way to Kew Pier.

The Black Bull, close by the railway bridge, received the drenched couple, and the watermen were delighted by the gift of a sovereign. A motherly woman took the half-dazed girl upstairs, and Jack was led into the oak-panelled parlor of the old inn by the landlord, who promptly poured him out a little brandy, and then insisted on his having a change of clothing.

"Thank you; I fear I must accept your offer," said Jack. "But I hope you will attend to the young lady first. Your wife seemed to know her."

"Quite well, sir," was the reply. "Bless you, we all know Miss Madge Foster hereabouts. She lives yonder at the lower end of the Green—"

"Then she had better be taken home."

"I think this is the best place for her at present, sir. Her father is in town, and there is only an old servant."

"You are quite right," said Jack. "I suppose there is a doctor near by."

"There is, sir, and I will send for him at once," the landlord promised. "If you will kindly step this way—"

At that moment there was a stir among the curious idlers who filled the entrance passage of the inn. An authoritative voice opened a way between them, and a man pushed through to the parlor. His face changed color at the sight of Jack, who greeted him with a cry of astonishment.

CHAPTER III.

AN OLD FRIEND

There was gladness as well as surprise in Jack's hearty exclamation, for the man who stood before him in the parlor of the Black Bull was his old friend Victor Nevill, little altered in five years, except for a heavier mustache that improved his dark and handsome face. To judge from appearances, he had not run through with all his money. He was daintily booted and gloved, and wore morning tweeds of perfect cut; a sprig of violets was thrust in his button-hole. The two had not met since they parted in Paris on that memorable night, nor had they known of each other's whereabouts.

“Nevill, old chap!” cried Jack, holding out a hand.

Nevill clasped it warmly; his momentary confusion had vanished.

“My dear Clare—” he began.

“Not that name,” Jack interrupted, laughingly. “I’m called Vernon on this side of the Channel.”

“What, John Vernon, the rising artist?”

“The same.”

“It’s news to me. I congratulate you, old man. If I had known I would have looked you up long ago, but I lost all trace of you.”

“That’s my case,” said Jack. “I supposed you were still abroad. Been back long?”

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"Yes, a couple of years."

"By Jove, it's queer we didn't meet before. Fancy you turning up here!"

"I stopped last night with a friend in Grove Park," Nevill answered, after a brief hesitation, "and feeling a bit seedy this morning, I came for a stroll along the river. I hear of a gallant rescue from the water, and, of course, you are the hero, Jack. Is the young lady all right?"

"I believe so."

"Do you know who she is?"

"Miss Madge Poster, sir," spoke up the landlord, "and I can assure you she was very nearly drowned—"

"Not so bad as that," modestly protested Jack.

Victor Nevill's face had changed color again, and for a second there was a troubled look in his eyes. He spoke the girl's name carelessly, then added in hurried tones:

"You must get into dry clothes at once, Jack, or you will be ill—"

"Just what I told him, sir," interrupted the landlord. "Young men *will* be reckless."

"I am going back to town to keep an engagement," Nevill resumed. "Can I do anything for you?"

"If you will, old chap," Jack said gratefully. "Stop at my studio," giving him the address, "and send my man Alphonse here with a dry rig."

"I'll go right away," replied Neville. "I can get a cab at Kew Bridge. Come and see me, Jack. Here is my card. I put up in Jermyn street."

"And you know where to find me," said Jack. "I am seldom at home in the evenings, though."

A few more words, and Neville departed. Jack was prevailed upon by the landlord to go to an upper room, where he stripped off his drenched garments and rubbed himself dry, then putting on a suit of clothes belonging to his host. The latter brought the cheering news that Miss Foster had taken a hot draught and was sleeping peacefully, and that it would be quite unnecessary to send for a doctor.

A little later Alphonse and a cab arrived at the rear of the Black Bull, where there was a lane for vehicular traffic, and Jack once more changed his attire. He left his card and a



polite message for the girl, pressed a substantial tip on the reluctant landlord, and was soon rattling homeward up Chiswick high-road, feeling none the worse for his wetting, but, on the contrary, gifted with a keen appetite. He had sent his boat back to Maynard's.

"What a pretty girl that was!" he reflected. "It's the first time in five years I've given a serious thought to a woman. But I shall forget her as quickly—I am wedded to my art. It's rather a fetching name, Madge Foster. Come to think of it, it was hardly the proper thing to leave my card. I suppose I will get a fervid letter of gratitude from the girl's father, or the two of them may even invade my studio. How could I have been so stupid?"

He ate a hearty lunch, and set to work diligently. But he could not keep his mind from the adventure of the morning, and he saw more frequently the face of the lovely young English girl, than that of the swarthy Moorish dancer he was doing in oils.

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Those five years had made a different man of Jack Clare—had brought him financial prosperity, success in his art, and contentment with life. He was now twenty-seven, clean-shaven, and with the build of an athlete; and his attractive, well-cut features had fulfilled the promise of youth. But for six wretched months, after that bitter night when Diane fled from him, he had suffered acutely. In vain his friends, none of whom could give him any clue to his betrayer, sought to comfort him; in vain he searched for trace of tidings of his wife, for her faithlessness had not utterly crushed his love, and the recollections of the first months of his marriage were very sweet to him. The chains with which the dancer of the Folies Bergere bound him had been strong; his hot youth had fallen victim to the charms of a face and figure that would have enslaved more experienced men.

But the healing power of time works wonders, and in the spring of the succeeding year, when Paris burst into leaf and blossom, Jack began to take a fresh interest in life, and to realize with a feeling little short of satisfaction that Diane's desertion was all for the best, and that he was well rid of a woman who must ultimately have dragged him down to her own level. The sale of his mother's London residence, a narrow little house in Bayswater, put him in possession of a fairly large sum of money. He left Paris with his friend Jimmie Drexell, and the two spent a year in Italy, Holland and Algeria, doing pretty hard work in the way of sketching. Jack returned to Paris quite cured, and with a determination to win success in his calling. He saw Drexell off for his home in New York, and then he packed up his belongings—they had been under lock and key in a room of the house on the Boulevard St. Germain—and emigrated to London. His great sorrow was only an unpleasant memory to him now. He had friends in England, but no relations there or anywhere, so far as he knew. His father, an artist of unappreciated talent, had died twenty years before. It was after his death that Jack's mother had come into some property from a distant relative.

Taking his middle name of Vernon, Jack settled in Fitzroy Square. A couple of hundred pounds constituted his worldly wealth. His ambition was to be a great painter, but he had other tastes as well, and his talent lay in more than one channel. Within a year, by dint of hard work, he obtained more than a foothold. He had sold a couple of pictures to dealers; his black-and-white drawings were in demand with a couple of good magazines, and a clever poster, bearing his name, and advertising a popular whisky was displayed all over London. Then, picking up a French paper in the Monico one morning, he experienced a shock. The body of a woman had been found in the Seine and taken to the Morgue, where several persons unhesitatingly identified her as Diane Merode, the one-time fascinating dancer of the Folies Bergere.

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Jack turned pale, and crushed the paper in his hand. Evening found him wandering on the heights of Hampstead, but the next morning he was at his easel. He was a free man now in every sense, and the world looked brighter to him. He worked as hard as ever, and with increasing success, but he spent most of his evenings with his comrades of the brush, with whom he was immensely popular. He was indifferent to women, however, and they did not enter into his life.

But a few months before the opening of this story Jack had taken his new studio at Ravenscourt Park, in the west of London. It was a big place, with a splendid north light, and with an admirable train service to all parts of town; in that respect he was better off than artists living in Hampstead or St. John's Wood. He had a couple of small furnished rooms at one end of the studio, in one of which he slept. He usually dined in town, Paris fashion, but his breakfast and lunch were served by his French servant, Alphonse, an admirable fellow, who had lodgings close by the studio; he could turn his hand to anything, and was devoted to his master.

Jack had achieved success, and he deserved it. His name was well known, and better things were predicted of him. The leading magazines displayed his black-and-white drawings monthly, and publishers begged him to illustrate books. He was making a large income, and saving the half of it. Nor did he lose sight of his loftier goal. His picture of last year had been accepted by the Academy, hung well, and sold, and he had just been notified that he was in again this spring. Fortune smiled on him, and the folly of his youth was a fading memory that could never cloud or dim his future.

* * * * *

It was two days after the adventure on the river, late in the afternoon. Jack was reading over the manuscript of a book, and penciling possible points for illustration, when Alphonse handed him a letter. It was directed in a feminine hand, but a man had clearly penned the inclosure. The writer signed himself Stephen Foster, and in a few brief sentences, coldly and curtly expressed, he thanked Mr. Vernon for the great and timely service he had rendered his daughter. That was all. There was no invitation to the house at Strand-on-the-Green—no hope or desire for a personal acquaintance.

Jack resented the bald, stereotyped communication. He felt piqued—slightly hurt. He had been trying to forget the girl, but now, thinking of her as something out of his reach, he wanted to see her again.

"A conceited, crusty old chap—this Stephen Foster," he said to himself. "No doubt he is a money-grubber in the city, and regards artists with contempt. If I had a daughter like that, and a man saved her life, I should be properly grateful. Poor girl, she can't lead a very happy life."

He lighted a pipe, read a little further, and then tossed the sheaf of manuscript aside. He rose and put on a hat and a black coat—he wore evening dress as little as possible.

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"Will you dine in town to-night, sir?" asked Alphonse, who was cleaning a stack of brushes.

"Yes, oh, yes," Jack answered. "You can go when you have finished."

Whatever may have been his intention when he left the studio, Jack did not cross the park toward the District Railway station. He walked slowly to the high-road, and then westward with brisker step. He struck down through Gunnersbury, by way of Sutton Court, and came out at the river close to the lower end of Strand-on-the-Green.

A girl was sitting on a bench near the shore, pensively watching the sun drooping over the misty ramparts of Kew Bridge; she held a closed book in one hand, and by her side lay a sketching-block and a box of colors. She heard the young artist's footsteps, and glanced up. A lovely blush suffused her countenance, and for an instant she was speechless. Then, with less confusion, with the candor of an innocent and unconventional nature, she said:

"I am so glad to see you, Mr. Vernon."

"That is kind of you," Jack replied, with a smile.

"Yes, I wanted to thank you—"

"Your father has written to me."

"But that is different. I wanted to thank you for myself."

"I wish I were deserving of such gratitude," said Jack, thinking that the girl looked far more charming than when he had first seen her.

"Ah, don't say that. You know that you saved my life. I am a good swimmer, but that morning my clothes seemed to drag me down."

"I am glad that I happened to be near at the time," Jack replied, as he seated himself without invitation on the bench. "But it is not a pleasant topic—let us not talk about it."

"I shall never forget it," the girl answered softly. She was silent for a moment, and then added gravely: "It is so strange to know you. I admire artists so much, and I saw your picture in last year's Academy. How surprised I was when I read your card!"

"You paint, yourself, Miss Foster?"

"No, I only try to. I wish I could."

She reluctantly yielded her block of Whatman's paper to Jack, and in the portfolio attached to it he found several sketches that showed real promise. He frankly said as much, to his companion's delight, and then the conversation turned on the quaintness of Strand-on-the-Green, and the constant and varied beauty of the river at this point—a subject that was full of genuine interest to both. When the sun passed below the bridge the girl suddenly rose and gathered her things.

"I must go," she said. "My father is coming home early to-day. Good-by, Mr. Vernon."

"Not really good-by. I hope?"

An expression of sorrow and pain, almost pitiful, clouded her lovely face. Jack understood the meaning of it, and hated Stephen Foster in his heart.

"I shall see you here sometimes?" he added.

"Perhaps."

"Then you do not forbid me to come again?"

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"How can I do that? This river walk is quite free, Mr. Vernon. Oh, please don't think me ungrateful, but—but—"

She turned her head quickly away, and did not finish the sentence. She called a word of farewell over her shoulder, and Jack moodily watched her slim and graceful figure vanish between the great elm trees that guard the lower entrance to Strand-on-the-Green.

"John Vernon, you are a fool," he said to himself. "The best thing for you is to pack up your traps and be off to-morrow morning for a couple of months' sketching in Devonshire. You've been bitten once—look out!"

He took a shilling from his pocket, and muttered, as he flipped it in the air: "Tail, Richmond—head, town."

The coin fell tail upward, and Jack went off to dine at the Roebuck on the hill, beloved of artists, where he met some boon companions and argued about Whistler until a late hour.

CHAPTER IV.

Number 320 Wardour street.

The rear-guard of London's great army of clerks had already vanished in the city, and the hour was drawing near to eleven, when Victor Nevill shook off his lassitude sufficiently to get out of bed. A cold tub freshened him, and as he dressed with scrupulous care, choosing his clothes from a well-filled wardrobe, he occasionally walked to the window of his sitting-room and looked down on the narrow but lively thoroughfare of Jermyn street. It was a fine morning, with the scent of spring in the air, and the many colors of the rumbling 'busses glistened like fresh paint in the sunlight.

His toilet completed, Victor Nevill pressed an electric bell, in answer to which there presently appeared, from some mysterious source downstairs, a boy in buttons carrying a tray on which reposed a small pot of coffee, one of cream, a pat of butter, and a couple of crisp rolls. Nevill ate his breakfast with the mechanical air of one who is doing a tiresome but necessary thing, meanwhile consulting a tiny memorandum-book, and counting over a handful of loose gold and silver. Then he put on his hat and gloves, looked at the fit of his gray frock-coat in the glass, and went into the street. At Piccadilly Circus he bought a *boutonniere*, and as he was feeling slightly rocky after a late night at card-playing, he dropped into the St. James. He emerged shortly, fortified by a brandy-and-soda, and sauntered westward along the Piccadilly pavement.

A typical young-man-about-town, an indolent pleasure-lover, always dressed to perfection and flush with money—such was Victor Nevill in the opinion of the world. For

aught men knew to the contrary, he thrived like the proverbial lily of the field, without the need of toiling or spinning. He lived in expensive rooms, dined at the best restaurants, and belonged to a couple of good clubs. To his friends this was no matter of surprise or conjecture. They were aware that he was well-connected, and that years before he had come into a fortune; they naturally supposed that enough of it remained to yield him a comfortable income, in spite of the follies and extravagances that rumor attributed to him in the past, while he was abroad.

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But Nevill himself, and one other individual, knew better. The bulk of his fortune exhausted by reckless living on the Continent, he had returned to London with a thousand pounds in cash, and a secured annuity of two hundred pounds, which he was too prudent to try to negotiate. The thousand pounds did not last long, but by the time they were spent he had drifted into degraded and evil ways. None had ever dared to whisper—none had ever suspected—that Victor Nevill was a rook for money-lenders and a dangerous friend for young men. He knew what a perilous game he was playing, but he studied every move and guarded shrewdly against discovery. There were many reasons, and one in particular, for keeping his reputation clean and untarnished. It was a matter of the utmost satisfaction to him that his uncle, Sir Lucius Chesney, of Priory Court in Sussex, cared but little for London, and seldom came up to town. For Sir Lucius was childless, elderly, and possessed of fifteen thousand pounds a year.

Victor Nevill's progress along Piccadilly was frequently interrupted by friends, fashionably dressed young men like himself, whose invitations to come and have a drink he declined on the plea of an engagement. Just beyond Devonshire House he was accosted eagerly by a fresh-faced, blond-haired boy—he was no more than twenty-two—who was coming from the opposite direction.

"Hullo, Bertie," Nevill said carelessly, as he shook hands. "I was on my way to the club."

"I got tired of waiting. You are half an hour over the time, Vic. I thought of going to your rooms."

"I slept later than I intended," Nevill replied. "I had a night of it."

"So had I—a night of sleeplessness."

The Honorable Bertie Raven, second son of the Earl of Runnymede, might have stepped out of one of Poole's fashion-plates, so far as dress was concerned. But there was a strained look on his handsome, patrician face, and in his blue eyes, that told of a gnawing mental anxiety. He linked arms with his companion, and drew him to the edge of the pavement.

"Is it all right?" he asked, pleadingly and hurriedly. "Were you able to fix the thing up for me?"

"You are sure there is no other way, Bertie?"

"None, Vic. I have until this evening, and then—"

"Don't worry. I saw Benjamin and Company yesterday."

"And they will accommodate me?"

“Yes, at my request.”

“You mean for your indorsement on the bill?” the lad exclaimed, blushing. “Vic, you’re a trump. You’re the best fellow that ever lived, and I can’t tell you how grateful I am. God only knows what a weight you’ve lifted from my mind. I’m going to run steady after this, and with economy I can save enough out of my allowance—”

“My dear boy, you are wasting your gratitude over a trifle. Could I refuse so simple a favor to a friend?”

“I don’t know any one else who would have done as much, Vic. I was in an awful hole. Will—will they give me plenty of time?”

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"As much as you like. And, I say, Bertie, this affair must be quite *entre nous*. There are plenty of chaps—good fellows, too—who would like to use my name occasionally. But one must draw the line—"

"I understand, Vic. I'll be mum as an oyster."

"Well, suppose we go and have the thing over," said Nevill, "and then we'll lunch together."

They turned eastward, walking briskly, and a few minutes later they entered a narrow court off Duke street, St. James. Through a dingy and unpretentious doorway, unmarked by sign or plate, they passed into the premises of Benjamin and Company. In a dark, cramped office, scantily furnished, they found an elderly Jewish gentleman seated at a desk.

Without delay, with a smoothness that spoke well for the weight and influence of Victor Nevill's name, the little matter of business, as the Jew smilingly called it, was transacted. A three-months' bill for five hundred pounds was drawn up for Bertie's signature and Nevill's indorsement. The lad hesitated briefly, then wrote his name in a bold hand. He resisted the allurements of some jewelry, offered him in part payment, and received the amount of the bill, less a prodigious discount for interest. The Jew servilely bowed his customers out.

The Honorable Bertie's face was grave and serious as he walked toward Piccadilly with his friend; he vaguely realized that he had taken the first step on a road that too frequently ends in disgrace and ruin. But this mood changed as he felt the rustling bank notes in his pocket. The world had not looked so bright for many a day.

"I never knew the thing was so easy," he said. "What a good fellow you are, Vic! You've made a new man of me. I can pay off those cursed gambling losses, and a couple of the most pressing debts, and have nearly a hundred pounds over. But I wish I had taken that ruby bracelet for Flora—it would have pleased her."

"Cut Flora—that's my advice," replied Nevill.

"And jolly good advice, too, Vic. I'll think about it seriously. But where will you lunch with me?"

"You are going to lunch with *me*," said Nevill, "at the Arlington."

* * * * *

In Wardour street, Soho, as many an enthusiastic collector has found out to the depletion of his pocket-book, there are sufficient antique treasures of every variety stored away in dingy shop windows and dingier rooms to furnish a small town. Number

320, which by chance or design failed to display the name of its proprietor, differed from its neighbors in one marked respect. Instead of the usual conglomerate mass, articles of value cheek by jowl with worthless rubbish, the long window contained some rare pieces of china and silver, an Italian hall-seat of richly carved oak, and half a dozen paintings by well-known artists of the past century, the authenticity of which was an excuse for the amount at which they were priced.

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Behind the window was a deep and narrow room, lined on both sides with cabinets of great age and curious workmanship, oaken furniture belonging to various periods, pictures restored and pictures cracked and faded, cases filled with dainty objects of gold and silver, brass work from Moorish and Saracenic craftsmen, tall suits of armor, helmets and weapons that had clashed in battle hundreds of years before, and other things too numerous to mention, all of a genuine value that put them beyond the reach of a slim purse.

In the rear of the shop—which was looked after by a salesman—was a small office almost opulent in its appearance. Soft rugs covered the floor, and costly paintings hung on the walls. The chairs and desk, the huge couch, would have graced a palace, and a piece of priceless tapestry partly overhung the big safe at one end. An incandescent lamp was burning brightly, for very little light entered from the dreary court on which a single window opened.

Here, at 3 o'clock in the afternoon, Stephen Foster sat poring over a sheaf of papers. He was a man of fifty-two, nearly six feet tall and correspondingly built—a man with a fine head and handsome features, a man to attract more than ordinary attention. His hands were white, slim and long. His eyes were deep brown, and his mustache and beard—the latter cut to a point—were of a tawny yellowish-brown color, mixed with gray to a slight degree. It would be difficult to analyze his character, for in many ways he was a contradiction. He was not miserly, but his besetting evil was the love of accumulating money—the lever that had made him thoroughly unscrupulous. He was rich, or reputed so, but in amassing gold, by fair means or foul, lay the keynote to his life. And it was a dual life. He had chosen the old mansion at Strand-on-the-Green to be out of the roar and turmoil of London life, and yet within touch of it. Here, where his evenings were mostly spent, he was a different man. He derived his chief pleasures from his daughter's society, from a table filled with current literature, from a box of choice Havanas. In town he was a sordid man of business, clever at buying and selling to the best advantage. He had loved his wife, the daughter of a city alderman and a friend of his father's, and her death twelve years before had been a great blow to him. Madge resembled her, and he gave the girl a father's sincere devotion.

Few persons knew that Stephen Foster was the proprietor of the curio-shop in Wardour street—his daughter was among the ignorant—and but one or two were aware that the business of Benjamin and Company, carried on in Duke street, belonged also to him. None, assuredly, among his sprinkling of acquaintances, would have believed that he could stoop to lower things, or that he and his equally unscrupulous and useful tool, Victor Nevill, the gay young-man-about-town, had been mixed up in more than one nefarious transaction that would not bear the light of day. He had taken the place in Wardour street within the past five years, and prior to that time he had held a responsible position as purchasing agent—there was not a better judge of pictures in Europe—with the well-known firm of Lamb and Drummond, art dealers and engravers to Her Majesty, of Pall Mall.

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A slight frown gathered on Stephen Foster's brow as he put aside the packet of papers, and it deepened as he recognized a familiar step coming through the shop. But he had a cheery smile of greeting ready when the office door opened to admit Victor Nevill. The young man's face was flushed with excitement, and he carried in one hand a crumpled copy of the *Westminster Budget*.

"Seen the evening editions yet?" he exclaimed.

"No; what's in them?" asked the curio-dealer.

"I was lunching at the Arlington, with the Honorable Bertie—By the way, he took the hook," Nevill replied, in a calmer tone, "and when I came out I bought this on the street. But read for yourself."

He opened the newspaper, folded it twice, and tossed it down on Stephen Foster's desk.

CHAPTER V.

A mysterious discussion.

The paragraph in the *Westminster Budget* to which Victor Nevill referred was headed in large type, and ran as follows:

"This morning, at his palatial residence in Amsterdam, commenced the sale of the gallery of valuable paintings collected by the late Mr. Martin Von Whele, who died while on a visit to his coffee estate in Java. He left everything to his son, with the exception of the pictures, which, by the terms of his will, were to be disposed of in order to found a hospital in his native town. Mr. Von Whele was a keen and discriminating patron of art, a lover of both the ancient and the modern, and his vast wealth permitted him to indulge freely in his hobby. His collection was well known by repute throughout the civilized world. But the trustees of the estate seem to have committed a grave blunder—which will undoubtedly cause much complaint—in waiting until almost the last moment to announce the sale. But few bidders were present, and these had things pretty much their own way, apparently owing to the gross ignorance of the auctioneer. The gem of the gallery, the famous Rembrandt found and purchased in Paris some years ago by Mr. Von Whele, was knocked down for the ridiculous sum of L2,400. The lucky purchaser was Mr. Charles Drummond, of the firm of Lamb and Drummond, Pall Mall."

A remark that would not look well in print escaped Stephen Foster's lips as he threw the paper on his desk.

"A blunder?" he cried. "It was criminal! A rascally conspiracy, with Drummond at the bottom of it—British cunning against Dutch stupidity! I seldom miss anything in the

papers, Nevill, and yet I never heard of Von Whele's death. I didn't get a hint of the sale."

"Nor I," replied Nevill. "It's a queer business. I thought the paragraph would interest you. The sale continues—do you think of running over to Amsterdam?"

"No; I shan't go. It's too late. By to-morrow a lot of dealers will have men on the spot, and the rest of the pictures will likely fetch full value. But L2,400 for the Rembrandt! Why, it's worth five times as much if it's worth a penny! There's a profit for you, Nevill. And I always coveted that picture. I had a sort of a hope that it would drop into my hands some day. I believe I spoke to you about it."

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"You did," assented Nevill, "and I remembered that at once when I read of the sale. But I had another reason—one of my own—for calling your attention to the matter."

Stephen Foster apparently did not hear the latter remark.

"I saw the Rembrandt when I was in Amsterdam, two years ago," he said bitterly. "It was a splendid canvas—the colors were almost as fresh and bright as the day they were laid on. And as a character study it was a masterpiece second to none, and in my estimation superior to his 'Gilder,' which is now in the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. It represented a Pole or a Russian, with a face of intense ferocity. His rank was shown by his rich cloak, the decorations on his furred hat, and by the gold-beaded mace held in his hand. Von Whele declared that the subject was John the Third, of Poland; but that was mere conjecture. And now Drummond has the picture, and it will soon be drawing crowds around the firm's window, I dare say. What a prize I have let slip through my fingers!"

"I want to ask you a question," Nevill started abruptly. "Suppose this Rembrandt, or any other painting of value and renown, should be stolen from a big dealer's shop. How could the thief dispose of it?"

"He would have little or no chance of doing so at once," was the reply, "unless he found some unscrupulous collector who was willing to buy it and hide it away. But in the course of a few years, when the affair had blown over, the picture could be sold for its full value, without any risk to the seller, if he was a smart man."

"Then, if you had this Rembrandt locked up in your safe, you would regard it as a sound and sure investment, to be realized on in the future?"

"Certainly. I should consider it as an equivalent for L10,000," Stephen Foster replied. "But there is not much of that sort of thing done—the ordinary burglar doesn't understand the game," he went on, carelessly. "And a good thing for the dealers, too. With my knowledge of the place, I could very easily remove a picture from Lamb and Drummond's store-room any night."

"Yes, you know the ground thoroughly. Would you like to make L10,000 at a single stroke, without risk?"

"I don't think I should hesitate long, if it was a sure thing," Stephen Foster replied, laughingly. "Nevill, what are you driving at?" he added with sudden earnestness.

"Wait a moment, and I'll explain."

Victor Nevill stepped to the door, listened briefly, and turned the key noiselessly in the lock. He drew a chair close to his companion and sat down.

“I am going to tell you a little story,” he said. “It will interest you, if I am not mistaken.”

It must have been a very important and mysterious communication, from the care with which Nevill told it, from the low and cautious tone in which he spoke. Stephen Foster listened with a blank expression that gradually changed to a look of amazement and satisfaction, of ill-concealed avarice. Then the two discussed the matter together, heedless of the passage of time, until the clock struck five.

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"It certainly appears to be simple enough," said Stephen Foster, "but who will find out about—"

"You must do that," Nevill interrupted. "If I went, it might lead to awkward complications in the future."

"It's the worst part, and I confess I don't like it. But I'll take a night to think it over, and give you an answer to-morrow. It's an ugly undertaking—"

"But a safe one. If it comes off all right, I want L500 cash down, on account."

"It is not certain that it will come off at all," said Stephen Foster, as he rose. "Come in to-morrow afternoon. Oh, I believe I promised you some commission to-day."

"Yes; sixty pounds."

The check was written, and Nevill pocketed it with a nod. He put on his hat, moved to the door, and paused.

"By the by, there's a new thing on at the Frivolity—awfully good," he said. "Miss Foster might like to see it. We could make up a little party of three—"

"Thank you, but my daughter doesn't care for theatres. And, as you know, I spend my evenings at home."

"I don't blame you," Nevill replied, indifferently. "It's a snug and jolly crib you have down there by the river. And the fresh air does a fellow a lot of good. I feel like a new man when I come back to town after dining with you. One gets tired of clubs and restaurants."

"Come out when you like," said Stephen Foster, in a voice that lacked warmth and sincerity.

"That's kind of you," Nevill replied. "Good-night!"

A minute later he was walking thoughtfully down Wardour street.

CHAPTER VI.

A visitor from Paris.

It was seven o'clock in the evening, ten days after Jack's second encounter with Madge Foster, and a blaze of light shone from the big studio that overlooked Ravenscourt Park. The lord and master of it was writing business letters, a task in which he was



assisted by frequent cigarettes. A tray containing whisky, brandy and siphons stood on a Moorish inlaid smoking stand, and suggested correctly that a visitor was expected. At noon Jack had received a letter from Victor Nevill, of whom he had seen nothing since their meeting at Strand-on-the-Green, to say that he was coming out at eight o'clock that night to have a chat over old times. Alphonse, being no longer required, had gone to his lodgings near by.

"It will be a bit awkward if Nevill wants his dinner," Jack said to himself, in an interval of his letter writing. "I'll keep him here a couple of hours, and then take him to dine in town. He's a good fellow, and will understand. He'll find things rather different from the Paris days."

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There was a touch of pardonable pride in that last thought, for few artists in London could boast of such luxuriously decorated quarters, or of such a collection of treasures as Jack's purse and good taste had enabled him to gather around him. The hard oak floor, oiled and polished by the hands of Alphonse, was sparsely strewn with Oriental rugs and a couple of tiger skins. A screen of stamped leather hid three sides of the French stove. The eye met a picturesque confusion of inlaid cabinets with innumerable drawers, oak chests and benches, easy chairs of every sort, Chippendale trays and escritoirs, Spanish lanterns dangling from overhead, old tables worn hollow on top with age, countless weapons and pieces of armor, and shelves stacked with blue delf china and rows of pewter plates. A long costume case flashed its glass doors at a cosy corner draped with art muslin. On the walls, many of them presented by friends, were scores of water-colors and oil paintings, etchings and engravings, no two of them framed alike. Minor articles were scattered about in profusion, and a couple of bulging sketch-books bore witness to their owner's summer wanderings about England.

The letters finished and stamped, Jack closed his desk with a sigh of relief. The evening was chilly, and he had started a small fire of coals in the grate—he used his stove only in wintry weather. He pulled a big chair to the blaze, stretched his legs against the fender, and fell straightway into a reverie; an expression that none of his English companions had ever seen there softened his handsome face.

"I wonder what she is doing now," he thought. "I fancy I can see her sitting opposite to her father, at the dinner table, with the soft lamplight on her lovely cheeks, and that bewitching look in her eyes. I am a conceited fool to believe that she cares for me, and yet—and yet—By Jove, I would marry her in a minute. She is the most winsome girl I ever saw. It is not like the passion I had for Diane—I was a foolish, hot-headed boy then. Madge would be my good angel. In spite of myself, she has come into my life and taken a deep hold on my heart—I can't put her out again. Jack, my boy, you had better have gone on that sketching tour—better have fled to Devonian wilds before it was too late."

But was it too late now? If so, the fact did not seem to trouble Jack much, for he laughed softly as he stirred the fire. He, the impregnable and boastful one, the woman-hater, had fallen a victim when he believed himself most secure. It was unutterably sweet to him—this second passion—and he knew that it was not to be shaken off.

During the past ten days he had seen Madge frequently. Nearly every afternoon, when the fading sun glimmered through a golden haze, he had wandered down to Strand-on-the-Green, confident that the girl would not be far away, that she would welcome him shyly and blushing, with that radiant light in her eyes which he hoped he could read aright. They had enjoyed a couple of tramps together, when time permitted—once up the towing-path toward Richmond, and again down the river to Barnes.

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They were happy hours for both. Madge was unconventional, and would have resented a hint that she was doing anything in the least improper. She had left boarding school two years before, and since then she had rejoiced in her freedom, not finding life dull in the sleepy Thames-side suburb of London. As for Jack, his conscience gave him few twinges in regard to these surreptitious meetings. It would be different, he told himself, had Stephen Foster chosen to receive him as a visitor. But he had gathered, from what Madge told him, that her father was eccentric, and detested visitors—that he would permit nothing to break the monotonous and regular habits of the secluded old house. Madge admitted that one friend of his, a young man, came sometimes; but she intimated unmistakably that she did not like him. Jack was curious to know what business took Stephen Foster to town every day, but on that subject the girl never spoke.

As the young artist sat watching the fire in the grate, his fancy painted pleasing pictures. “Why should I not marry?” he mused. “Bachelor life is well enough in its way, but it can’t compare with a snug house, and one’s own dining-table, and a charming wife to drive away the occasional blue-devils. I have money put aside, and it won’t be long till I’m making an easy twelve hundred a year. By Jove, I will—”

A noisy rap at the door interrupted Jack’s train of thought, and brought him to his feet.

“Come in!” he cried, expecting to see Nevill.

But the visitor was a telegraph boy, bearing the familiar brown envelope. Jack signed for it, and tore open the message.

“Awfully seedy,” Victor Nevill wired. “Sorry I can’t get out to-night. Am going to bed.”

“No answer,” said Jack, dismissing the boy. With his hands in his pockets he strolled undecidedly about the studio for a couple of minutes. “I hope nothing serious is the matter with Nevill,” he reflected. “He’s not the sort of a chap to go to bed unless he feels pretty bad. What shall I do now? I must be quick about it if I want to get any dinner in town. It’s past eight, and—”

There was the sound of slow footsteps out in the passage, followed by the nervous jingling of the electric bell.

“Who can that be?” Jack muttered.

He pulled a cord that turned the gas higher in the big circlet of jets overhead, and opened the door curiously. The man who entered the studio was a complete stranger, and it was certain that he was not an Englishman, if dress and appearance could decide that fact. He was very tall and well-built, with a handsome face, so deeply tanned as to suggest a recent residence in a tropical country. His mustaches were twisted into

waxed points, and there was a good deal of gray in his beard, which was parted German fashion in the middle, and carefully brushed to each side. His top hat was unmistakably French, with a flat rim, and his boots were of patent leather. As he opened his long caped cloak, the collar of which he kept turned up, it was seen that he was in evening dress.

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“Do I address Monsieur Vernon, the artist?” he asked in good English, with a French accent.

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Formerly Monsieur John Clare?”

“I once bore that name,” said Jack, with a start of surprise; he was ill-pleased to hear it after so many years.

The visitor produced a card bearing the name of M. Felix Marchand, Parc Monceaux, Paris.

“I do not recall you,” said Jack. “Will you take a seat.”

“We have not met until now,” said M. Marchand, “but I have the honor to be familiar with your work, and to possess some of it. Pictures are to me a delight—I confess myself a humble patron of art—and a few years ago I purchased several water-color sketches signed by your name. They appealed to me especially because they were bits of Paris—one looking down the river from the bridge of the Carrousel, and the other a night impression of Montmartre.”

“I remember them vaguely,” said Jack. “They, with others, were sold for me by a dealer named Cambon—”

“Monsieur is right. It was from Jacques Cambon, of the Quai Voltaire, I obtained the sketches. They pleased me much, and I went again to seek more—that was eighteen months later, when I returned to Paris after a long absence. Imagine my disappointment to learn that Jacques Cambon had no further knowledge of Monsieur Clare, and no more of his sketches to sell.”

“No; I had come to London by that time—or was in Italy,” said Jack. “But perhaps—pardon me—you would prefer to carry on our conversation in French.”

“Monsieur is thoughtful,” replied M. Marchand. “He will understand that I desire, while in England, to improve as much as possible my knowledge of the language.”

“Quite so,” assented Jack. “You speak it already like a native born,” he added to himself.

“The years passed on,” resumed the Frenchman, “but I did not forget the author of my little sketches. A few weeks ago I resolved to cross the Channel and pay a visit to London, which I last saw in 1891. I had but lately returned from a long trip to Algeria and Morocco, and I was told that the English spring was mild; in Paris I found the weather too cold for my chest complaint. So I said to myself, ‘I will make endeavor to

find the artist, John Clare.’ But how? I had an idea. I went to the school of the great Julian, and there my inquiries met with success. ‘Monsieur Clare,’ one of the instructors told me, ‘is now a prosperous painter of London, by the name of Vernon.’ They gave me the address of a magazine in your Rue Paternoster, and at that place I was this morning informed where to find you. I trust that my visit is not an intrusion.”

“Oh, not at all,” said Jack. “Who at Julian’s can have known so much about me?” he thought.

“I have spoken with freedom—perhaps too much,” M. Marchand went on. “But I desired to explain clearly. I have come on business, monsieur, hoping that I may be privileged to purchase one or two pictures to take back with me to Paris.”

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"I am very sorry," said Jack, "but I fear I have nothing whatever to sell at present. I am indeed flattered by your kind interest in my work."

"Monsieur has nothing?"

Jack shook his head.

"You see I do a great deal in the way of magazine drawing," he explained. "The half-finished water-colors on the easels are orders. I expect to have a large painting in the Royal Academy shortly."

"Alas, I will not be able to see it," M. Marchand murmured. "I leave London to-morrow." All the time he was speaking he had been looking with interest about the studio, and his eyes still wandered from wall to wall. "Ah, monsieur, I have a thought," he added suddenly. "It is of the finished pictures, of your later work, that you speak. But surely you possess many sketches, and among them would be some of Paris, such as you placed with Jacques Cambon. Is it not so?"

Jack, in common with all artists, was reluctant to part with his sketches. But he was growing uncomfortably hungry, and felt disposed to make a sacrifice for the sake of getting rid of his importunate visitor.

"I will show you my collection," he answered briefly.

Lifting the drapery of a couch, he pulled out one of half a dozen fat portfolios, of huge dimensions. He untied the strings and opened it, exhibiting a number of large water-color drawings on bristol-board, most of them belonging to his student days in Paris, some made in Holland and Normandy. The sight of them, recalling his married life with Diane, awoke unpleasant memories. He moved away and lighted a cigarette.

The Frenchman began to turn the sketches over eagerly, and presently Jack saw him staring hard at an unstiffened canvas which he had found. It was the duplicate Rembrandt painted for Martin Von Whele. Jack had not been reading the papers much of late, and was ignorant of the Hollander's death.

"That is nothing of any account," he said. "It is the copy of an old master."

"Ah, I have a little taste for the antique," replied M. Marchand. "This is repulsive—it is a frightful face. Were it in my collection, monsieur, it would quite spoil my pretty bits of scenery."

He tossed the canvas carelessly aside, and finally chose a couple of water-colors, both showing picturesque nooks of Paris.

"I should like to have these," he said, "if monsieur is willing to name a price."

“Fifteen pounds for the two,” Jack announced reluctantly. “Can I send them for you?” he added.

“No; I will take them with me.”

Jack tied up the portfolio and replaced it under the couch, an operation that was closely watched by his visitor. Then he wrapped up the two sketches, and received three five-pound notes.

“May I offer you some refreshment?” he said, politely. “You will find brandy there—”

“I love the golden whisky of England,” protested M. Marchand.

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He mixed some for himself, and after drinking it he wiped his lips with a handkerchief. As he returned it to his pocket Jack saw on the white linen a brown stain that he was sure had not been there before.

M. Felix Marchand looked at his watch, shook hands with Jack, and hoped that he would have the pleasure of seeing him again. Then he bowed ceremoniously, and was gone, carrying the parcel under his arm. Jack closed the door, and retired to an inner room to change his clothing for the evening.

"I'll have a grill at the Trocadero," he told himself, "and drop in at the Alhambra for the last few numbers. A queer chap, that Frenchman! Where did he pick up such good English? He was all right, of course, but I can't help feeling a bit puzzled. Fancy his taking a craze for my studies of Paris! I remember that they gathered dust for months in old Cambon's window, until one day I missed them. It's a funny thing about that brown mark which came off on his handkerchief after he wiped his mustache. Still, I've known men to use such stuff to give them a healthy color, though this chap didn't look as if he needed it. And he said he suffered from a chest complaint."

* * * * *

At eight o'clock Jack was up and splashing in his bath, a custom that he hugely enjoyed, winter and summer. He had come home the night before by the last train, after dining with some friends he had picked up, and spending an hour with them at the Alhambra.

He dressed himself with unusual care and discrimination, selecting a suit of dark brown tweeds that matched his complexion, and a scarf with a good bit of red in it. Prepared for him in the studio, and presided over by Alphonse in a white apron, were rolls and coffee, eggs and bacon. The sun was shining brightly outside. The postman came while he was at breakfast, and he read his batch of letters; from some of which dropped checks. One he purposely saved for the last, and the contents—only a few lines—brought a smile to his lips. He tore the dainty sheet of note-paper into small pieces and threw them into the fire. Then he filled his cigar case with choice Regalias, pulled on his driving gloves, and perched a jaunty Alpine hat on his head.

"Alphonse, you must be here all day," he said. "Mordaunt, of the Frivolity, will send for that poster; and a messenger may come from the Piccadilly Magazine—the drawings are in a parcel on my desk. Say to any person who calls that I will not be back until evening."

"I will remember," assured Alphonse.

"By the by, Alphonse, you were living in a big house in the Parc Monceaux half a dozen years ago?"

“Monsieur is right.”

“Do you remember a gentleman by the name of Marchand—M. Felix Marchand?”

“My memory may be at fault,” Alphonse answered, “but I do not recall a person of that name.”

“Well, no matter. He may not have resided there then, and the Parc Monceaux means a large neighborhood.”

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Jack banished M. Marchand from his mind with ease, as he went out into the sunshine and freshness of the spring morning; the singing of the birds, and the beauty of the trees and flowers, told him that it was a glorious thing to be alive. He waited a few moments at a nearby livery stable, while the attendants brought out a very swell-looking and newly varnished trap, and put into the shafts a horse that would have held his own in Hyde Park.

Chiswick high-road, with its constantly widening and narrowing perspectives, its jumble of old and modern houses, had never looked more cheerful as Jack drove rapidly westward. He crossed Kew Bridge, rattled on briskly, and finally entered Richmond, where he pulled up by the curb opposite to the station where centre a number of suburban railway lines.

He had not long to wait—a glance at his watch told him that. Five minutes later the rumble of an incoming train was heard, and presently a double procession of passengers came up the steps to the street. Jack had eyes for one only, a radiant vision of loveliness, as sweet and fresh and blushing as a June rose. The vision was Madge Foster, her graceful figure set off by a new spring gown from Regent street, and a sailor hat perched on her golden curls. She stepped lightly into the trap, and nestled down on the cushions.

“Oh, Jack, what *will* you think of me after this,” she cried, half seriously.

“I think that the famed beauties of Hampton Court would turn green in their frames with envy if they could see you now,” Jack answered evasively, as he flicked the horses with his whip. “Here we go for a jolly day. It will come to an end all too soon.”

CHAPTER VII.

Love's young dream.

The trap rattled up crooked George street, and swung around and down to classic-looking Richmond Bridge, with its gorgeous vistas of river scenery right and left over the low parapets. Madge was very quiet for a time, and it was evident that she felt some misgivings as to the propriety of what she had consented to do at Jack's urgent request. She had left home soon after her father's departure for town, and she must be back before six o'clock to meet him on his return. Her secret was shared with the old servant, Mrs. Sedgwick, who was foolishly fond of the girl, and naturally well-disposed toward Jack because he had saved Madge's life. This faithful creature, on the death of her young husband twenty years before, had entered Mrs. Foster's service; she practically managed Stephen Foster's establishment, assisted by a housemaid and by the daily visits of a charwoman.



Until Richmond was left behind, Jack was as serious and thoughtful as his companion. He had a high sense of honor, a hatred of anything underhanded, and his conscience pricked him a little. However, it was not his fault, he told himself. Stephen Foster had no business to be churlish and ungrateful, and treat his daughter as though she were a school miss still in her teens. And what wrong could there be about the day's outing together, if no harm was intended? It would all come right in the end, unless, unless—

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He felt reassured as he stole a glance at Madge's face, and saw her quick blush. She laughed merrily, and nestled a little closer to his side.

"You are not sorry?" he asked.

"Sorry? Oh, no. It is so good of you, Jack, and the weather is perfect—we could not have had a better day."

Their depression vanished like a summer cloud, as they rode through Twickenham and Teddington, under the shade of the great trees, enjoying the occasional views of the shining river, and the peeps into the walled gardens of the fine old houses.

"It is all new to me," said Madge, with a sigh. "I used to go to Hampton Court with father on Sundays, but that was long ago; he doesn't take me anywhere now, except to the theatre once or twice a year."

"It is a shame," Jack replied indignantly, "when you enjoy things so much."

"Oh, but I dearly love Strand-on-the-Green. I am very happy there."

"And you never long for a wider life?"

"Yes—sometimes. I want to go abroad and travel. It must be delightful to see the places and countries one has read about, to roam in foreign picture galleries."

"I would like to show you the Continent," said Jack. "We have the same tastes, and—"

A rapturous "Oh!" burst from Madge. They had turned suddenly in at the gates of Bushey Park, and before them was the twenty-mile-long perspective of the chestnut avenue, bounded by the white sunlit walls of the hospitable Greyhound. The girl's eyes sparkled with pleasure, and in her excitement, as some fresh bit of beauty was revealed, she rested a tiny gloved hand on Jack's arm.

"I will take you out often, if you will let me," he said.

They drove out of the park, and swung around the weather-beaten wall of Hampton Court. Red-coated soldiers were lounging by the barracks in the palace yard, and the clear notes of a bugle rose from quarters; a tide of people and vehicles was flowing in the sunlight over Molesey Bridge. Jack turned off into the lower river road, and so on by shady and picturesque ways to the ancient village of Hampton.

They put up the horse and trap at the Flower Pot, and lunched in the coffee-room of that old-fashioned hostelry, at a little table laid in the bow-window, looking out on the quaint high-street. It was a charming repast, and both were hungry enough to do it justice.

The Chambertin sparkled like rubies as it flowed from the cobwebbed bottle, and Jack needed little urging from Madge to light a fragrant Regalia.

Then they sauntered forth into the sunshine, down to the river shore, and Jack chose a big roomy boat, fitted with the softest of red cushions. He pulled for a mile or more up the rippling Thames, chatting gaily with Madge, who sat opposite to him and deftly managed the rudder-ropes. A little-known backwater was the goal, and suddenly he drove the boat under a screen of low-drooping bushes and into a miniature lake set in a frame of leafy trees that formed a canopy of dense foliage overhead.

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"What do you think of it?" Jack asked, as he ran the bow gently ashore and pulled in the oars.

"It is like fairyland. It is too beautiful for words."

Madge averted her eyes from his, and pushed back a tress of golden hair that had strayed from under her hat; she took off one glove, and dipped the tips of her fingers in the water.

"I wish I had brought a book," she said. "Why don't you smoke? You have my permission, sir. But we must not stop long."

Jack felt for his cigar-case and dropped it again. The next instant he was beside the girl, and one arm encircled her waist.

"Madge, my darling!" he cried. "Don't you know—can't you guess—why I brought you here?"

Her silence, the droop of her blushing face, emboldened him. The old, old story, the story that was born when the world began, fell from his lips. They were honest, manly words, with a ring of heartfelt passion and pleading.

"Have I surprised you, Madge?" he went on. "Have I spoken too soon? We have known each other only a short time, it is true, but I could not care more for you had we been acquainted for months or years. I am not an impulsive boy—I know my own heart. I loved you from the day you came into my life. I love you now, and will always love you. I will be a good and true husband. Have you no answer for me, dear?"

The girl suddenly raised her face to his. Half-shed tears glistened in her eyes, but there was also a radiant look there which thrilled his heart with unspeakable joy. He knew that he had won her.

"Madge, my sweet Madge!" he whispered.

She trembled as his arm tightened about her waist.

"Jack, do you really, really love me?"

"More than I can tell you, dear. Can you doubt me? Have you nothing to say? Do you think it so strange—"

"Strange? Yes, it is more than I dared to hope for. Don't think me unwomanly, Jack, for telling the truth, but—but I do love you with all my heart."

"Madge! You have made me the happiest man alive! God grant that I be always worthy of your affection!"

A bird began to sing overhead, and Jack thought it was the sweetest music he had ever heard, as he drew Madge to him and pressed a lover's first kiss on her lips. Side by side they sat there in the leafy retreat, heedless of time, while the afternoon sun drooped lower in the sky. They had much to talk of—many little confidences to exchange. They lived over again the events of that brief period in which they had known each other.

"You have upset all my plans," said Madge, with a pretty pout. "I was going to devote my life to art, and become a second Rosa Bonheur or Lady Butler."

"One artist in the family will be enough," her lover answered, laughingly. "But you shall continue to paint, dearest. We will roam over Europe with our sketch-books."

"Oh, how delightful! To think of it—my dreams will be realized! I knew your work, Jack, before I knew you. But I am so ignorant of the world—even of the little world of London."

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"Madge, you are talking nonsense. You are my queen—you are the dearest, sweetest little woman that ever man won. And I love you the better because you are as fresh and pure as a flower, untainted by the wicked world, where innocence rubs off her bloom on vice's shoulders. I am not old, dear, but I have lived long enough to appreciate the value of—"

"Hush, or I shall think you do not mean all you say. Oh, Jack, promise me that you will never repent of your bargain. I wonder that some woman did not enslave you long ago."

A shadow crossed Jack's face, and he was silent for a moment.

"Madge," he said, hesitatingly, "I have not been a bad man in my time, nor have I been a particularly good one. I was an art student in Paris for years, and Paris is a city of dissipation, full of pitfalls and temptations to young fellows like myself. There is something connected with my past, which I feel it is my duty to—"

"Don't tell me, Jack—please don't. I might not like to hear it. I will try to forget that you had a past, and I will never ask you about it. You are mine now, and we will think only of the present and the future. I trust you, dear, and I know that you are good and true. You will always love me, won't you?"

"Always, my darling," Jack replied in a tone of relief. He told himself, as he kissed the troubled look from the girl's eyes, that it was better to keep silence. What could he gain by dragging up the black skeleton of the past? He was a free man now, and the withholding of that bitter chapter of his life would be the wisest course. If the future ever brought it to light, Madge would remember that she herself had checked the story on his lips.

"Jack, you are looking awfully serious."

"Am I? Well, I won't any more. But, I say, Madge, when will you be my wife? And how about speaking to your father? You know—"

"I can't tell him yet, Jack, really—you must wait a while. You won't mind, will you?"

"I hate this deception."

"So do I. But father has not been quite himself lately—I think something troubles him."

"Does he want to marry you to any one else?" Jack asked, jealously. "Is there anything of the sort between him and that young chap who comes to the house?"

"I can't be certain, Jack, but sometimes I imagine so, though father has never spoken to me about it. I dislike Mr. Royle, and discourage his attentions."

“His attentions?”

“Oh, Jack, don’t look at me in that way—you make me feel wretched. Won’t you trust me and believe me? I love you with all my heart, and I am as really yours as if I were married to you.”

“My darling, I *do* trust you,” he said contritely. “Forgive me—I was very foolish. I know that nothing can separate us, and I will await your own time in patience. And when you are willing to have me speak to your father—”

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"It shall be very soon, dear," whispered Madge, looking up at him with a soft light in her eyes. "If I find him in a good humor I will tell him myself. We are great chums, you know."

Jack kissed her, and then glanced at his watch.

"Four o'clock," he said, regretfully. "We must be off."

He pulled the boat back to Hampton, and ordered the hostler at the Flower Pot to get the trap ready. The world looked different, somehow, to the happy couple, as they drove Londonwards. Love's young dream had been realized, and they saw no shadow in the future.

The ride home was uneventful until they reached Richmond. Then, on the slope of the hill in front of the Talbot, where the traffic was thick and noisy, a coach with half a dozen young men on top was encountered, evidently bound for a convivial dinner at the Star and Garter or the Roebuck. A well-known young lord was driving, and beside him sat Victor Nevill. He smiled and nodded at Jack, and turned to gaze after his fair companion.

"That was an old friend of mine," remarked Jack, as the trap passed on. "A jolly good fellow, too."

"Drive faster, please," Madge said, abruptly. "I am afraid it is late."

There was a troubled, half-frightened look on her face, and she was very quiet until the station was reached, where she was sure to get a train to Gunnersbury within a few minutes. She sprang lightly to the pavement, and let her hand rest in Jack's for a moment, while her eyes, full of unspeakable affection, gazed into his. Then, with a brief farewell, she had vanished down the steps.

"She is mine," thought Jack, as he drove on toward Kew and Chiswick. "I have won a pearl among women. I think I should kill any man who came between us."

CHAPTER VIII.

An attraction in Pall Mall.

There was a counter-attraction in Pall Mall—a rival to Marlborough House, opposite which, ranged along the curb, a number of persons are usually waiting on the chance of seeing the Prince drive out. The rival establishment was the shop of Lamb and Drummond, picture dealers and engravers to Her Majesty. Since nine o'clock that morning, in the blazing May sunshine, there had been a little crowd before the plate glass window, behind which the firm had kindly exposed their latest prize to the public



gaze. Newspaper men had been admitted to a private view of the picture, and for a couple of days previous the papers had contained paragraphs in reference to the coming exhibition. Rembrandts are by no means uncommon, nor do all command high prices; but this particular one, which Martin Von Whele had unearthed in Paris, was conceded to be the finest canvas that the master-artist's brush had produced.

It was the typical London crowd, very much mixed. Some regarded the picture with contemptuous indifference and walked away. Others admired the rich, strong coloring, the permanency of the pigments, and the powerful, ferocious head, either Russian or Polish, that seemed to fairly stand out from the old canvas. A few persons, who were keener critics, envied Lamb and Drummond for the bargain they had obtained at such a small figure.

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Early in the afternoon Jack Vernon joined the group before the shop window; an interview with the editor of the *Piccadilly Magazine* had brought him to town, and, having read the papers, he had walked from the Strand over to Pall Mall. Memories of his Paris life, of the morning when he had trudged home in bitter disappointment to the Boulevard St. Germain and Diane, surged into his mind.

"It is the same picture that I copied at the Hotel Netherlands," he said to himself, "and it ought to sell for a lot of money. How well I recall those hours of drudgery, with old Von Whele looking over my shoulder and puffing the smoke of Dutch tobacco into my eyes! I was sorry to read of his death, and the sale of his collection. He was a good sort, if he was forgetful. By Jove, I've half a mind to box up my duplicate and send it to his executors. I wonder if they would settle the long-standing account."

Several hours later, when Jack had gone home and was hard at work in his studio, Victor Nevill sauntered down St. James street. He wore evening dress, and carried a light overcoat on his arm. He stopped at Lamb and Drummond's window for a few moments, and scrutinized the Rembrandt carelessly, but with a rather curious expression on his face. Then he looked at his watch—the time was half-past five—and cutting across into the park he walked briskly to St. James' Park station. The train that he wanted was announced, and when it came in he watched the row of carriages as they flashed by him. He entered a first-class smoker, and nodded to Stephen Foster. The two were not alone in the compartment, and during the ride of half an hour they exchanged only a few words, and gave close attention to their papers. But they had plenty to talk about after they got out at Gunnersbury, and their conversation was grave and serious as they walked slowly toward the river, by the long shady streets lined with villas.

Stephen Foster's house stood close to the lower end of Strand-on-the-Green. It was more than a century old, and was larger than it looked from the outside. It had the staid and comfortable stamp of the Georgian period, with its big square windows, and the unique fanlight over the door. Directly opposite the entrance, across the strip of paved quay, was a sort of a water-gate leading down to the sedgy shore of the Thames—a flight of stone steps, cut out of the masonry, from the foot of which it was possible to take boat at high tide. In the rear of the house was a walled garden, filled with flowers, shrubbery, and fruit trees.

Opening the door with his key, Stephen Foster led his guest into the drawing-room, where Madge was sitting with a book. She kissed her father, and gave a hand reluctantly to Nevill, whom she addressed as Mr. Royle. She resumed her reading, perched on a couch by the window, and Nevill stole numerous glances at her while he chatted with his host.

The curio-dealer dined early—he was always hungry when he came back from town—and dinner was announced at seven o'clock. It was a protracted ceremony, and the

courses were well served and admirably cooked; the wine came from a carefully selected cellar, and was beyond reproach. Madge presided at the table, and joined in the conversation; but it evidently cost her an effort to be cheerful. After the dessert she rose.

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"Will you and Mr. Royle excuse me, father?" she said. "I know you want to smoke."

"I hope you are not going to desert us, Miss Foster," Nevill replied. "Your company is preferable to the best cigar."

"We will go up stairs and smoke," said Stephen Foster. "Come, Royle; my daughter would rather play the piano."

The library, whither Nevill accompanied his host, was on the second floor front. It was a cozy room, trimmed with old oak, with furniture to match, lined with books and furnished with rare engravings and Persian rugs. Stephen Foster lighted the incandescent gas-lamp on the big table, drew the window curtains together, and closed the door. Then he unlocked a cabinet and brought out a box of Havanas, a siphon, a couple of glasses, and a bottle of whisky and one of Maraschino.

"Sit down, and help yourself," he said. "Or is it too early for a stimulant?"

Nevill did not reply; he was listening to the low strains of music from the floor beneath, where Madge was at the piano, singing an old English ballad. He hesitated for a moment, and dropped into an easy chair. Stephen Foster drew his own chair closer and leaned forward.

"We are quite alone," he said, "and there is no danger of being overheard or disturbed. You intimated that you had something particular to say to me. What is it? Does it concern our little—"

"No; we discussed that after we left the train. It is quite a different matter."

Nevill's usual self-possession seemed to have deserted him, and as he went on with his revelation he spoke in jerky sentences, with some confusion and embarrassment.

"That's all there is about it," he wound up, aggressively.

"All?" cried Stephen Foster.

He got up and walked nervously to the window. Then he turned back and confronted Nevill; there was a look on his face that was not pleasant to see, as if he had aged suddenly.

"Is this a jest, or are you serious?" he demanded, coldly. "Do I understand that you love my daughter?—that you wish to marry her?"

"I have told you so plainly. You must have known that I loved her—you cannot have been blind to that fact all this time."

"I have been worse than blind, Nevill, I fear. Have you spoken to Madge?"

"No; I never had a chance."

"Do you consider yourself a suitable husband for her?"

"Why not?" Nevill asked; he was cool and composed now. "If you are good enough to be her father, am I not worthy to be her husband?"

"Don't say that," Stephen Foster answered. "You are insolent—you forget to whom you are speaking. Whatever our relations have been and are, whatever sort of man I am at my desk or my ledgers, I am another person at home. Sneer if you like, it is true. I love my daughter—the child of my dead wife. She does not know what I do in town—you are aware of that—and God forbid that she ever does learn. I want to keep her in ignorance—to guard her young life and secure her future happiness. And *you* want to marry her!"

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"I do," replied Nevill, trying to speak pleasantly.

"How will you explain the deception—the fact that you have been coming here under a false name?"

"I will get around that all right. It was your suggestion, you remember, not mine, that I should take the name of Royle. Look here, Foster, I know there is some reason in what you say—I respect your motives. But you misunderstand and misjudge me. I love the girl with all my heart, with a true, pure and lasting affection. I might choose a wife in higher places, but Madge has enslaved me with her sweet face and charming disposition. As for our relations—you know what poverty drove me to. Given a secure income, and I should never have stooped to dishonor. The need of money stifled the best that was in my nature. It is not too late to reform, though. I don't mean now, but when I come into my uncle's fortune, which is a sure thing. Then, I promise you, I will be as straight as you could wish your daughter's husband to be. Believe me, I am sincere. No man could offer Madge a deeper affection."

There was no doubt that Victor Nevill spoke the truth, for once in his life; he loved Madge with a passion that dominated him, and he knew his own unworthiness. Stephen Foster paced the floor with a haggard face, with knitted brows.

"It is impossible," he said to himself. "I would rather see her married to some poor but honest clerk." He lighted a cigar and bit it savagely. "What if I refuse?" he added aloud.

A dangerous light flashed in Nevill's eyes.

"I won't give her up," he replied; and in the words there was a hidden menace which Stephen Foster understood.

"Give her up?" he echoed. "You have not won her yet."

"I know that, but I hope to succeed."

"What do you expect me to do?"

"All in your power. Give me a fair show."

"The girl shan't be bullied or browbeaten—I won't force her into such a step against her wishes. If she marries you, it will be of her own free will."

"That's fair enough. But I want an open field. You must keep other admirers away from the girl, and there isn't any time to lose about it. It may be too late now—"

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that Madge has improved her acquaintance with the chap who pulled her out of the river a couple of weeks ago."

"Impossible, Nevill!"

"It is perfectly true. And do you know who the man is? It is none other than Jack Vernon, the artist."

"By heavens, Jack Vernon! The same who—"

"Yes, the same. I did not tell you before."

"And I did not dream of it. I wrote a letter of gratitude to the fellow, and told Madge to get his address from the landlord of the Black Bull—I did not know it myself, else—"

"I was afraid you might have some scruples. It is too late for that now."

"It was like your cursed cunning," exclaimed Stephen Foster. "Yes, I should have hesitated. But are you certain that Madge has seen the fellow since?"



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"Certain? Why, I passed them in George street, Richmond, last evening, as I was driving to the Star and Garter. They were together in a trap, going toward Kew. That is the reason I determined to speak to you to-night."

Stephen Foster rose and hurried toward the door; his face was pale with anger and alarm.

"Stop!" cried Nevill. "What are you going to do?"

"Sit still," was the hoarse reply. "I'll tell you when I return."

CHAPTER IX.

UNCLE AND NEPHEW.

Victor Nevill was on his feet instantly, and by a quick move he intercepted Foster and clutched him by the arm. He repeated his question: "What are you going to do?"

"Take your hand off me. I shall hear from Madge's own lips a denial of your words. How dare you accuse her of stooping to an intrigue?"

"I wouldn't call it that. Madge is young and innocent. She knows little of the censorious world. She has been left pretty much to herself, and naturally she sees no harm in meeting Vernon. As for denying my words—she can't do that."

"I will call her to account, and make her confess everything."

"But not to-night," urged Nevill. "Come, sit down."

Stephen Foster yielded to the solicitation of his companion, and went back to his chair. He mixed a whisky and soda, and drank half of it.

"I forget," he muttered, "that my little Madge has grown to womanhood. Her very innocence would make her an easy prey to some unscrupulous scoundrel. I must speak to her, Nevill."

"Yes, by all means."

"And why not to-night?"

"Need you ask? Would not Madge know at once that it was I who told you? And what, then, would be my chance of winning her?"

"It couldn't be any poorer than it is now," thought Stephen Foster. "Did she see you yesterday?" he said aloud.

"No, by good luck she did not—at least I feel pretty sure of it. A jolly good thing, too, for Vernon recognized me and nodded to me. But whether Madge saw me or not won't make much difference under present circumstances. If you go downstairs now and start a row with her, she will be sure to suspect that you received your information from me."

"Quite likely. What do you want me to do?"

"Wait until to-morrow evening, when you return from town. Then tell her that some stock-broking friend of yours in the city saw her near Richmond station."

"That is the best plan," assented Stephen Foster. "I will take your advice."

"Of course you will forbid her to have anything more to do with Vernon, and will see that your wishes are enforced?"

"Decidedly. The man has behaved badly, and I can't believe that he has any honorable intentions. He has been simply amusing himself with the girl."

"That's like him," Nevill said carelessly. "Jack Vernon was always a rake and a *roue*; though, as I am a friend of his, I ought not to tell you this. But for your daughter's sake ___"

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"I understand. The warning is timely, and I will see that the girl's eyes are opened."

"And you will give Madge to me if I can win her consent."

"She shall marry the man she loves—the man of her choice," replied Stephen Foster, "provided he is worthy of her. But I won't compel her to do anything against her wishes."

"I am not asking you to do that. I have your permission, then, to visit here as a suitor?"

"Yes; I shall be glad to see you a couple of times a week."

Stephen Foster did not speak very cordially, and his expression was not that of a father who has found a suitable husband for his daughter; but Victor Nevill had gained his point, and was satisfied with what he had so far accomplished. He was a vain man, and possessed an overweening amount of self-confidence, especially where women were concerned.

The two had other subjects to discuss. For a couple of hours—long after Madge had forsaken the piano and gone to bed—a whispered conversation was carried on that had no reference to the girl. It was nearly eleven o'clock when Nevill left the house, and bade Stephen Foster good-night on the step. He knew the way in spite of the darkness and the paucity of street lamps. Having lighted a cigar, he walked briskly toward Gunnersbury.

"It was a narrow squeak yesterday," he reflected. "Until I met the girl to-night, I was doubtful as to her having failed to see me on the coach. It would have been most unfortunate had both of them recognized me; they would have compared notes in that case, and discovered that Victor Nevill and Mr. Royle were one and the same. I must be more careful in future. Foster was rather inclined to be ugly, but he promised certain things, and he knows that he can't play fast and loose with me. I am afraid some harm has been done already, but it will blow over if he keeps a tight rein on his daughter. As for Vernon, he must be forced to decamp. Curse the fate that brought him across my path! There's not much I would stop at if he became a dangerous rival. But there is no danger of that. I have the inner track, and by perseverance I will win the girl in the end. She is not a bit like other women—that's her charm—but it ought to count for something when she learns that I am Sir Lucius Chesney's heir. I've been going to the devil pretty fast, but I meant what I told Foster. I love Madge with all my better nature, and for her sake I would run as straight as a die. A look from her pretty eyes makes me feel like a blackguard."

Thus Nevill communed with himself until he neared Gunnersbury station, when the distant rumble of a train quickened his steps. He had just time to buy his ticket, dash down the steps, and jump into a first-class carriage. Getting out at Portland road, he

took a cab to Regent street, and dropped in at the Cafe Royal for a few minutes. Then he started toward his lodgings on foot. It was that witching hour when West End London, before it goes to sleep, foams and froths like a glass of champagne that will soon be flat and flavorless. Men and women, inclined to be hilarious, thronged the pavements under the strong lights. Birds of prey, male and female, prowled alertly.

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A jingling hansom swung from Piccadilly Circus into the Quadrant. Its occupants were a short, Jewish-looking man with a big diamond in his shirt-front, and a woman who leaned forward more prominently than her companion. She was richly dressed, and—at least by gaslight—strikingly beautiful, with great eyes of a purplish hue, and a mass of golden-red hair that might or might not have been natural; only at close range could one have detected the ravages of an unfortunate and unbridled life—the tell-tale marks that the lavish use of powder and rouge could not utterly hide.

The vehicle very nearly ran Victor Nevill down—he had been about to cross the street—and as he dodged back to the sidewalk his face was for an instant close to the woman's, and he saw her distinctly. He uttered an exclamation of surprise, and started as though an unseen hand had dealt him a blow. He hesitated briefly, seemingly dazed, and then started in pursuit. But he ran into a couple of men at the outset, and by the time he had stammered an apology, and was free to look about him again, the swift-moving hansom was lost to sight in a maze of similar vehicles.

"It's no use to follow in a cab," muttered Nevill. "And I must be mistaken, anyway. It can't be she whom I saw—she is dead."

He stood at the edge of the pavement, staring undecidedly up the curve of the street. When a brace of painted women, emboldened by his attitude, shot covert remarks at him, he turned on them sharply. But, seeing a policeman approaching, he walked on.

"By heavens, I was *not* mistaken!" he said to himself. "The papers must have blundered—such things often happen. She is much altered, but they were her eyes, her lips. To think that her peerless beauty should have brought her so low! She is nothing to me now, though I nearly broke my heart over her once. But she may serve as a useful tool. She will be a trump card to play, if need be. She has probably come to London recently, and if she stays any time it would not be a difficult matter for me to find her. I daresay she drained the Russian's purse, and then served him as she served me. The heartless vampire! But I am glad I saw her to-night. With her aid it will be easier than I hoped, perhaps, to win Madge."

* * * * *

Since ten o'clock an unexpected visitor had been waiting in Victor Nevill's rooms on Jermyn street. In a big basket-chair, drawn close to the light, sat Sir Lucius Chesney. He had helped himself to cigars and brandy-and-soda, and had dipped into half a dozen late novels that were scattered about the table, but without finding any to interest him. It was long past twelve now, and he was beginning to feel drowsy and out of temper. He wished he had remained in the smoking-room of his hotel, or hunted up some old acquaintances at the Country Club.

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Sir Lucius was a medium-sized, slightly portly gentleman of fifty-eight, though he did not look his age, thanks to the correct life he led. He had a military carriage, a rubicund face, a heavy mustache, keen, twinkling eyes, and a head of iron-gray hair. He was a childless widower, and Victor Nevill, the son of his dead sister Elizabeth, was his nephew, and presumably his heir. He had had another sister—his favorite one—but many years ago he had cast her out of his life. He lived alone at his fine old place in Sussex, Priory Court, near to the sea and the downs. When he was at home he found occupation in shooting and fishing, riding, cultivating hot-house fruits, and breeding horses and cattle. These things he did to perfection, but his knowledge of art was not beyond criticism. He was particularly fond of old masters, but he bought all sorts of pictures, and had a gallery full of them. He made bad bargains sometimes, and was imposed upon by unscrupulous dealers. That, however, was nobody's business, as long as he himself was satisfied.

He cared nothing for London or for society, and seldom came up to town; but he liked to travel, and a portion of each year he invariably spent on the Continent or in more remote places. He smoked Indian cheroots from choice—he had once filled a civil position in Bombay for eighteen months—and his favorite wine was port. He was generous and kind-hearted, and believed that every young man must sow his crop of wild oats, and that he would be the better for it. But there was another and a deeper side to his character. In his sense of honor he was a counterpart of Colonel Newcome, and he had a vast amount of family pride; a sin against that he could neither forget nor forgive, and he was relentless to the offender.

It was twenty minutes to one when Victor Nevill mounted the stairs and opened his door, surprised to see that the gas was lighted in his rooms. If he was unpleasantly startled by the sight of his visitor, he masked his feelings successfully.

"My dear uncle," he cried, "I am delighted to see you!"

"You dog!" exclaimed Sir Lucius, with a beaming countenance. "You night-bird! Do you know that I have been here since ten o'clock?"

"I am awfully sorry, I assure you, sir. If you had only dropped me a line or wired. I have been dining with a friend in the suburbs, and the best train I could catch took me to Portland road."

Possibly Sir Lucius did not believe this explanation. He glanced keenly at his nephew, noting his flushed face and rumpled shirt-bosom, and a shadow of displeasure crossed his features.

"I hoped to spend a few quiet hours with you," he said. "I came to town this evening, and put up at Morley's. I am off to Norway in the morning, by a steamer that sails from

the Thames, and from there I shall probably go to the Continent. I have been feeling a little run down—livery—and my physician has advised a complete change of air.”

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"You are a regular globe-trotter," replied Victor, laughing to hide his sudden look of relief. "I wish I could induce you to spend the season in London."

"That's well enough for an idle young dog like yourself—you can't exist out of London. What are you doing?"

"Nothing in particular. I read a good bit—"

"Yes, trashy novels. Does your income hold out?"

"I manage to get along, with economy."

"Economy? Humph! I have taken the liberty to look about your rooms. The landlady remembered me and let me in. You have a snug nest—more luxurious than the last time I was here. It is fit for a Sybarite. Your brandy is old liquor, and must have cost you a pretty penny. Your cigars are too good for *me*, sir, and I'll warrant you don't pay less than ten pounds a hundred for them. As for your clothing, you have enough to start a shop."

"I must keep up appearances, my dear uncle."

"Yes, I suppose so. I don't blame you for wanting to stand well with your friends, if you can afford it. Your father and mother spoiled you. You should have gone to the bar, or into the army or the church. However, it is too late to talk about that now. But, to be frank with you, my boy, it has come to my ears that you are leading a fast life."

"It is false!" Victor cried, indignantly.

"I sincerely trust so. I have heard only rumors, and I do not care to attach any credence to them. But a word of warning—of advice—may not be out of place. Young men must have their fling, and I think none the worse of them for it. But you are not young, in your knowledge of the world. It is six or seven years since you were thrown on the Continent with a full purse. You have been able to indulge every whim and fancy. You have had enough of wild oats. Fill your niche in Society and Clubdom, if you like. Be a butterfly and an ornament, if you feel no inclination for anything better. But be a gentleman—be honorable. If you ever forget yourself, and bring a shadow of shame upon the unsullied names of Chesney or Nevill, by gad, sir, you shall never touch a penny of my money. I will leave it all to charities, and turn Priory Court into a hospital. Mark that! If you go wrong, I'll hear of it. I'm good for twenty years yet, if I'm good for a day."

"You seem to have a very bad opinion of me, Uncle Lucius. I never give your fortune a thought. As for the honor of the family, it is as dear to me as it is to you."



“Glad to hear you say it, my boy,” replied Sir Lucius, breathlessly. “It shows spirit. Well, I hope you’ll overlook my sharp words. I meant them for your good. And if you want a check—”

“Thanks, awfully, but I don’t need it,” Victor interrupted, with a stroke of inspiration. “My income keeps me going all right. It is only in trifles that I am extravagant. I have inherited a taste, sir, for good cigars and old brandy.”

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"You dog, of course you have. Your maternal grandfather was noted for his wine cellar, and he bought his Havanas by the thousand from Fribourg and Treyer. That I should prefer cheroots is rank degeneracy. But I must be off, or I shall get no sleep. I won't ask you to come down to the dock in the morning—"

"But I insist upon coming, sir."

"Then breakfast with me at Morley's—nine o'clock sharp."

Uncle and nephew parted on the best of terms, but Sir Lucius was not altogether easy in mind as he walked down Regent street, tapping the now deserted pavement with his stick.

"I hope the boy is trustworthy," he thought. "He has some excuse for recklessness and extravagance, but none for dishonor. I told him the name of Chesney was unsullied—I forgot for a moment. It is strange that Mary should be so much in my mind lately. Poor girl! Perhaps I was too harsh with her. I wonder if she is still alive—if she has a son. But if she came to me this moment, I could not forgive her. Nearly thirty years have not softened me."

He sighed heavily as he entered Trafalgar Square, and to a wretched woman with an infant in her arms, crouching under the shadow of the Nelson Column, he tossed a silver piece.

CHAPTER X.

A LONDON SENSATION.

It had rained most of the afternoon, and then cleared off beautifully just before twilight. Strand-on-the-Green, ever changeful of mood, was this evening as fresh and sweet-smelling as a bit of the upper Thames—as picturesque as any waterside village a hundred miles from London.

By the grassy margin of the river, between Maynard's boat-house and the elm trees, Jack Vernon strolled impatiently up and down. He was in low spirits, and the beauty of the evening was wasted on him. He had been here for fifteen minutes, and he told himself that he had been a fool to come at all, at such an hour. He waited a little longer, and then, as he was on the point of leaving, he heard light footsteps approaching, and recognized them with a lover's keen perception. He hurried to meet the slim, girlish figure, with a light cloak fluttering from her shoulders, and Madge's little cry of pleasure was stifled on her lips as he kissed them again and again.



"My darling!" he whispered eagerly. "I scarcely dared to hope that you would come to-night, but I could not stay away. Do you know that you have treated me cruelly? I have not seen you for two days—since Wednesday afternoon. And I have been here twice."

"I am sorry, Jack, but I could not help it. I missed you ever so much."

"Where is your father?"

"He is not at home—that is why I came. He is dining in town with an old friend, and won't be back until the last train, at the very earliest."

"I am indebted to him. I was hungry for a sight of you, dearest."

"And I longed to see you, Jack. But I am afraid we shall not be able to meet as often as before."

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"Madge, what do you mean? Has anything gone wrong?"

The girl linked her arm in his, and drew him to a darker and lonelier spot by the water. In a few words, tremulously spoken, she told him what he had already surmised—that her father had discovered her secret, and had taxed her with it when he came home on the previous evening.

"By Jove, it was my fault," Jack said, contritely. "I should not have tempted you to go on that unlucky trip last Tuesday. So you were seen near Richmond station by some meddlesome individual—probably when you got out of the trap! But it may turn out for the best; your father could not have been kept in ignorance much longer. Was he angry?"

"Yes, Jack; but he seemed more hurt and grieved. Oh, it was such a wretched time!"

"My poor girl! Does—does he want you to give me up?"

"He forbade me to see you again."

"And you are here!"

"Did you expect me to obey him?"

"What did you tell him, dearest?"

"All—everything. I spoke up bravely, Jack. I told him I was a woman now, and that I loved you with all my heart, and intended to marry you!"

"My own plucky Madge! And I suppose that made him the more angry?"

"No; my defiance surprised him—he thought I would yield. He talked about ingratitude, and called me a foolish girl who did not know her own mind. He looked awfully sad and stern, Jack, but when I kissed him and begged him not to be angry, he melted a little."

"And gave in?"

"No, neither of us yielded; we agreed to a sort of a tacit truce. Father did not speak of the matter again, and he went to town very early this morning, before I was up. He left word with Mrs. Sedgewick that he would not be back until late. I was sure he would go to your studio."

"I have not seen him," replied Jack; "but I hope he will come. If he doesn't I shall call on him and ask for your hand, and without delay. It is the only honorable course. Until I set things right with him, and satisfy him of my intentions, I can't blame him for thinking all sorts of evil of me."

"If he knew you as I know you, dear!"

"But he doesn't," Jack said, bitterly. "Is it likely that he will consent to let you marry a poor artist? No. But I can't—I won't—give you up, Madge!"

The girl rested her hands on his shoulders, and looked trustfully into his face.

"Dear Jack, don't worry," she whispered. "It will all come right in the end. We love each other, and we will be true. Nothing shall part us. I am yours always, and some day I will be your wife. Promise that you will believe me—that you will never be afraid of losing me!"

"I *do* believe you, darling," Jack said, fervently. "You have made me happy again—your words have driven the clouds away. I could not live without you, Madge. Since I have known you the whole world seems brighter and better. For your sake I am going to make a name and a fortune."

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He kissed her passionately, and for a few moments they stood watching the incoming tide, and talking in a lighter vein. Then they parted, and Madge slipped away toward the old house with its guardian elm trees. The memory of her last words cheered Jack as he walked to the high-road and thence to his studio. Alphonse had prepared him a tempting little supper, and he did not go to town that night.

The next morning London awoke to a new sensation, which quite eclipsed the week-old theft of the Duchess of Hightower's jewels and the recent mysterious murder at Hoxton. The news was at first meager and unsatisfactory, and contained little more in substance than was found in the big headlines and on the posters of the leading papers:

DARING ROBBERY AT LAMB AND DRUMMOND'S.

THE FAMOUS REMBRANDT CARRIED OFF—WATCHMAN BRUTALLY HANDLED.

The early journals had gone to press before a full report of the affair could reach them, but a detailed account appeared between ten and eleven o'clock in the first edition of the afternoon papers. The Rembrandt was gone—there was no doubt of it—and the story of its disappearance contained many dramatic elements. A curious crowd gathered about the premises of Lamb and Drummond on Pall Mall, to gaze at the now vacant window, and the services of a policeman were required to keep the sidewalk clear. Many persons recalled the similar case, some years before, of the Gainsborough portrait of the Duchess of Devonshire.

Mr. Lamb, it appeared, had been detained at his place of business until long after the closing hour, writing important letters. He left at nine o'clock, and Raper, the night watchman, fastened the street door behind him. During the night the policeman on duty in Pall Mall saw or heard nothing suspicious about the premises. The Rembrandt was on an easel in a large room back of the shop proper, and from it a rear door opened on a narrow paved passage leading to Crown Court; the inmates heard no noise in the night. At four o'clock in the morning a policeman, flashing his lantern in Crown Court, found a window open at the back of Lamb and Drummond's premises. He entered at once. Inside the gas was burning dimly, and the watchman lay bound and gagged in a corner, with a strong odor of drugs mingling with his breath. The Rembrandt had been cut out of its frame and carried away.

"The robbery was evidently well-planned, and is enveloped in mystery," said the *St. James' Gazette*, "and the thieves left not the slightest clew. It is difficult to conceive their motive. They cannot hope at present to dispose of the picture, which is known by reputation in Europe and America, nor is it certain that they could safely realize on it after the lapse of years. The watchman, who has recovered consciousness, declared that he has no knowledge of how the thieves entered the building. It was about midnight, he states, when he was knocked down from behind. He remembers nothing after that."

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The *Globe's* account was more sensational. "It has come to light," wrote the enterprising reporter, "that Raper, the watchman, was in the habit of slipping out to the Leather Bottle, on Crown Court, for a drink at ten o'clock every evening, and leaving the back door of the shop unlocked. He came into the private bar at the usual time last night, and remained for twenty minutes. He drank a pint of ale, and was seen conversing with a shabbily dressed stranger, whose face was unfamiliar to the publican and the barmaid. This incident suggests two theories. Did the affable stranger drug Raper's beer, and, at a later hour of the night, while the watchman was in a stupor, force the window with one or more companions and carry off the Rembrandt? Or was the watchman in the plot? Did the thieves slip into the building while he was in the Leather Bottle, and subsequently bind, gag and drug him, and force open the window from the outside, in order to screen him from the suspicions of his employers? We learn that Raper has been suspended from his position, pending an investigation. Mr. Lamb informs us that the Rembrandt was insured against fire and burglary for the sum of ten thousand guineas. The company is the Mutual, and they are sure to do all in their power to apprehend the thieves and save themselves from such a heavy loss."

Such was the gist of the newspaper accounts of the puzzling affair. And now to see how they affected certain individuals who are not strangers to the reader.

CHAPTER XI.

A MYSTERIOUS DISCOVERY.

Stephen Foster sat in his office at No. 320 Wardour street, with half a dozen of the morning and afternoon papers scattered about his desk. It was two o'clock, but he had not gone out to lunch, and it had not occurred to him that the usual hour for it was past. Footsteps came down the length of the shop, and Victor Nevill opened the door. He closed it quickly behind him as he entered the room; his face expressed extreme agitation, and he looked like a man who has spent a sleepless night.

"You have seen them?" he exclaimed, pointing to the papers. "You have read the different accounts?"

"Yes, I have read them—that is all. They tell me nothing. You could have knocked me down with a feather when I bought a *Telegraph* at Gunnersbury station this morning, and saw the headlines."

"And I first heard of it at breakfast—I got up rather late. I opened the *Globe* and there it was, staring me in the eyes. It knocked my appetite, I can assure you. What do you make of it?"

“It’s a mystery,” replied Stephen Foster, “and I am all in the dark about it. Devilish unfortunate, I call it.”

“Right you are! And it’s more than that. You have seen the *Globe*?”

“Yes; here it is.”

“Did you know that the picture was insured?”

“I judged that it was, but the fact was quite unimportant.”

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"The Mutual people won't regard it in that light."

"Hardly. Will you have a drink, my dear fellow? You are looking seedy."

A stiff brandy-and-soda pulled Victor Nevill together, and for nearly an hour the two men spoke in low and serious tones, occasionally referring to the heap of papers.

"Not the slightest clew," said Stephen Foster. "It is absurd to suspect Raper of collusion with the thieves—his only fault was carelessness. Leave the affair to the police. I shan't give it another thought."

"That's easier said than done," Nevill replied. He rose and put on his hat. "I must be off now. Oh, about the other matter—have you said anything further to your daughter?"

"Not a word."

"She still defies you?"

"She refuses to give the fellow up." Stephen Foster sighed. "The girl has lots of spirit."

"You won't let her have her own way?"

"Not if I can prevent it."

"Prevent it?" echoed Nevill, sneeringly. "What measures will you take?"

"I shall see the artist."

"Much good that will do," said Nevill. "Better begin by enforcing your authority over your daughter."

"I can't be harsh with her," Stephen Foster answered. "I am more inclined to pity than anger."

Under the circumstances, now that he knew how far matters had gone with the woman he loved and his rival, Victor Nevill was curiously unconcerned and unmoved, at least outwardly. It is true that he did not despair of success, strong as were the odds against him. There was a hard and evil expression on his face, which melted at times into a cunning smile of satisfaction, as he walked down Wardour street.

"I am on the right scent, and the game will soon be in my hands," he reflected. "In another week I ought to be able to put an effectual spoke in Jack Vernon's wheel. It will be a blow for Madge, but she will forget him presently, and then I will commence to play my cards. I won't fail—I'm determined to make her my wife. Shall I let Foster into the

scheme? I think not. Better let things take their course, and keep him in ignorance of the fact that I had a hand in the revelation, if it comes off. I'm afraid it won't, though."

We must take the reader now to Ravenscourt Park, to the studio of Jack Vernon. Early in the afternoon, while Victor Nevill was closeted with Stephen Foster, the young artist was sitting at his easel. He had been working since breakfast on a landscape, a commission from one of his wealthy patrons. Things had gone unusually well with him lately. His picture was on the line at the Academy, it had been favorably reviewed, and he had received several offers for it. This indicated increased fame, with a larger income, and a luxurious little home for Madge.

"Will you have your lunch now, sir?" Alphonse called from the doorway of an inner room.

"Yes, you may fetch it," Jack replied. "I'm as hungry as a bear."

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He usually took his second meal at an earlier hour, but to-day he had gone on working, deeply interested in his subject. He put aside his brush and palette, and seated himself at the table, on which Alphonse had placed a couple of chops, a bottle of Bass, and half a loaf of French bread. When he had finished, he lighted a cigarette and opened the *Telegraph* lazily. He had not looked at it before, and he uttered a cry of surprise as his eyes fell on the headlines announcing the theft of the Rembrandt. He perused the brief paragraph, and turned to his servant.

"Go out and buy me an afternoon paper," he said.

Alphonse departed, and, having the luck to encounter a newsboy in the street, he speedily returned with the latest edition of the *Globe*. It contained nothing more in substance than the earlier issues, but the full account of the mysterious robbery was there, a column long, and with keen interest Jack read every word of it over twice.

"It's a queer case," he said to himself, "and the sort of thing that doesn't often happen. The last sensation of the kind was the Gainsborough, years ago. What will the thieves do with their prize? They can't well dispose of it. It will be a waiting game. I daresay the watchman knows more than he cares to tell. And so the picture was insured—over-insured, too, for I don't believe it would have brought ten thousand pounds. That's rather an interesting fact. Now, if Lamb and Drummond were like some unscrupulous dealers that I know, instead of being beyond reproach, there would be reason to think —"

He did not finish the mental sentence, but tossed the paper aside, and rose suddenly to his feet.

"By Jove, I'll hang up the duplicate!" he muttered. "I was going to send it to Von Whele's executors, but it is worth keeping now, as a curiosity. It will be an attraction to the chaps who come to see me. I hope it won't get me into trouble. It is so deucedly like the original that I might be accused of stealing it from the premises of Lamb and Drummond."

He crossed the studio, knelt down by the couch and pulled the drapery aside, and drew out the half-dozen of bulging portfolios; they had not been disturbed since the visit of his French customer, M. Felix Marchand. He opened the one in which he knew he had seen the Rembrandt on that occasion, but he failed to find it, though he turned over the sketches singly. He examined them again, with increasing wonder, and then went carefully through the other portfolios. The search was fruitless. The copy of Martin Von Whele's Rembrandt was gone!

"What can it mean?" thought Jack. "I distinctly remember putting the canvas back in the biggest portfolio—I could swear to that. I have not touched them since. Yet the picture

is gone—missing—stolen. Yes, stolen! What else? By Jove, it's a queer coincidence that both the original and the copy should disappear simultaneously!"

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He struck a match and looked beneath the couch; there was nothing there. He ransacked about the studio for a few minutes, and then summoned his servant.

"Was there a stranger here at any time during the last two weeks?" he asked; "any person whom you did not know?"

Alphonse shook his head decidedly.

"There was no one, monsieur. I am certain of that."

"And my friends—"

"On such occasions as monsieur's friends called while he was out, I was in the studio as long as they remained."

"Yes, of course. When did you sweep under this couch?"

"About three weeks ago, monsieur," was the hesitating reply.

"No less than that?"

"No less, monsieur."

Jack was satisfied. There was no room for suspicion, he told himself. The man's word was to be relied upon. But by what agency, then, had the canvas disappeared? How could a thief break into the studio without leaving some trace of his visit, in the shape of a broken window or a forced lock? There had been plenty of opportunities, it is true—nights when Alphonse had been at home and Jack in town.

"Has monsieur lost something?"

"Yes, a large painting has been stolen," Jack replied.

He went to the door and examined the lock from the outside, by the aid of matches, though with no hope of finding anything. But a surprising and ominous discovery rewarded him at once. In and around the key-hole, sticking to it, were some minute fragments of wax.

"By Jove, I have it!" cried Jack. "Here is the clew! Look, Alphonse! The scoundrel, whoever he was, took an impression in wax on his first visit. He had a key made from it, came back later at night, and stole the picture. It was a cunning piece of work."

"Monsieur is right," said Alphonse. "A thief has robbed him. You suspect nobody?"

"Not a soul," replied Jack.

Though the shreds of wax showed how the studio had been entered, he was no nearer the solution of the mystery than before. He excepted the few trustworthy friends—only three or four—who knew that he had the duplicate Rembrandt.

“And even in Paris there were not many who knew that I painted the thing,” he thought. “I painted it at the Hotel Netherlands, and when Von Whele went home and left it on my hands, I locked the canvas up in an old chest. No, I can’t suspect any of my friends, past or present. But then who—By Jove! I have overlooked one point! The man who stole the picture knew just where it was kept, and he went straight to it. Otherwise he would have rummaged the studio, and disarranged things badly before he found what he wanted.”

A light flashed on Jack—a light of inspiration, of certainty and conviction. He remembered the visit of M. Felix Marchand, that he had commented on the painting, and had seen it restored to its place in the portfolio. Beyond doubt the mysterious Frenchman was the thief. Armed with his craftily-won knowledge, provided with a duplicate key to the studio, he had easily and safely accomplished his purpose. At what hour, and on what night, it was impossible to say. Probably a day or two after his first visit in the guise of a buyer.

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"Monsieur must not take his loss too much to heart," said Alphonse, with well-meant sympathy. "If he informs the police—"

"I prefer to have nothing to do with the police, thank you. You may go, Alphonse. I shall dine in town, as usual."

When Alphonse had departed, Jack threw a sheet over the canvas on his easel, put on a smoking jacket, lighted his pipe, and stretched himself in an easy chair, to think about the startling discovery he had made.

The mystery presented many difficult points for his consideration. The rogue's sole aim was to get that particular painting, and he had taken nothing else, though he might have walked off with his pockets filled with valuable articles. He probably expected that the robbery would not be discovered for a long time.

But what was his object in stealing the Rembrandt? What did he hope to do with a copy of so well-known a work of art? Was there any connection between this crime and the one committed last night on the premises of the Pall Mall dealers? That was extremely unlikely. It was beyond question that Lamb and Drummond had had the original painting in their possession, and that daring burglars had taken it.

"I could see light in the matter," Jack reflected, "if the fellow had visited my place after hearing of the robbery at Lamb and Drummond's. In that case, his scheme would have been to get the duplicate canvas—granted that he knew of its existence and whereabouts—and trade it off for the original. But he could not have known until early this morning, and he did not come then. I was sleeping here, and would have heard him. No, my picture must have been taken at least a week or ten days ago."

Jack smoked two more pipes, and the dark-brown Latakia tobacco from Oriental shores, stealing insidiously to his brain, brought him an idea.

"It is chimeric and improbable," he concluded, "but it is the most likely theory I have struck yet. Was my Frenchman the same chap who robbed Lamb and Drummond? Did he or his confederates steal both paintings, knowing them to be as like as two peas, with the intention of disposing of each as the original, and thus killing two birds with one stone? By Jove, I believe I've hit it! But, no, it is unlikely. Can I be right? I'll reserve my opinion, anyway, until I have written to Paris to ascertain if there is such a person as M. Felix Marchand, of the Pare Monceaux. If there is *not*, then I will interview Lamb and Drummond, and confide the whole story to them."

He decided to write the letter at once, but before he could reach his desk there was a sharp rap on the door. He opened it, and saw a tall, well-dressed gentleman, with a tawny beard and mustache, who bowed coldly and silently, and held out a card. Jack took it and read the name. His visitor was Stephen Foster.

CHAPTER XII.

A COWARDLY COMMUNICATION.

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"You doubtless know why I have come," said Stephen Foster, as he stepped into the room and closed the door. He looked penetratingly at the young man through a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses.

"I think I do, sir," Jack replied, "and I am very glad to see you. I rather expected a visit from you. Take a seat, please."

"Thank you—I prefer to stand. My business is very brief, Mr. Vernon. It is quite unnecessary to enter into discussions or explanations. You are aware, of course, that my daughter has told me everything. Do you consider that you have acted honorably—that your conduct has been what a gentleman's should be?"

"It has, sir. Appearances are a little against me, I admit, but I have a clear conscience, Mr. Foster. I love your daughter with all my heart, and I have no higher aim in life than to make her my wife. I am heartily glad of the opportunity to tell you this to your face. Believe me, it was not from choice that I stooped to clandestine meetings."

Stephen Foster laughed contemptuously.

"You took an unfair advantage of an innocent and trustful girl," he said. "My daughter is young, ignorant of the world, and she does not know her own mind. You have cast a spell over her, as it were. She defies me—she refuses to obey my orders. You have estranged us, Mr. Vernon, and brought a cloud into what was a happy home. I appeal to you, in a father's name, to release the girl from the ill-advised and foolish promises she made you."

"I cannot give her up, sir. I fear you do not understand how much Madge—Miss Foster—is to me. If words could prove my sincerity, my devotion to her—"

"Her marriage to you is out of the question."

"May I ask why?"

"My reasons do not concern you."

"But at least I am entitled to some explanation—it is no more than my due," said Jack. "Why do you object to me as a son-in-law? I am not a rake or an idler—you can easily satisfy yourself of my character, if you like. I am not a rich man, but I can offer your daughter a comfortable, even a luxurious, home. I have succeeded in my profession, and in another year I shall doubtless be making an income of two or three thousand pounds."

"I am ready to admit all that," was Stephen Foster's curt reply. "It does not alter the position, however."

“I suppose you have higher views for your daughter!” Jack cried, bitterly.

“Yes, I have,” Stephen Foster admitted, after a moment’s hesitation. “I don’t mind saying as much. But this interview has already lasted longer than I intended it should, Mr. Vernon. Have I appealed to you in vain?”

“With all proper respect to you, sir, I can answer you in only one way,” Jack replied, firmly. “Your daughter returns my affection, and she is a woman in ten thousand—a woman for whose love one might well count the world well lost. I cannot, I will not, give her up.”

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The young artist's declaration, strange to say, brought no angry response from Stephen Foster. For an instant the hard lines on his face melted away, and there was a gleam of something closely akin to admiration in his eyes; he actually made a half-movement to hold out his hand, but as quickly withdrew it. He turned and opened the door.

"Is this your last word?" he asked from the threshold.

"That rests with you. I cannot retreat from my position. Should I renounce your daughter, after winning her heart, I would deserve to be called—"

"Very well, sir," interrupted Stephen Foster. "I shall know what measures to take in the future. Forewarned is forearmed. And, by the way, to save you the trouble of hanging about Strand-on-the-Green, I may tell you that I have sent my daughter out of town on a visit."

With that parting shot he went down the short flight of steps, and passed into the street. Jack closed the door savagely, and began to walk up and down the studio, as restless as a caged beast.

"Here's a nice mess!" he reflected. "Angry parent, obdurate daughter, and all that sort of thing. But I rather fancy I scored—he gained nothing by his visit, and after he thinks the matter over he will probably take a more sensible view of it. His appeal to me shows clearly that he failed to make Madge yield."

On the whole, after further consideration, Jack concluded that there was no ground for despondency. His spirits rose as he recalled the girl's earnest and loving promises, her assurances of eternal fidelity.

"My darling will be true to me, come what may," he thought. "No amount of persuasion or threats can induce her to give me up, and in the end, when Stephen Foster is convinced of that, he will make the best of it and withdraw his objections. If Madge has been sent out of town, she went against her will. But, of course, she will manage to let me hear from her."

Jack sat down to his desk, intending to write a letter to a friend in Paris, a well-to-do artist who lived in the neighborhood of the Pare Monceaux. He held his pen undecidedly for a moment, and then leaned back in his chair with a puzzled countenance.

"By Jove, it's queer," he muttered; "but Stephen Foster's voice was awfully familiar. We never met before, and I never laid eyes on the man, so far as I can remember. I am mistaken. It is only a fancy. No—I have it! He suggests M. Felix Marchand—there is something in common in their speech, though it is very slight. What an odd coincidence!"

That it could possibly be more than a coincidence did not occur to Jack, and he would have laughed the idea to scorn. He dismissed the matter from his mind, wrote and posted the letter, and then went off to dine by appointment with Victor Nevill.

There was no word from Madge the next day, and it is to be feared that Jack's work suffered in consequence, and that Alphonse found him slightly irritable. But on the following morning a letter came in the well-known handwriting. It was very brief. The girl was *not* out of town, but was stopping near Regent's Park with an elderly maternal aunt who lived in Portland Terrace, and was addicted to the companionship of cockatoos and cats, not to speak of a brace of overfed, half-blind pugs.

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"I am in exile," the letter concluded, "and the dragon is a watchful jailer. But she sleeps in the afternoon, and at three o'clock to-morrow I will be inside the Charles street gate."

"To-morrow" meant to-day, and until lunch time Jack's brush flew energetically over the canvas. He was at the trysting-place at the appointed hour, and Madge was there waiting for him, so ravishingly dressed that he could scarcely resist the temptation to gather her in his arms. As they strolled through the park he rather gloomily described his visit from Stephen Foster, but the girl's half-smiling, half-tearful look of affection reassured him.

"You foolish boy!" she said, chidingly. "As if there were any danger of your losing me. Why, I wouldn't give you up if you wanted me to! I think you got the best of father, dear. He understands now, and by and by he will relent. He is a good sort, really, and you will like him when you know him better."

"We made a bad beginning," Jack said, ruefully.

They had reached the lake by this time, and they went on to a bench in a shady and sequestered spot. Madge's high spirits seemed suddenly to desert her, and she looked pensively across the glimmering water to the tall mansions of Hanover Terrace.

"Madge, something troubles you," her lover said, anxiously.

"Yes, Jack. I—I received an anonymous letter at noon. Mrs. Sedgewick forwarded it to me. Oh, it is shameful to speak of it—"

"An anonymous letter? There is nothing more vile or cowardly! Did it concern me?"

"Yes."

"And spoke badly of me?"

"It didn't say anything good."

"I wish I had the scoundrel by the throat! You have no idea who sent it?"

"None, dear. It was in a strange, scrawly hand, and was postmarked Paddington."

"It is a mystery I am powerless to explain," Jack said dismally. "To the best of my knowledge I have not an enemy in the world. I can recall no one who would wish to do me an ill turn. And the writer lied foully if he gave me a bad character, Madge. Where is the letter?"

"I destroyed it at once. I hated to see it, to touch it."

"I am sorry you did that. It might have contained some clew. Tell me all, Madge. Surely, darling, you don't believe—"

"Jack, how can you think so?" She glanced up at him with a tender, trustful, and yet half-distressed look in her eyes. "Forgive me, dear. It is not that I doubt you, but—but I must ask you one question. You are a free man? There is no tie that could forbid you to marry me?"

"I am a free man," Jack answered her solemnly. "Put such evil thoughts out of your mind, my darling. By the passionate love I feel for you, by my own honor, I swear that I have an honest man's right to make you mine. But, as I told you before, I had a reckless past—"

"I don't want to hear about it," Madge interrupted.

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No one was within sight or sound, so she put her arms about his neck and lifted her lips to his.

“Jack, you have made me so happy,” she whispered. “I will forget that false, wicked letter. I love you, love you, dear. And I will be your wife whenever you wish—”

Her voice broke, and he kissed a tear from her burning cheek.

“My Madge!” he said, softly. “Do you care so much for me?”

Half an hour later they parted at the Hanover Gate. As he turned his steps homeward, the cowardly anonymous letter lay heavily on his mind. Who could have written it, and what did it contain? He more than suspected that it referred to his youthful marriage with Diane Merode.

When he reached the studio he found on his desk a letter bearing a French stamp. He opened it curiously.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE TEMPTER.

“Just as I suspected!” Jack exclaimed. “I knew I couldn’t be mistaken. I have spotted the thief. The queer chap who bought my water-color sketches is the same who carried off the Rembrandt. How cleverly he worked his little game! But there my information stops, and I doubt if the police could make much out of it.”

The letter, which he had crumpled excitedly in his hand after reading it, was written in French; freely translated it ran as follows:

“No. 15, BOULEVARD DE COURCELLES, PARIS.

“My Dear Jack—I was rejoiced to hear from you, after so long a silence, and it gave me sincere pleasure to look into the matter of which you spoke. But I fear that my answers must be in the negative. It is certain that no such individual as M. Felix Marchand lives in or near the Pare Monceaux, where I have numerous acquaintances; nor do I find the name in the directory of Paris. Moreover, he is unknown to the dealer, Cambon, on the Quai Voltaire, of whom I made inquiries. So the matter rests. I am pleased to learn of your prosperity. When shall I see you once more in Lutetia?

“With amiable sentiments I inscribe myself,

“Your old friend,

“CHARLES JACQUIN.”

“I’ll take the earliest opportunity of seeing Lamb and Drummond,” Jack resolved. “The affair will interest them, and it may lead to something. But I shan’t bother about it—I didn’t value the picture very highly, and the thief almost deserves to keep it for his cleverness.”

During the next three days, however, Jack was too busy to carry out his plan—at least in the mornings. Not for any consideration would he have sacrificed his afternoons, for then he met Madge in Regent’s Park, and spent an hour or more with her, reckless of extortionate cab fares from Ravenscourt Park to the neighborhood of Portland Terrace. On the second night, dining in town, he met Victor Nevill, and had a long chat with him, the two going to a music-hall afterward. Jack was discreetly silent about his love affair, nor did he or Nevill refer to the little incident near Richmond Hill.

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At the end of the week Jack's opportunity came. He had finished some work on which he had been employed for several days, and soon after breakfast, putting on a frock coat and a top hat he went off to town. He presented a card at Lamb and Drummond's, and the senior partner of the firm, who knew him well by reputation, invited him into his private office. On learning his visitor's errand, Mr. Lamb evinced a keen interest in the subject. He listened attentively to the story, and asked various questions.

"Here is the letter from my friend in Paris," Jack concluded. "You will understand its import. It shows conclusively that M. Marchand came to my studio under a false name, and leaves no room for doubt that it was he who stole my duplicate Rembrandt."

"I agree with you, Mr. Vernon. It is a puzzling affair, and I confess I don't know what to make of it. But it is exceedingly interesting, and I am very glad that you have confided in me. I think it will be best if we keep our knowledge strictly to ourselves for the present."

"By all means."

"I except the detectives who are working on the case."

"Yes, of course. They are the proper persons to utilize the information," assented Jack. "It should not be made public."

"I never knew that a copy of Von Whele's picture was in existence," said Mr. Lamb. "I need hardly ask if it is a faithful one."

"I am afraid it is," Jack replied, smiling. "I worked slowly and carefully, and though I was a bit of an amateur in those days, I was more than satisfied with the result. The pictures were of the same size; and I really don't think many persons could have distinguished the one from the other."

"Could *you* do that now, supposing that both were before you, framed alike, and that the duplicate was cunningly toned to look as old as the original?"

"I should not hesitate an instant," Jack replied, "because it happens that I took the precaution of making a slight mark in one corner of my canvas."

"Ah, that was a clever idea—very shrewd of you! It may be of the greatest importance in the future."

"You have not yet given me your opinion of the mysterious Frenchman," Jack went on. "Do you believe that he was concerned in both robberies?"

"Circumstances seem to point that way, Mr. Vernon, do they not? Your picture was certainly taken before mine?"

“It was, without doubt.”

“Then, what object could the Frenchman have had in stealing the comparatively worthless duplicate, unless he counted on subsequently getting possession of the original?”

“It sounds plausible,” said Jack. “That’s just my way of looking at it. The advantage would be—”

“That the thieves would have two pictures, equally valuable to them, to dispose of secretly,” put in Mr. Lamb. “We may safely assume, then, that our enterprising burglars are in possession of a brace of Rembrandts. What they will do with them it is difficult to say. They will likely make no move at present, but it is possible that they will try to dispose of them in the Continental market or in America, in which case I have hopes that they will blunder into the hands of the police. Proper precautions have been taken both at home and abroad.”

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"Is there any clew yet?"

Mr. Lamb shook his head sadly.

"Not a ray of light has been thrown on the mystery," he replied, "though the best Scotland Yard men are at work. You may depend upon it that the insurance people, who stand to lose ten thousand pounds, will leave no stone unturned. As for Raper, our watchman, he has been discharged. Mr. Drummond and I are convinced that his story was true, but it was impossible to overlook his gross carelessness. We never knew that he was in the habit of going nightly to the public house in Crown Court."

"It's a wonder you were not robbed before," said Jack. "You have my address—will you let me know if anything occurs?"

"Certainly, Mr. Vernon. Must you be off? Good morning!"

Jack sauntered along Pall Mall, and turned up Regent street. At Piccadilly Circus he saw two men standing before the cigar shop on the corner. One was young and boyish looking. The other, a few years older, was of medium height and stout beyond proportion; he wore a tweed suit of a rather big check pattern, and the coat was buttoned over a scarlet waistcoat; the straw hat, gaudily beribboned, shaded a fat, jolly, half-comical face, of the type that readily inspires confidence. He was talking to his companion animatedly when he saw Jack approaching. With a boisterous exclamation of delight he rushed up to him and clapped him on the shoulder.

"Clare, old boy!" he cried.

"Jimmie Drexell!" Jack gasped in amazement. "Dear old chap, how awfully glad I am to see you!"

With genuine and heartfelt emotion they shook hands and looked into each other's eyes—these two who had not met for long years, since the rollicksome days of student life in Paris when they had been as intimate as brothers.

"You're fit as a king, my boy—not much changed," spluttered Drexell, with a strong American accent to his kindly, mellow voice. "I was going to look you up to-day—only landed at Southampton yesterday—got beastly tired of New York—yearned for London and Paris—shan't go back for six months or a year, hanged if I do."

"I'm jolly glad to hear it, Jimmie."

"We'll see a lot of each other—eh, old man? So, you've stuck to the name of Vernon? I called you Clare, didn't I? Yes, I forgot. You told me you had taken the other name when you wrote a couple of years ago. I haven't heard from you since, except through the papers. You've made a hit, I understand. Doing well?"

“Rather! I’ve no cause to complain. And you, Jimmie? What’s become of the art?”

“Chuckled it, Jack—it was no go. I painted like a blooming Turk—hired a studio—filled it with jimcrackery—got the best-looking models—wore a velvet coat and grew long hair. But it was all useless. I earned twenty-five dollars in three years. I had a picture in a dealer’s shop—his place burnt down—I made him fork over. Then a deceased relative left me \$150,000—said I deserved it for working so hard in Paris. A good one, eh? I leased the studio to the Salvation Army, and here I am, a poor devil of an artist out of work.”

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Jack laughed heartily.

"Art never was much in your line," he said, "though I remember how you kept pegging away at it. And no one can be more pleased than myself to learn that you've dropped into a fortune. Stick to it, Jimmie."

"There will be another one some day, Jack—when this is gone. By the way, I met old Nevill last night—dined with him. And that reminds me—"

He turned to his companion, the fresh-faced boy, and introduced him to Jack as the Honorable Bertie Raven. The two shook hands cordially, and exchanged a few commonplace words.

"Come on; we've held up this corner long enough," exclaimed Drexell. "Let's go and lunch together somewhere. I'll leave it to you, Raven. Name your place."

"Prince's, then," was the prompt rejoinder.

As they walked along Piccadilly the Honorable Bertie was forced ahead by the narrowness of the pavement and the jostling crowds, and Drexell whispered at Jack's ear:

"A good sort, that young chap. I met him in New York a year ago. His next eldest brother, the Honorable George, is over there now. I believe he is going to marry a cousin of mine—a girl who will come into a pot of money when her governor dies."

* * * * *

Nine o'clock at night, and a room in Beak street, Regent street; a back apartment looking into a dingy court, furnished with a sort of tawdry, depressing luxury, and lighted by a pair of candles. A richly dressed woman who had once been extremely handsome, and still retained more than a trace of her charms, half reclined on a couch; a fluffy mass of coppery-red hair had escaped from under her hat, and shaded her large eyes; shame and confusion, mingled with angry defiance, deepened the artificial blush on her cheeks.

Victor Nevill stood in the middle of the floor, confronting her with a faint, mocking smile at his lips. He had not taken the trouble to remove his hat. He wore evening dress, with a light cloak over it, and he twirled a stick carelessly between his gloved fingers.

"So it is really you!" he said.

"If you came to sneer at me, go!" the woman answered spitefully. "You have your revenge. How did you find me?"

“It was not easy, but I persevered—”

“Why?”

“For a purpose. I will tell you presently. And do not think that I came to sneer. I am sorry for you—grieved to find you struggling in the vortex of London.” He looked about the room, which, indeed, told a plain story. “You were intended for better things,” he added. “Where is Count Nordhoff?”

“He left me—three years ago.”

“I wouldn’t mind betting that you cleaned him out, and then heartlessly turned him adrift.”

“You are insolent!”

“And I dare say you have had plenty of others since. What has become of the Jew?”

The woman’s eyes flashed like a tiger’s.

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"I wish I had him here now!" she cried. "He deserted me—broke a hundred promises. I have not seen him for a week."

"You are suffering heavily for the past."

"For the past!" the woman echoed dully. "Victor," she said with a sudden change of voice, "*you* loved me once—"

"Yes, once. But you crushed that love—killed it forever. No stage sentiment, please. Understand that, plainly."

The brief hope died out of the woman's eyes, and was replaced by a gleam of hatred. She looked at the man furiously.

"There is no need to fly into a passion," said Nevill. "We can at least be friends. I cherish no ill-feeling—I pity you sincerely. And yet you are still beautiful enough to turn some men's heads. How are you off for money?"

The woman opened a purse and dashed a handful of silver to the floor.

"That is my all!" she cried, hoarsely.

"Then you must find a way out of your difficulties. I am going to have a serious talk with you."

Nevill drew a chair up to the couch, and his first words roused the woman's interest. He spoke for ten minutes or more, now in whispers, now with a rising inflection; now persuasively, now with well-feigned indignation and scorn. The effect which his argument had on his companion was shown by the swift changes that passed over her face; she interrupted him frequently, asking questions and making comments. At the end the woman rustled her silken skirts disdainfully, and rose to her feet.

"Why do you suggest this, Victor?" she demanded. "Where do *you* come in?"

Nevill seemed slightly disconcerted.

"I am foolish enough to feel an interest in a person I once cared for," he replied. "I want to save you from ruin that is inevitable if you continue in your present course."

"It is kind of you, Victor Nevill," the woman answered sneeringly. "He has a personal motive," she thought. "What can it be?"

"The thing is so simple, so natural," said Nevill, "that I wonder you hesitate. Of course you will fall in with it."

“Suppose I refuse?”

“I can’t credit you with such madness.”

“But what if—” She leaned toward him and whispered a short sentence in his ear. His face turned the color of ashes, and he clutched her wrist so tightly that she winced with pain.

“It is a lie!” he cried, brutally. “By heavens, if I believed—”

The woman laughed—a laugh that was not pleasant to hear.

“Fool! do you think I would tell you if it was true?” she said. “I was only jesting.”

“It is not a subject to jest about,” Nevill answered stiffly. “I came here to do you a good turn, and—”

“You had better have kept away. You are a fiend—you are a Satan himself! Why do you tempt me? Do you think that I have no conscience, no shame left? I am bad enough, Victor Nevill, but by the memory of the past—of what I threw away—I can’t stoop so low as to—”

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"Your heroics are out of place," he interrupted. "Go to the devil your own way, if you like."

"You shall have an answer to-morrow—to-morrow! Give me time to think about it."

The woman sank down on the couch again; her over-wrought nerves gave way, and burying her face in the cushions she sobbed hysterically. Nevill looked at her for a moment. Then he put a couple of sovereigns on the table and quietly left the room.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE DINNER AT RICHMOND.

Three days later, at the unusually early hour of nine in the morning, Victor Nevill was enjoying his sponge bath. There appeared to be something of a pleasing nature on his mind, for as he dressed he smiled complacently at his own reflection in the glass. Having finished his toilet, he did not ring immediately for his breakfast. He sat down to his desk, and drew pen, ink and paper before him.

"My Dear Jack" he wrote, "will you dine with me at the Roebuck to-morrow night? Jimmie Drexell is coming, and I am going to drive him down. We will stop and pick you up on the way. An answer will oblige, if not too much trouble."

He put the invitation in an envelope and addressed it. Then he pulled the bell-cord, and a boy shortly entered the room with a tray containing breakfast and a little heap of letters. Nevill glanced over his correspondence carelessly—they were mostly cards for receptions and tradesmen's accounts—until he reached a letter bearing a foreign stamp. It was a long communication, and the reading of it caused him anything but satisfaction, to judge from the frown that gathered on his features.

"I wouldn't have credited Sir Lucius with such weakness," he muttered angrily. "What has possessed him?—and after all these years! He says his conscience troubles him! He fears he was too cruel and hard-hearted! Humph! it's pleasant for me, I must say. Fancy him putting *me* on the scent—asking *me* to turn private detective! I suppose I'll have to humor him, or pretend to. It will be the safest course. Can there be any truth in his theory, I wonder? No, I don't think so. And after such a lapse of time the task would be next to impossible. I will be a fool if I let the thing worry me."

Victor Nevill locked the offending letter in his desk, vowing that he would forget it. But that was easier said than done, and his gloomy countenance and preoccupied air showed how greatly he was disturbed. His breakfast was quite spoiled, and he barely tasted his coffee and rolls. With a savage oath he put on his hat, and went down into Jermyn street. He walked slowly in the direction of the Albany, where Jimmie Drexell had been fortunate enough to secure a couple of chambers.

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The afternoon post brought Jack the invitation to dinner for the following night, and he answered it at once. He accepted with pleasure, but told Nevill not to stop for him on the way to Richmond. He would not be at home after lunch, he wrote, but would turn up at the Roebuck on time. Having thus disposed of the matter, he went to town, and he and Drexell dined together and spent the evening at the Palace, where the newest attraction was an American dancer with whom the susceptible Jimmie had more than a nodding acquaintance, a fact that possibly had something to do with his hasty visit to London.

Jack worked hard the next day—he had a lot of lucrative commissions on hand, and could not afford to waste much time. It was three o'clock when he left the studio, and half an hour later he was crossing Kew Bridge. He turned up the river, along the towing-path, and near the old palace he joined Madge. She had written to him a couple of days before, announcing her immediate return from Portland Terrace, and arranged for a meeting.

It was a perfect afternoon of early summer, with a cloudless sky and a refreshing breeze. It cast a spell over the lovers, and for a time they were silent as they trod the grassy path, with the rippling Thames, dotted with pleasure-craft, flowing on their right. Jack stole many a glance at the lovely, pensive face by his side. He was supremely happy, in a dreamy mood, and not a shadow of the gathering storm marred his content.

"It was always a beautiful world, Madge," he said, "but since you came into my life it has been a sort of a paradise. Work is a keener pleasure now—work for your sake. Existence is a dreary thing, if men only knew it, without a good, pure woman's love."

The girl's face was rapturous as she looked up at him; she clung caressingly to his arm.

"You regret nothing, dearest?" he asked.

"Nothing, Jack. How could I?"

"You have been very silent."

"You can't read a woman's heart, dear. If I was silent, it was because I was so happy—because the future, our future, seemed so bright. There is only the one little cloud—"

"Your father?" he interrupted. "Is he still relentless, Madge?"

"I think he is softening. He has been much kinder to me since I came home. He does not mention your name, and he has not forbidden me to see you or write to you. I should not have hesitated to tell him that I was going to meet you to-day. He knows that I won't give you up."

“And, knowing that, he will make the best of it,” Jack said, gladly. “He will come round all right, I feel sure. And now I want to ask you something, Madge, dear. You won’t make me wait long, will you?”

She averted her eyes and blushed. Jack drew her to a lonely bench near the moat, and they sat down.

“I will tell you why I ask,” he went on. “I got a letter this morning from a man who wants to buy my Academy pictures. He offers a splendid price—more than I hoped for—and I will put it aside for our honeymoon. Life is short enough, and we ought to make the most of it. Madge, what do you say? Will you marry me early in September? That is a glorious month to be abroad, roaming on the Continent—”

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"It is so soon, Jack."

"To me it seems an age. You will consent if your father does?"

"Yes, I will."

"And if he refuses?"

The girl nestled closer to him, and looked into his face with laughing eyes.

"Then, I am afraid I shall have to disobey him, dear. If you wish it I will be your wife in September."

"My own sweet Madge!" he cried.

All his passionate love was poured out in those four little words. He forgot the past, and saw only the rich promise of the future. There was a lump in his throat as he added softly:

"You shall never repent your choice, darling!"

For an hour they sat on the bench, talking as they had never talked before, and many a whispered confidence of the girl's, many a phrase and sentence, burnt into Jack's memory to haunt him afterward. Then they parted, there by the riverside, and Madge tripped homeward.

Happy were Jack's reflections as he picked up a cab that rattled him swiftly into Richmond and up the famous Hill to the Roebuck. Nevill and Jimmie Drexell, who had arrived a short time before, greeted him hilariously.

The table was laid for Nevill and his guests in the coffee-room of the Roebuck, as cheerful and snug a place as can be found anywhere, with its snowy linen and shining silver and cut-glass, its buffet temptingly spread, and on the walls a collection of paintings that any collector might envy.

The Roebuck's *chef* was one of the best, and the viands served were excellent; the rare old wines gurgled and sparkled from cobwebbed bottles that had lain long in bin. The dinner went merrily, the evening wore on, and the sun dipped beneath the far-off Surrey Hills.

"This is a little bit of all right, my boys," said Jimmie, quoting London slang, as he stirred his *creme de menthe frappe* with a straw. "I'm jolly glad I crossed the pond. Many's the time I longed for a glimpse of Richmond and the river while I sweltered in the heat on the Casino roof-garden. Here's to 'Dear Old London Town,' in the words of—who *did* write that song?"

Nevill drained his chartreuse.

“Come, let’s go and have a turn on the Terrace,” he said. “It’s too early to drive back to town.”

They lighted their cigars and filed down stairs, laughing gaily, and crossed the road. Jack was the merriest of the three. Little did he dream that he was going to meet his fate.

CHAPTER XV.

FROM THE DEAD.

There were not many people about town. The strollers had gone back to town, or down the hill to their dinners. The Terrace, and the gardens that dropped below it to the Thames, were bathed in the purplish opalescent shades of evening. From the windows of the Roebuck streamed a shaft of light, playing on the trunks of the great trees, and gleaming the breadth of the graveled walk. It shone full on Nevill and his companions, and it revealed a woman coming along the Terrace from the direction of the Star and Garter; she was smartly dressed, and stepped with a graceful, easy carriage.

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"Look!" whispered Jimmie. "The Lass of Richmond Hill! There's something nice for you."

"Not for me," Jack laughed.

The woman, coming opposite to the three young men, shot a bold glance at them. She stopped with a little scream, and pressed one hand agitatedly to her heart.

"Jack!" she cried in an eager whisper. "My Jack!"

That once familiar voice woke the chords of his memory, bridged the gulf of years. His blood seemed to turn to ice in his veins. He stared at the handsome face, with its expression of mingled insolence and terror—met the scrutiny of the large, flashing eyes. Then doubt fled. His brain throbbed, and the world grew black.

"Diane! My God!" fell from his lips.

"Fancy *her* turning up!" Nevill whispered to Drexell.

"It's a bad business," Jimmie replied; he, as well as Nevill, had known Diane Merode while she was Jack's wife.

The woman came closer; she shrugged her shoulders mockingly.

"Jack—my husband," she said. "Have you no welcome for me?"

With a bitter oath he caught her arm. His face indicated intense emotion, which he vainly tried to control.

"Yes, it is you!" he said, hoarsely. "You have come back from the grave to wreck my life. I heard you were dead, and I believed it—"

"You read it in a Paris paper," interrupted Diane, speaking English with a French accent. "It was a lie—a mistake. It was not I who was dragged from the river and taken to the Morgue. It would have been better so, perhaps. Jack, why do you glare at me? Listen, I am not as wicked as you think. There were circumstances—I was not to blame. I can explain all—"

"Hush, or I will kill you!" he said, fiercely. He snatched at a chain that encircled her white throat, and as it broke in his grasp a sparkling jewel fell to the ground. The most stinging name that a man can call a woman hissed from his clenched teeth. She shrank back, terrified, into the shadow, and he followed her. "Are you dead to all shame, that you dare to make yourself known to me?" he cried. "The life you lead is blazoned on your painted cheeks! You are no wife of mine! Begone! Out of my sight! Merciful God, what have I done to deserve this?"

“For Heaven’s sake, don’t make a scene!” urged Jimmie. “Control yourself, old man.” He looked anxiously about, but as yet the altercation had not been observed by the few persons in the vicinity. “Nevill, we must stop this,” he added.

“I *won’t* go away,” Diane vowed, obstinately. “You are my husband, Jack, and you know it. Let your friends, who knew us in the old days, deny it if they can! I have a wife’s claim on you.”

“Take her away!” Jack begged.

Nevill drew the woman to one side, and though she made a show of resistance at first, she quickly grew calm and listened quietly to his whispered words. He whistled for a passing hansom, and it stopped at the edge of the street. He helped Diane into it, and rejoined his companions.

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"It's all right—she is reasonable now," he said in a low voice. "Brace up, Jack; I'll see you through this. Jimmie, go over and pay the account, will you? Here is the money. And say that I will send for the trap to-morrow."

Nevill entered the cab, and it rattled swiftly down the hill. As the echo of the wheels died away, Jack dropped on a bench and hid his face in his hands.

"I'll be back in a moment, old chap," said Jimmie. "Wait here."

He had scarcely crossed the street when Jack rose. His agony seemed too intense to bear, and even yet he did not realize all that the blow meant. For the moment he was hardly responsible for his actions, and a glimpse of the river, shining far below, lured him on blindly and aimlessly. A little farther along the Terrace, just beyond the upper side of the gardens, was a footway leading down to the lower road and the Thames. He followed this, swaying like a drunken man, and he had reached the iron stile at the bottom when Jimmie, who had sighted him in the distance, overtook him and caught his arm. Jack shook him roughly off.

"What do you want?" he said, hoarsely.

"Don't take it so hard," pleaded Jimmie. "I'm awfully sorry for you, old man. I know it's a knock-down blow, but—"

"You don't know half. It's worse than you think. I am the most miserable wretch on earth! And an hour ago I was the happiest—"

"Come with me," said Jimmie. "That's a good fellow."

Jack did not resist. Linked arm in arm with his friend, he stumbled along the narrow pavement of the lower road. At The Pigeons they found a cab that had just set down a fare. They got into it, and Jimmie gave the driver his orders.

It seemed a short ride to Jack, and while it lasted not a word passed his lips. He sat in a stupor, with dull, burning eyes and a throbbing head. In all his thoughts he recalled the lovely, smiling face of Madge. And now she was lost to him forever—there was a barrier between them that severed their lives. In his heart he bitterly cursed the day when he had yielded to the wiles of Diane Merode, the popular dancer of the Folies Bergere.

The cab stopped, and he reeled up a dark flight of steps. He was sitting in a big chair in his studio, with the gas burning overhead, and Jimmie staring at him with an expression of heartfelt sympathy on his honest face.

"This was the best place to bring you," he said.

Jack rose, and paced to and fro. He looked haggard and dazed; his hair and clothing were disheveled.

“Tell me, Jimmie,” he cried, “is it all a dream, or is it true?”

“I wish it wasn’t true, old man. But you’re taking it too hard—you’re as white as a ghost. It can be kept out of the papers, you know. And you won’t have to live with her—you can pension her off and send her abroad. I dare say she’s after money. Women are the very devil, Jack, ain’t they? I could tell you about a little scrape of my own, with Totsy Footlights, of the Casino—”

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"You don't understand," said Jack, in a dull, hard voice. "I believed that Diane was dead."

"Of course you did—you showed me the paragraph in the *Petit Journal*."

"I considered myself a free man—free to marry again."

"Whew! Go on!"

Jack was strangely calm as he took out his keys and unlocked a cabinet over his desk. He silently handed his friend a photograph.

"By Jove, what a lovely face!" muttered Jimmie.

"That is the best and dearest girl in the world," said Jack. "I thought I was done with women until I met her, a short time ago. We love each other, and we were to be married in September. And now—My God, this will break her heart! It has broken mine already, Jimmie! Curse the day I first put foot in Paris!"

"My poor old chap, this *is*—"

That was all Jimmie could say. He vaguely realized that he was in the presence of a grief beyond the power of words to comfort. There was a suspicious moisture in his eyes as he turned abruptly to the table and mixed himself a mild stimulant. He drank it slowly to give himself time to think.

Jack thrust the photograph into the breast pocket of his coat. He rubbed one hand through his hair, and kicked an easel over. He burst into a harsh, unnatural laugh.

"This is a rotten world!" he cried. "A rotten world! It's a stage full of actors, and they play d—— little but tragedy! I've found my long-lost wife again, Jimmie! Rejoice with me!"

He poured three fingers of neat brandy into a glass and drank it at a gulp. Then the mocking laughter died on his lips, and he threw himself into a chair. He buried his face in his hands, and his body shook with the violence of the sobs he was powerless to stifle.

"It will do him good," thought Jimmie.

The clock ticked on, and at intervals there was the rumble of trains passing to and from Ravenscourt Park station, and the clang of distant tram-bells. The voice of mighty London mocked at Jack's misery, and he conquered his emotions. He lifted a defiant face, much flushed.

"I've made a beastly fool of myself, Jimmie."

"Not a bit of it, old chap. Brace up; some one is coming." He had heard a cab stop in the street.

There were rapid steps on the stairs, and Nevill entered the studio. His face was eloquent with sympathy, and he silently held out a hand. Jack gripped it tightly.

"Thanks, Vic," he said, gratefully. "Where did—did you take her?"

"To her lodgings, off Regent street. And then I came straight on here. I thought she was dead, Jack. I don't wonder you're upset."

"Upset? It's worse than that. If I were the only one to suffer—"

"Then there's another woman?"

"Yes!"

"That's bad! I didn't dream of such a thing. I can't tell you how sorry I feel."

Nevill sat down and lighted a cigar; he thoughtfully watched the smoke curl up.

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"I suppose I could get a divorce?" Jack asked, savagely.

"No doubt of it, but—"

"But you wouldn't advise me to do it. No, you're right. I couldn't stand the publicity and disgrace."

"I would like to choke her," muttered Jimmie.

"I had a talk with her on the way to town," said Nevill. "She has been in London for a month, and knew your address all the time, but did not wish to see you. Now she is hard up, and that is why she made herself known to you to-night."

"What became of the scoundrel she ran away with? Did he desert her?"

"Yes," Nevill answered, after a brief hesitation.

"Do you know who he was?"

"She intimated that he was a French Count. I believe she has had several others since, and the last one left her stranded."

"She wants money, then?"

"Rather. That's her game. She knows she has no legal claim on you, and for a fixed sum I think she will agree to return to Paris and not molest you in future."

"I don't care what becomes of her," Jack replied, bitterly, "but I am determined not to see her again. Let her understand that, and tell her that I will give her three hundred pounds on condition that she goes abroad and never shows her face in England again. And another thing, there must be no further appeals to me."

"Bind her tight, in writing," suggested Jimmie.

"It's asking a lot of you, Nevill," said Jack, "but if you don't mind—"

"My dear fellow, it is a mere trifle. I will gladly help you in the matter to my utmost power, and I only wish I could do more."

"That's the way to talk," put in Jimmie. "Can I be of any assistance, Nevill? I've a persuasive sort of way with women—"

"Thanks, but I can manage much better alone, I think." Nevill took a memorandum book from his pocket, and turned over the pages. "Trust all to me, Jack," he added. "I am

free to-morrow after four o'clock. I will see Diane—your wife—fix the terms with her, and come down in the evening to report to you."

"What time?"

"That is uncertain. But you will be here?"

"Yes; I shall expect you," said Jack. "I can't thank you enough. It's a blessing for a chap to have a couple of friends like you and Jimmie."

"You would do as much for me," replied Nevill. "I'm going to see you through your trouble."

Jack walked abruptly to the open window, and looked out into the starry night.

"What does it matter," he thought, "whether I am rid of Diane or not? I have lost my darling. Madge is dead to me. I can't grasp it yet. How can I tell her?—how can I live without her?"

"Are you going up to town, Jimmie?" Nevill asked. "My cab is waiting, and you can share it."

"No; I shall stop with poor old Jack," Jimmie replied. "I don't like to leave him alone."

"That's good of you. It's a terrible blow, isn't it?"

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Nevill went away, and Jimmie remained to comfort his friend. But there was no consolation for Jack, whose bitter mood had turned to dull despair and grief that would be more poignant in the morning, when he would be better able to comprehend the fell blow that had shattered his happiness and crushed his ambitions and dreams. He refused pipe and cigars. Until three o'clock he sat staring vacantly at the floor, seemingly oblivious of Jimmie's presence, and occasionally helping himself to brandy. At last he fell asleep in the chair, and Jimmie, who had with difficulty kept his eyes open, dozed away on the couch.

Meanwhile, Victor Nevill had driven straight to his rooms in Jermyn street and had gone to bed. He rose about ten o'clock, and after a light breakfast he sat down and wrote a short letter, cleverly disguising his own hand, and imitating the scrawly penmanship and bad spelling of an illiterate woman.

"The last card in the game," he reflected, as he addressed and stamped the envelope. "It may be superfluous, in case he sees or writes to her to-day. But he won't do that—he will put off the ordeal as long as possible. My beautiful Madge, for your sake I am steeping myself in infamy! It is not the first time a man has sold himself to the devil for a woman. Yet why should I feel any scruples? It would have been far worse to let them go on living in their fool's paradise."

An hour later, as he walked down Regent street, he posted the letter he had written in the morning.

"It will be delivered at just about the right time," he thought.

CHAPTER XVI.

THE LAST CARD.

It was nine o'clock in the evening, and darkness had fallen rather earlier than usual, owing to a black, cloudy sky that threatened rain. Jimmie Drexell had gone during the afternoon, and Jack was alone in the big studio—alone with his misery and his anguish. He had scarcely tasted food since morning, much to the distress of Alphonse. He looked a mere wreck of his former self—haggard and unshaven, with hard lines around his weary eyes. He had not changed his clothes, and they were wrinkled and untidy. Across the polished floor was a perceptible track, worn by hours of restless striding to and fro. Now, after waiting impatiently for Victor Nevill, and wondering why he did not come, Jack had tried to nerve himself to the task that he dreaded, that preyed incessantly on his mind. He knew that the sooner it was over the better. He must write to Madge and tell her the truth—deal her the terrible blow that might break her innocent, loving heart.

“It’s no use—I can’t do it,” he said hoarsely, when he had been sitting at his desk for five minutes. “The words won’t come. My brain is dry. Would it be better to try to see her, and tell her all face to face? No—anything but that!”

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Thrusting pen and paper from him, he rose and went to the liquor-stand. The cut-glass bottle containing brandy dropped from his shaking hand and was shattered to fragments. The crash drowned the opening of the studio door, and as he surveyed the wreck he heard footsteps, and turned sharply around, expecting to see Nevill. Diane stood before him, in a costume that would have better suited a court presentation; the shaded gas-lamps softened the rouge and pearl-powder on her cheeks, and lent her a beauty that could never have survived the test of daylight. Her expression was one of half defiance, half mute entreaty.

The audacity of the woman staggered Jack, and for an instant he was speechless with indignation. His dull, bloodshot eyes woke to a fiery wrath.

"You!" he cried. "How dare you come here? Go at once!"

"Not until I am ready," she replied, looking at him unflinchingly. "One would think that my presence was pollution."

"It is—you know that. Did Nevill permit you to come? Have you seen him?"

"No; I kept out of his way. He is searching for me in town now, I suppose. It was you I wanted to see."

"You are dead to all shame, or you would never have come to London. I don't know what you want, and I don't care. I won't listen to you, and unless you leave, by heavens, I will call the police and have you dragged out!"

"I hardly think you will do that," said Diane. "I am going presently, if you will be a little patient. I am your wife, Jack—"

He laughed bitterly.

"You were once—you are not now. If I thought it would be any punishment to you, that disgrace could soil *you*, I would take advantage of the law and procure a divorce."

"I am your wife," she repeated, "but I do not intend to claim my rights. We were both to blame in the past—"

"That is false!" he cried. "You only were to blame—I have nothing to reproach myself with, except that I was a mad fool when I married you for your pretty face. You tried to pull me down to your own level—the level of the Parisian kennels. You squandered my money, tempted me to reckless extravagances, and when the shower of gold drew near its end, you ran off with some scoundrel who no doubt proved as simple a victim as myself. I trusted you, and my honor was betrayed. But you did me a greater wrong when you allowed me to believe that you were dead. By heavens, when I think of it all —"

“You forget that we drifted apart toward the last,” Diane interrupted. “Was that entirely my fault? I believed that you no longer cared for me, and it made me reckless.” There was a sudden ring of sincerity in her voice, and the insolent look in her eyes was replaced by a softer expression. “I did wrong,” she added. “I am all that you say I am. I have sinned and suffered. But is there no pity or mercy in your heart? Remember the past—that first year when we loved each other and were happy. Wait; I have nearly finished. I am going out of your life forever—it is the only atonement I can make. But will you let me go without a sign of forgiveness?—without a soft word?”

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For a moment there was silence. Diane waited with rigid face. She had forgotten the purpose that brought her to the studio—a womanly impulse, started to life by the memories of the past, had softened her heart. But Jack, blinded by passion and his great wrongs, little dreamed of the chance that he was throwing away.

“You talk of forgiveness!” he cried. “Why, I only wonder that I can keep my hands off your throat. I hate the sight of you—I curse the day I first saw your face! Do you know what you have done, by letting me believe that you were dead? You have probably broken the heart of one who is as good and pure as you are vile and treacherous—the woman whom I love and would have married.”

Diane’s features hardened, and a sudden rage flashed in her half-veiled eyes; her repentant impulse died as quickly.

“So that is your answer!” she exclaimed, harshly. “And there is another woman! You shall never marry her—never!”

“You fiend!”

The threat goaded Jack to fury, and he might have lost his self-control. But just then quick footsteps fell timely on his ear.

“Get behind that screen, or go into the next room,” he muttered. “No; it won’t matter—it must be Nevill.”

Diane held her ground.

“I don’t care who it is,” she said, shrilly. “I will tell the world that I am your wife.”

The next instant the door was thrown open, and a woman entered the studio and came hesitatingly forward under the glare of the gas-jets. With a rapid movement she partly tore off her long, hooded cloak, which was dripping with rain. Jack quivered as though he had been struck a blow.

“Madge!” he gasped, recognizing the lovely, agitated face.

The girl caught her breath, and looked from one to the other—from the painted and powdered woman to the man who had won her love. Her bosom heaved, and her flushed cheeks turned to the whiteness of marble.

“Jack, tell me—is it true?” she pleaded, struggling with each word. “I should not have come, but—but I received this an hour ago.” She flung a crumpled letter at his feet, and he picked it up mechanically. “It said that I would find you here with your—your—” She could not utter the word. “I had to come,” she added. “I could not rest. And now—who is that woman? Speak!”

No answer. Jack's lips and throat were dry, and a red mist was before his eyes.

"Is she your wife?"

"God help me, yes!" Jack cried, hoarsely. "I can explain. Believe me, Madge, I was not false—I told you only the truth. If you will listen to me for a moment—"

She shrank from him with horror, and the color surged back to her cheeks.

"Don't touch me!" she cried. "Let me go—this is no place for me! I pray heaven to forgive you, Jack!"

The look that she gave him, so full of unspeakable agony and reproach, cut him like a knife. She pressed one hand to her heart, and with the other tried to draw her cloak around her. She swayed weakly, but recovered herself in time. Jack, watching her as a man might watch the gates of paradise close upon him, had failed to hear a cab stop in the street. He suddenly saw Stephen Foster in the room.

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"Is my daughter here?" he excitedly demanded.

Madge turned at the sound of her father's voice, and sank, half-fainting, into his arms. Tears came to her relief, and she shook with the violence of her sobs.

Stephen Foster looked from Diane to Jack. Madge had shown him the anonymous letter, and he needed not to ask if the charge was true.

"You blackguard!" he cried, furiously. "You dastardly scoundrel!"

"I do not deserve those words!" Jack said, hoarsely, "but I cannot resent them. From any other man, under other circumstances—"

"Coward and liar!"

With that Stephen Foster turned to the door, with Madge leaning heavily on him. They passed down the stairs, and the rattle of wheels told that they had gone. Jack was left alone with Diane.

"Are you satisfied with your devil's work?" he demanded, glaring at her with burning, bloodshot eyes.

"It was not my fault."

"Not your fault? By heavens—"

He looked at the crumpled letter he held, and saw that it was apparently written by a woman. A suspicion that as quickly became a certainty flashed into his mind.

"*You* sent this, and the other one as well," he exclaimed. "Don't deny it! You planned the meeting here—"

"It is false, Jack! I swear to you that I know nothing of it—"

"Perjurer!" he snarled.

His face was like a madman's as he caught her arm in a cruel grip. She cowered before him, dropping to her knees. She was pale with fear.

"Go, or I will kill you!" he cried, disregarding her protestations of innocence. "I can't trust myself! Out of my sight—let me never see you or hear of you again. I will give you money to leave London—to return to Paris. Nevill will arrange it. Do you understand?"

He lifted her to her feet and pushed her from him. She staggered against an easel on which was a completed picture in oils, and it fell with a crash. Jack trampled over it ruthlessly, driving his feet through the canvas.

“Go!” he cried.

And Diane, trembling with terror, went swiftly out into the black and rainy night.

An hour later, when Victor Nevill came to say that his search had been fruitless, he found Jack stretched full length on the couch, with his face buried in a soft cushion.

CHAPTER XVII.

TWO PASSENGERS FROM CALAIS.

It was the 9th of November, Lord Mayor’s Day, and in London the usual clammy compound of fog and mist—was there ever a Lord Mayor’s Day without it?—hung like a shroud in the city streets, though it was powerless to chill the ardor of the vast crowds who waited for the procession to come by in all its pomp and pageantry.

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At Dover the weather was as bad, but in a different way. Leaden clouds went scudding from horizon to horizon, accentuating the chalky whiteness of the cliffs, and reflecting their sombre hue on the gray waters. A cold, raw wind swept through the old town, lashing the sea to milk-crested waves. It was an ugly day for cross-Channel passages, but the expectant onlookers sighted the black smoke of the *Calais-Douvres* fully twenty minutes before she was due. The steamer's outline grew more distinct. On she came, pitching and rolling, until knots of people could be seen on the fore-deck.

The majority of the passengers, excepting a few Frenchmen and other foreigners, were heartily glad to be at home again, after sojourns of various lengths on the Continent. Two, in particular, could scarcely restrain their impatience as they looked eagerly landward, though the social gulf that separated them was as wide as the Channel itself. On the upper deck, exposed to the buffeting of the wind, stood a short, portly gentleman in a dark-blue suit and cape-coat; he had a soldierly carriage, a ruddy complexion, and an iron-gray mustache. Sir Lucius Chesney was in robust health again, and his liver had ceased to trouble him. Norway had pulled him together, and a few months of aimless roaming on the Continent had done the rest. He was anxious to get back to Priory Court, among his pictures and hot-houses, his horses and cattle, and he intended to go there after a brief stop in London.

Down below, among the second-class passengers, Mr. Noah Hawker paced to and fro, gazing meditatively toward the Shakespeare Cliff. Mr. Hawker, to give him the name by which he was known in Scotland Yard circles, was a man of fifty, five feet nine in height, and rather stockily built. He was lantern-jawed and dark-haired, with a coarse, black mustache curled up at the ends like a pair of buffalo horns, and so strong a beard that his cheeks were the color of blue ink, though he had shaved only three hours before. His long frieze overcoat, swinging open, disclosed beneath a German-made suit of a bad cut and very loud pattern. His soft hat, crushed in, was perched to one side; a big horseshoe pin and a scarlet cravat reposed on a limited space of pink shirt-front.

There was about one chance in ten of guessing his calling. He looked equally like a successful sporting man, an ex-prize fighter, a barman, a racing tout, a book-maker, or a public house thrower-out. But the most unprejudiced observer would never have taken him for a gentleman.

It was a thrilling moment when the *Calais-Douvres*, slipping between the waves, ran close in to the granite pier. She accomplished the feat safely, and was quickly made fast. The gangway was thrown across, and there was a mad rush of passengers hurrying to get ashore. A babel of shouting voices broke loose: "London train ready!" "Here you are, sir!" "Luggage, sir?" "Extry! extry!"

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Sir Lucius Chesney, who was rarely disturbed by anything, showed on this occasion a fussy solicitude about his trunks and boxes; nor was he appeased until he had seen them all on a truck, waiting for the inspection of the customs officers. Mr. Hawker, slouching along the pier with his ulster collar turned up and his hat well down over his eyes, observed the military-looking gentleman and then the prominent white-lettered name on the luggage. He passed on after an instant's hesitation.

"Sir Lucius Chesney!" he muttered. "It's queer, but I'll swear I've heard that name before. Now, where could it have been? The bloke's face ain't familiar—I never ran across him. But the name? Ah, hang me if I don't think I've got it!"

Mr. Hawker did not get into the London train, though his goal was the metropolis. He left the pier, and as he walked with apparent carelessness through the town—he had no luggage—he took an occasional crafty survey over his shoulder, as a man might do who feared that he was being shadowed. When the train rattled out of Dover he was in the public bar of a tavern not far from the Lord Warden Hotel, fortifying himself with a brandy-and-soda after the rough passage across the Channel. Meanwhile, Sir Lucius Chesney, seated in a first-class carriage, was regarding with an ecstatic expression the one piece of luggage that he had refused to trust to the van. This was a flat leather case, and it contained something of much greater importance than the dress-suit for which it was intended.

Dover was honored by Mr. Hawker's presence until three o'clock in the afternoon, and he took advantage of the intervening couple of hours to eat a hearty meal and to count his scanty store of money, after which he dozed on a bench in the restaurant until roused by a waiter. There are two railway stations in the town, and he chose the inner one. He found an empty third-class compartment, and his relief was manifest when the train pulled out. He produced a short briar-root pipe, and stuffed it with the last shreds of French Caporal tobacco that remained in his pouch.

"Give me the shag of old England," he said to himself, as he puffed away with a poor relish and watched the flying sides of the deep railway cutting. "This is no class—it's cabbage leaf soaked in juice. I wonder if I ain't a fool to come back! But it can't be helped—there was nothing to be picked up abroad, after that double stroke of hard luck. And there's no place like London! I'll be all right if I dodge the ferrets at Victoria. For the last ten years they've only known me clean-shaven or with a heavy beard, and this mustache and the rig will puzzle them a bit. Yes, I ought to pass for a foreign gent come across to back horses."

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The truth about Mr. Noah Hawkins, though it may shock the reader, must be told in plain words. He was a professional burglar; none of your petty, clumsy craftsmen that get lagged for smashing a shopkeeper's till, but a follower to some extent in the footsteps of the masterful Charles Peace. During the previous February he had come out of Dartmoor—it was his third term of penal servitude—with a period of police supervision to undergo. For the space of four months he regularly reported himself, and then, in company with a pal of even higher professional standing than himself, he suddenly disappeared from London.

A well-planned piece of work, cleverly performed, made it advantageous to the couple to go abroad. It was a question of money, not dread of discovery and arrest; they had covered their tracks well, and they believed that no suspicion could fall upon them. They were not prepared for the ill-luck that awaited them on the Continent. Their fruit of hope turned to ashes of despair, or very nearly so. They realized but a fraction of the sum they had expected, and Hawker lost his share of even that through the treachery of his pal, who departed by night from the German town where they were stopping. So Hawker started for home, and he had landed at Dover with, two sovereigns and a few silver coins. He still believed that the police were ignorant of the business that had taken him abroad; the worst that he feared was getting into trouble for failing to report himself.

"There isn't much danger if I'm sharp," he thought, as the Kentish landscape, the Garden of England, sped by him in the gathering dusk; "and I won't touch a crib of any sort till I've tried those other two lays. It's more than doubtful about the papers—I forget what was in them. And they may be gone by this time. But, leaving that out, I've got a pretty sure thing up my sleeve. What happened in Germany put me on the track—but for that I wouldn't have suspected. I'll make somebody fork over to a stiff tune, and serve him d—— right. It's the first time I was caught napping."

The endless chimney-pots and glowing lights of the great city gladdened Hawker's heart, and a whiff from the murky Thames bade him welcome home. He gave up his ticket at Grosvenor road, and when the train pulled into Victoria he walked boldly through the immense station. He loved London with a thoroughbred cockney's passion, and he exulted in the sights and sounds around him.

Hawker spent his last coppers for a packet of tobacco, and broke one of his sovereigns to get a drink. He speedily lost himself in the crowds of Victoria street, satisfied that he had not been recognized or followed. He went on foot to Charing Cross, and climbed to the top of a brown and yellow bus. Three-quarters of an hour later he got off in Kentish Town and made his way to a squalid and narrow thoroughfare in the vicinity of Peckwater street. He stopped before a house in the middle of a dirty and monotonous row, and looked at it reminiscently. He had lodged there five years back, previous to his third conviction, and here he had been arrested. He had not returned since, for on his

release from Dartmoor he went to live near his pal, who was then planning the lay that had ended so disastrously.

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He pulled the bell and waited anxiously. A stout, slatternly woman appeared, and uttered a sharp exclamation at sight of her visitor. She would have closed the door in his face, but Hawker quickly thrust a leg inside.

"None o' that," he growled. "Don't you know me, missus?"

"It ain't likely I'd furgit *you*, Noah Hawker! What d'ye want?"

"A lodging, Mrs. Miggs," he replied. "Is my old room to let?" he added eagerly.

"It's been empty a week, but what's that to you? I won't 'ave no jail-bird in my 'ouse. I'm a respectable woman, an' I won't be disgraced again by the likes of you."

"Come, stow that! Can't you see I'm a foreign gent from abroad? The police ain't after me—take my word for it. I've come back here because you always made me snug and comfortable. I'll have the room, and if you want to see the color of my money—"

He produced a half-sovereign, and a relenting effect was immediately visible. A brief parley ensued, which ended in Mrs. Miggs pocketing the money and inviting Mr. Hawker to enter. A moment after the door had closed a rather shabby man strolled by the house and made a mental note of the number.

Presently a light gleamed from the window of the first floor back, which overlooked, at a distance of six feet, a high, blank wall. Noah Hawker put the candle on a shelf, locked the door noiselessly, and glanced about the well-remembered room, with its dirty paper, frayed carpet and scanty furniture. A little later, after listening to make sure that he was not being spied upon, he blew out the candle and opened the window. He fumbled for a minute, then closed the window and drew down the blind. When he relighted the candle he held in one hand a packet wrapped in a piece of mildewed leather.

Seating himself in a rickety chair he lighted his pipe and opened the packet, which contained several papers in a good state of preservation. He read them carefully and thoughtfully, and the task occupied him for half an hour or more.

"Whew! It's a heap better than I counted on—I didn't have the time to examine them right before," he muttered. "There may be a tidy little fortune in it. I'll make something out of this, or my name ain't Noah Hawker. The old chap is out of the running, to start with, so I must hunt up the others. And that won't be easy, perhaps."

CHAPTER XVIII.

HOME AGAIN.

By an odd coincidence, on the same day that Sir Lucius Chesney and Noah Hawker crossed over from Calais, a P. and O. steamship, Calcutta for London, landed Jack Vernon at the Royal Albert Docks. He had expected to be met there by Mr. Hunston, the editor of the *Illustrated Universe*, or by one of the staff; yet he seemed rather relieved than otherwise when he failed to pick out a single familiar face in the crowd. He was fortunate in having his luggage attended to quickly, and, that formality done with, he walked to the dock station.

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The four or five intervening months, commencing with that tragic night in the Ravenscourt Park studio, had wrought a great change in Jack; though it was more internal, perhaps, than external. His old friends would promptly have recognized the returned war-artist, laden with honors that he did not care a jot for. He looked fit, and his step was firm and elastic. His cheeks were deeply bronzed and well filled out. A severe bullet wound and a sharp attack of fever had led to his being peremptorily ordered home as soon as he was convalescent, and the sea voyage had worked wonders and built up his weakened constitution. But he was altered, none the less. There were hard lines about his mouth and forehead, and in his eyes was a listless, weary, cynical look—the look of a man who finds life a care and a burden almost beyond endurance.

The train was waiting, and Jack settled himself in a second-class compartment. He tossed his traveling-bag on the opposite seat, lighted a cigar, and let his thoughts wander at will. At the beginning of his great grief, when nothing could console him for the loss of Madge, the *Illustrated Universe*, a weekly journal, had asked him to go out to India and represent them pictorially in the Afridi campaign on the Northwest frontier. He accepted readily, with a desperate hope in his heart that he did not confide to his friends. He wasted no time in leaving London, which had become intensely hateful to him. He joined the British forces, and performed his duty faithfully, sending home sketches that immensely increased the circulation of the *Universe*. And he did more. At every opportunity he was in the thick of the fighting. Time and again, when he found himself with some little detachment that was cut off from the main column and harassed by the enemy, he distinguished himself for valor. He risked his life recklessly, with an unconcern that surprised his soldier comrades. But the Afridis could not kill him. He recovered from a bullet wound in the shoulder and from fever, and now he was back in England again.

It was a dreary home-coming, without pleasure or anticipation. The sense of his loss—the hopeless yearning for Madge—was but little dulled. He felt that he could never take up the threads of his old life again; he wished to avoid all who knew him. He had no plans for the future. His studio was let, and the new tenant had engaged Alphonse—Nevill had arranged this for him. He had received several letters from Jimmie, and had answered them; but neither referred to Madge in the correspondence. She was dead to him forever, he reflected with savage resentment of his cruel fate. As for Diane, she had taken his three hundred pounds—it was arranged through Nevill—and returned to the Continent. She had vowed solemnly that he should never see or hear of her again.

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The train rolled into Fenchurch street. Jack took his bag and got out, a little dazed by the unaccustomed hubbub and din, by the jostling throng on the platform. Here, again, there was no one to meet him. He passed out of the station—it was just four o'clock—into the clammy November mist. He shivered, and pulled up his coat collar. He was standing on the pavement, undecided where to go, when a cab drew alongside the curb. A corpulent young gentleman jumped out, and immediately uttered an eager shout.

“Jack!” he cried. “So glad to see you! Welcome home!”

“Dear old Jimmie! This is like you!” Jack exclaimed. As he spoke he gripped his friend’s hand, and for a brief instant his face lighted up with something of its old winning expression, then lost all animation. “How did you know I was coming?” he added.

“Heard it at the office of the *Universe*. Did you miss Hunston?”

“I didn’t see him.”

“Then he got there too late—he said he was going to drive to the docks. I’m not surprised. It’s Lord Mayor’s Day, you know, and the streets are still badly blocked. I had a jolly close shave of it myself. How does it feel to be back in dear old London?”

“I think I prefer Calcutta,” Jack replied, stolidly. “I’m not used to fogs.”

Jimmie regarded him with a critical glance, with a stifled sigh of disappointment. He saw clearly that strange scenes and stirring adventures had failed to work a cure. He expected better things—quite a different result.

“Yes, it’s beastly weather,” he said; “but you’ll stand it all right. You are in uncommonly good condition for a chap who has just pulled through fever and a bullet hole. By Jove! I wish I could have seen you tackling the Afridis—you were mentioned in the papers after that last scrimmage, and they gave you a rousing send-off. You deserve the Victoria Cross, and you would get it if you were a soldier.”

“I didn’t fight for glory,” Jack muttered, bitterly. “I’m the most unlucky beggar alive.”

Jimmie looked at him curiously.

“You don’t mean to say,” he asked, “that you were hankering for an Afridi bullet or spear in your heart?”

“It’s the best thing that could have happened. They tell me I bear a charmed life, and I believe it’s true. I never expected to come back, if you want to know.”



"I'm sorry to hear you say that, old man. You need cheering up. Have you any luggage besides that bag?"

"I sent the rest on to the *Universe* office."

"Then come to my rooms—you know you left a lot of clothes and other stuff there. You can fix up a bit, and then we'll go out and have a good feed."

"As you like," Jack assented, indifferently. "But I must see Hunston first—he will go from the docks to the office, and expect to find me there."

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They entered a cab and drove westward, through the decorated streets and surging crowds of the city, down Ludgate Hill and up the slope of Fleet street. Jack left his friend in the Strand, before the *Illustrated Universe* building, with its windows placarded with the paper's original sketches and sheets from the current issue, and it was more than an hour later when he turned up at Jimmie's luxurious chambers in the Albany. He was in slightly better spirits, and he exhaled an odor of brandy. He had a check for five hundred pounds in his pocket, and there was more money due him.

"Where's my war-paint?" he demanded.

That meant, in plain English, Jack's dress clothes, and they were soon produced from a trunk he had left in Jimmie's care. He made a careful toilet, and then the two sallied forth into the blazing streets and pleasure-seeking throngs.

They went to the Continental, above Waterloo Place, and Jack ordered the dinner lavishly—he insisted on playing the host. He chatted in his old light-hearted manner during the courses, occasionally laughing boisterously, but with an artificial ring that was perceptible to his companion. His eyes sparkled, and his brown cheeks flushed under the glow of the red-shaded lamps.

"This is a rotten world, Jimmie," he said. "You know that, don't you? But I've come home to have a good time, and I'm going to have it—I don't care how."

"I wouldn't drink any more," Jimmie urged.

"Another bottle, old chap," Jack cried, thickly, as he lighted a fresh cigar; "and then we'll wind up at the Empire."

"None for me, thank you."

"Then I'll drink it myself," vowed Jack. "Do you hear, *garcon*—'nother bottle!"

Jimmie looked at him gravely. He had serious misgivings about the future.

* * * * *

Many of London's spacious suburbs have the advantage of lying beyond the scope of the fog-breeding smoke which hangs over the great city, and at Strand-on-the-Green, on that 9th of November, the weather was less disagreeable.

A man and a woman came slowly from the direction of Kew Bridge, sauntering along the wet flagstones of the winding old quay, which was almost as lonely as a rustic lane. Victor Nevill looked very aristocratic and handsome in his long Chesterfield coat and top hat; in one gray-gloved hand he swung a silver-headed stick. Madge Foster walked quietly by his side, a dainty picture in furs. She was as lovely as ever, if not more so,



but it was a pale, fragile sort of beauty. She had spent the summer in Scotland and the month of September in Devonshire, and had returned to town at the beginning of October. Change of air and scenery had worked a partial cure, but had not brought back her merry, light-hearted disposition. She secretly nursed her grief—the sorrow that had fallen on her happy young life—and tried hard not to show it. There was a wistful, far-away expression in her eyes, and she seemed unconscious of the presence of her companion.

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"It's a beastly day," remarked Nevill. "I shouldn't like to live by the river in winter. You need cheering up. What do you say to a box at the Savoy to-night? There is plenty of time to arrange—"

"I don't care to go, thank you," was the indifferent reply.

The girl drew her furs closer about her throat, and watched a grimy barge that was creeping up stream. She had become resigned to seeing a good deal of Victor Nevill lately, but her treatment of him was little altered. She knew his real name now, and that he was the heir of Sir Lucius Chesney. She had accepted his excuses—listened to him with resentment and indignation when he explained that he had assumed the name of Royle because he wanted to win her for himself alone, and not for the sake of his prospects. She realized whither she was trending, but she felt powerless to resist her fate.

They paused a short distance beyond the Black Bull, where the quay jutted out a little like a pier. It was guarded by a railing, and Madge leaned on this and looked down at the black, incoming tide lapping below her. No other person was in sight, and the white mist seemed suddenly to close around the couple. The paddles of a receding steamer churned and splashed monotonously. From Kew Bridge floated a faint murmur of rumbling traffic. It was four o'clock, and the sun was hidden.

"You are shivering," said Nevill.

"It is very cold. Will you take me home, please?"

As she spoke, the girl turned toward him, and he moved impulsively nearer.

"I will take you home," he said; "but first I want to ask you a question—you *must* hear me. Madge, are you utterly heartless? Twice, when I told you of my love, you rejected it. But I persevered—I did not lose hope. And now I ask you again, for the third time, will you be my wife? Do I not deserve my reward?"

The girl did not answer. Her eyes were downcast, and one little foot tapped the flagstone nervously.

"I love you with all my heart, Madge," he went on, with deep and sincere passion in his voice. "You cannot doubt that, whatever you may think of me. You are the best and sweetest of women—the only one in the world for me. I will make your life happy. You shall want for nothing."

"Mr. Nevill, you know that I do not love you."

"But you will learn to in time."

"I fear not. No, I am sure of it."

"I will take the risk. I will hope that love will come."

"And you would marry me, knowing that I do not care for you in that way?"

"Yes, gladly. I cannot live without you. Say yes, Madge, and make me the happiest of men."

"I suppose I must," she replied. She did not look him in the face. "My father wishes it, and has urged me to consent. It will please him."

"Then you will be my wife, Madge?"

"Some day, if you still desire it."

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"I will never change," he said, fervently.

It was a strange, ill-omened promise of marriage, and a bitter realization of how little it meant was suddenly borne home to Nevill. He touched the girl's hand—more he dared not do, though he longed to take her in his arms and kiss her red lips. The coldness of her manner repelled him. They turned and walked slowly along the river, while the shadows deepened around them.

CHAPTER XIX.

A SHOCK FOR SIR LUCIUS.

They lingered but a moment at the house, standing irresolutely by the steps. Madge did not invite Nevill to stop, which suited him in his present mood. He pressed the girl's cold hand and strode away into the darkness. His thoughts were not pleasant, and there was a sneering smile on his face.

"I have won her," he reflected. "Won her at last! She will be my wife. But it is not a victory to be proud of—not worth the infamy I've waded through. She consented because she has been hard driven—because I compelled her father to put the screws on. How calmly she told me that she did not love me! I can read her like a book. I hoped she had forgotten Jack, but I see now that she cares for him as much as ever. Oh, how I hate him! Is his influence to ruin my life? I ought to be satisfied with the blow I have dealt him, but if I get a chance to strike another—"

A harsh laugh finished the sentence, and he hit out viciously with his stick at a cat perched on a garden wall.

A Waterloo train conveyed him cityward, and, avoiding the haunts of his associates, he dined at a restaurant in the Strand. It was eight o'clock when he went to his rooms in Jermyn street, intending to change his clothes and go to a theatre. A card lay inside the door. It bore Sir Lucius Chesney's name, and Morley's Hotel was scribbled on the corner of it. Nevill scowled, and a look that was closely akin to fear came into his eyes.

"So my uncle is back!" he muttered. "I knew he would be turning up some time, but it's rather a surprise all the same. He wants to see me, of course, and I don't fancy the interview will be a very pleasant one. Well, the sooner it is over the better. It will spoil my sleep to-night if I put it off till to-morrow."

He dressed hurriedly and went down to Trafalgar Square. Sir Lucius had just finished dinner, and uncle and nephew met near the hotel office. They greeted each other heartily, and Sir Lucius invited the young man upstairs to his room. He was in a good humor, and expressed his gratification that Nevill had come so promptly.

"I want a long chat with you, my boy," he said. "Have you dined?"

"Yes."

Sir Lucius lighted a cigar, and handed his case to Nevill.

"Been out of town this summer?" he asked.

"The usual thing, that's all—an occasional run down to Brighton, a month at country houses, and a week's shooting on the Earl of Runnymede's Scotch moor."

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"London agrees with you. I believe you are a little stouter."

"And you are looking half a dozen years younger, my dear uncle. How is the liver?"

"It ought to be pretty well shaken to pieces, from the way I've trotted it about. It hasn't troubled me for months, I am glad to say. I've had a most enjoyable holiday, and a longer one than I intended to take. I stopped in Norway seven weeks, and then went to the Continent. I did the German baths, Vienna and a lot of other big cities, and came to Paris. There I met an old Anglo-Indian friend, and he dragged me down to the Riviera for a month. But there is no place like home. I've been in town only a couple of hours—crossed this morning. And to-morrow I'm off to Priory Court."

"So soon?"

"Yes; I can't endure your fogs."

There was an awkward pause. Nevill struck a match and put it to his cigar, though it did not need relighting. Sir Lucius coughed, and stirred nervously in his chair.

"You remember that little matter I wrote you about," he began. "Have you done anything?"

"My dear uncle, I have left nothing undone that I could think of," Nevill replied; "but I am sorry to say that I have met with no success whatever. It was a most difficult undertaking, after so many years."

"I feared it would be. You didn't advertise?"

"No; you told me not to do that."

"Quite right. I wished to avoid all publicity. But what steps did you take?"

"I made careful inquiries, interviewed some of the older school of artists, and searched London and provincial directories for some years back. Then I consulted a private detective. I put the matter in his hands. He worked on it for a couple of months, and finally said that it was too much for him. He could not discover a trace of either your sister or her husband, and he suggested that they probably emigrated to America or Australia years ago."

"That is more than possible," assented Sir Lucius; "and it is likely that they are both dead. But they may have left children, and for their sakes—". He broke off abruptly, and sighed. "I should like to have a talk with your private detective, if he is a clever fellow," he added.

“He is clever enough,” Nevill replied slowly, “but I am afraid you would have to go a long distance to find him. He went to America a week ago to collect evidence for a divorce case in one of the Western States.”

“Then he will hardly be back for months,” said Sir Lucius. “No matter. I think sometimes that it is foolish of me to take the thing up. But when a man gets to my age, my boy, he is apt to regret many episodes in his past life that seemed proper and well-advised at the time. I am convinced that I was too harsh with your aunt. Poor Mary, she was my favorite sister until—”

He stopped, and his face hardened a little at the recollection.

“I wish I could find her,” said Nevill.

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"I am sure you do, my boy. I am undecided what steps to take next. It would be a good idea to stop in town for a couple of days and consult a private inquiry bureau. But no, not in this weather. I will let the matter rest for the present, and run up later on, when we get a spell of sunshine and cold."

"I think that is wise. Meanwhile I am at your service."

"Thank you. Oh, by the way, Victor, you must have incurred some considerable expense in my behalf. Let me write you a check."

"There is no hurry—I don't need the money," Nevill answered, carelessly. "I will look up the account and send it to you."

"Or bring it with you when you come down to Priory Court for Christmas, if I can induce you to leave town."

"I shall be delighted to come, I assure you."

"Then we'll consider it settled."

Sir Lucius lighted a fresh cigar and rose. His whole manner had changed; he chuckled softly, and his smile was pleasant to see.

"I have something to show you, my boy," he said. "It is the richest find that ever came my way. Ha, ha! not many collectors have ever been so fortunate. I know where to pry about on the Continent, and I have made good use of my holidays. I sent home a couple of boxes filled with rare bargains; but this one—"

"You will be rousing the envy of the South Kensington Museum if you keep on," Nevill interrupted, gaily; he was in high spirits because the recent disagreeable topic had been shelved indefinitely. "What is it?" he added.

"I'll show you in a moment, my boy. It will open your eyes when you see it. You will agree that I am a lucky dog. By gad, what a stir it will cause in art circles!"

Sir Lucius crossed the room, and from behind a trunk he took a flat leather case. He unlocked and opened it, his back screening the operation, and when he turned around he held in one hand a canvas, unframed, about twenty inches square; the rich coloring and the outlines of a massive head were brought out by the gaslight.

"What do you think of that?" he cried.

Nevill approached and stared at it. His eyes were dilated, his lips parted, and the color was half-driven from his cheeks, as if by a sudden shock. He had expected to see a bit of Saracenic armor, made in Birmingham, or a cleverly forged Corot. But this—

"I don't wonder you are surprised," exclaimed Sir Lucius. "Congratulate me, my dear boy."

"Where did you get it?" Nevill asked, sharply.

"In Munich—in a wretched, squalid by-street of the town, with as many smells as Cologne. I found the place when I was poking about one afternoon—a dingy little shop kept by a Jew who marvelously resembled Cruikshank's Fagin. He resurrected this picture from a rusty old safe, and I saw its value at once. It had been in his possession for several years, he told me; he had taken it in payment of a debt. The Jew was pretty keen on it—he knew whose work it was—but in the end I got it for eleven hundred pounds. You know what it is?"

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"An undoubted Rembrandt!"

"Yes, the finest Rembrandt in existence. No others can compare with it. Look at the brilliancy of the pigments. Observe the masterful drawing. See how well it is preserved. It is a prize, indeed, my boy, and worth double what I paid for it. It will make a sensation, and the National Gallery will want to buy it. But I wouldn't accept five thousand pounds for it. I shall give it the place of honor in my collection."

Sir Lucius paused to get his breath.

"You don't seem to appreciate it," he added. "Remember, it is absolutely unknown. Victor, what is the matter with you? Your actions are very strange, and the expression of your face is almost insulting. Do you dare to insinuate—"

"My dear uncle, will you listen to me for a moment?" said Nevill. "Prepare yourself for a shock. I fear that the picture is far better known than you think. Indeed, it is notorious."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that this Rembrandt, which you purchased in Munich, is the identical one that was stolen some months ago from Lamb and Drummond, the Pall Mall dealers. The affair made a big stir."

"Impossible!"

"It is only too true. Did you read the papers while you were away?"

"No; I scarcely glanced at them. But I can't believe—"

"Wait," said Nevill. From a pocket-book he produced a newspaper clipping, which he handed silently to his uncle. It contained an account of the robbery.

Sir Lucius read to the end. Then his cheeks swelled out, and turned from red to purple; his eyes blazed with a hot anger.

"Good God!" he exclaimed, "was ever a man so cruelly imposed upon? It is a d—nable shame! You are right, Victor. This is the stolen Rembrandt!"

"Undoubtedly. I can't tell you how sorry I feel for you." Nevill's expression was most peculiar as he spoke, and the semblance of a smile hovered about his lips.

"What is to be done?" gasped his uncle, who had flung the canvas on a chair, and was stamping savagely about the room. "It is clear as daylight. The thieves disposed of the painting in Munich, to my lying rascal of a Jew. Damn him, I wish I had him here!"

“Under the peculiar circumstances, my dear uncle, I should venture to suggest—”

“There is only one course open. This very night—no, the first thing to-morrow morning—I will take the picture to Lamb and Drummond’s and tell them the whole story. I can’t honorably do less.”

“Certainly not,” assented Nevill; it was not exactly what he had been on the point of proposing, but he was glad that he had not spoken.

“I won’t feel easy until it is out of my hands,” cried Sir Lucius. “Good heavens, suppose I should be suspected of the theft! Ah, that infamous scoundrel of a Jew! The law shall punish him as he deserves!”

Rage overpowered him, and he seemed in danger of apoplexy. There was brandy on the table, and he poured out a glass with a shaking hand. Nevill watched him anxiously.



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CHAPTER XX.

AT A NIGHT CLUB.

Victor Nevill called for his uncle at nine o'clock the next morning—it was not often he rose so early—and after breakfasting together the two went on to Lamb and Drummond's. Sir Lucius carried the unlucky picture under his arm, and he thumped the Pall Mall flagstones viciously with his stick; he walked like a reluctant martyr going to the stake.

Mr. Lamb had just arrived, and he led his visitors to his private office. He listened with amazement and rapt interest to the story they had come to tell him, which he did not once interrupt. When the canvas was unrolled and spread on the table he bent over it eagerly, then drew back and shook his head slightly.

"I was not aware of the robbery until my nephew informed me last night," explained Sir Lucius. "I have lost no time in restoring what I believe to be your property. It is an unfortunate affair, and a most disagreeable one to me, apart from any money considerations. But it affords me much gratification, sir, to be the means of—"

"I am by no means certain, Sir Lucius," Mr. Lamb interrupted, "that this *is* my picture."

"There could not be two of them!" gasped Sir Lucius.

"As a matter of fact, there *are* two," was the reply. "It is a curious affair, Sir Lucius, but I can speedily make it clear to you."

Very concisely and briefly Mr. Lamb told all that he knew about the duplicate Rembrandt, giving the gist of his interview months before with Jack Vernon.

"Then you mean to say that this is the duplicate?" asked Nevill.

"No; I can't say that."

Sir Lucius brightened suddenly. The loss of his prize was a heavy blow, but it would be far worse, he told himself, if he had been tricked into buying a false copy. He hated to think of such a thing—it was a wound to his pride, an insult to his judgment.

"I have reason to believe that the duplicate was a splendid replica of the original, otherwise it would not have been worth the trouble of stealing," Mr. Lamb went on. "Mr. Vernon assured me of that. So, under the circumstances, I cannot be positive which picture lies here before us. My eyesight is a little bad, and I prefer not to trust to it. Mr. Drummond might recognize the canvas, but he is out of town. I am disposed to doubt, however, that this is the original Rembrandt."

"You think it is more likely to be the duplicate?" inquired Sir Lucius.

"I do."

Sir Lucius swelled out with indignation, and his cheerfulness vanished.

"I am sorry to hear that" he said. "I can scarcely believe that I have been imposed upon. I am somewhat of an authority on old masters, Mr. Lamb."

The dealer smiled faintly; he had known Sir Lucius in a business way for a number of years.

"The price you paid—eleven hundred pounds—favors my theory," he replied. "Your Munich Jew, whom I happen to know by repute, is a very clever scoundrel. It is most unlikely that he would have parted with a real Rembrandt for such a sum. But I will gladly refund you the amount if this proves to be the original."

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"I don't want the money," growled Sir Lucius. "I dare say you are right, sir; and if so, it is not to my discredit that I have been taken in by such a perfect copy. Gad, it would have deceived Rembrandt himself! But the question still remains to be settled. How can that be done, and as quickly as possible?"

"Mr. Vernon, the artist, is the only person who can do that. He put a private mark on the duplicate—"

"Vernon—John Vernon?" interrupted Sir Lucius. "Surely, Victor, I have heard you mention that name?"

"Quite right, uncle," said Nevill. He made the admission promptly, foreseeing that a denial might have awkward consequences in the future. "I know Jack Vernon well," he added. "He is an old friend. But I am sorry to inform you that he is not in England at present."

This was false, for Nevill had noted in the morning paper that Jack was one of the passengers by the P. and O. steamship *Ismaila*, which had docked on the previous day. Mr. Lamb, it appeared, was not aware of the fact.

"Your nephew is correct, Sir Lucius," he said. "Mr. Vernon has been in India for some months, acting as special war artist for the *Universe*. But he is expected home very shortly—in the course of a week, I believe."

"I shall not be here then," said Sir Lucius. "I am to leave London to-day. What would you suggest?"

"Allow the canvas to remain in my hands—I will take the best of care of it," replied Mr. Lamb. "I will write to you as soon as Mr. Vernon returns, and will arrange that you shall meet him here."

"Very well, sir," assented Sir Lucius. "Let the matter rest at that. When I hear from you I will run up to town."

He still hoped to learn that he had bought the original picture, and he would have preferred an immediate solution of the question. He was in a dejected mood when he left the shop with his nephew, but he cheered up under the influence of a good lunch and a pint of port, and he was in fairly good spirits when he took an afternoon train from Victoria to his stately Sussex home.

"Hang the Rembrandt!" he said at parting. "I don't care how it turns out. Run down for a few days at the end of the month, Victor—I can give you some good shooting."

Glancing over a paper that evening, Mr. Lamb read of Jack Vernon's return. But to find him proved to be a different matter, and at the end of a week he was still unsuccessful.

Then, meeting Victor Nevill on Regent street, he induced him to join in the search for the missing artist. The commission by no means pleased Nevill, but he did not see his way to refuse.

* * * * *

For thirteen days Sir Lucius Chesney had been back at Priory Court, happy among his horses and dogs, his short-horns and orchids; his pictures rested temporarily under a cloud, and he was rarely to be found in the spacious gallery. In London, Victor Nevill enjoyed life with as much zest as his conscience would permit; Madge Foster dragged through weary days and duller evenings at Strand-on-the-Green; and the editor of the *Illustrated Universe* wondered what had become of his bright young war-artist since the one brief visit to the office.

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At two o'clock on a drizzling, foggy morning a policeman, walking up the Charing Cross Road, paused for a moment to listen to some remote strains of music that came indistinctly from a distance; then he shrugged his shoulders and went on—it was no business of his. The sounds that attracted the policeman's attention had their source in a cross street to the left—in one of those evil institutions known as a “night club,” which it seems impossible to eradicate from the fast life of West End London.

It was a typical scene; there were many like it that night. The house had two street doors, and behind the inner one, which was fitted with a small grating and kept locked, squatted a vigilant keeper, equally ready to open to a member or deny admittance to any one who had no business there. On the first floor, up the dingy stairs, were two apartments. The outer and smaller room had a bar at one side, presided over by a bright, golden-haired young lady in very conspicuous evening dress, whose powers of *repartee* afforded much amusement to her customers. These were, many of them, in more or less advanced stages of intoxication, and they comprised sporting men, persons from various unfashionable walks of life, clerks who wanted to soar like eagles, and a few swell young men who had dropped in to be amused. A sprinkling of women must be added.

Both apartments were hung with engravings and French prints and decorated with tawdry curtains, and in the larger of the two dancing was going on. Here the crowd was denser and of the same heterogeneous kind. It was a festival of high jinks—a sway of riotous, unbridled merriment. A performer at the piano, with a bottle of beer within easy reach, rapped out the inspiriting chords of a popular melody. Couples glided over the polished floor, some lightly, some galloping, and all reckless of colliding with the onlookers. There was a touch of the *risque* in the dancing, suggesting the Moulin Rouge of a Casino de Paris carnival. Occasionally, during a lull, songs were sung by music-hall *artistes* of past celebrity, who were now glad of the chance to earn a few shillings before an uncritical audience. The atmosphere was charged with the scent of rouge and powder, brandy and stale sherry. Coarse jest and laughter, ringing on the night, mocked at go-to-bed London.

Two young men leaned against the wall of the dancing-room, close to the door, both smoking cigars. They wore evening dress, considerably rumpled, and their attitudes were careless. The elder of the two was Tony Mostyn, a clever but dissipated artist of the decadent school, who steered his life by the rule of indulgence and worked as little as possible.

“It's rather dull,” he said; “eh, old chap?”

“It gives one a bad taste,” his companion replied. “I don't see why you brought me here.”

The second speaker was Jack Vernon. He looked bored and weary, but his cheeks were flushed and his eyes sparkled; the women who glanced pertly at him as they swung by inspired him merely with disgust. He had come to the club with Mostyn, after a dozen turns at the Alhambra, followed by a prolonged theater supper. He had drunk more than was good for him during the course of the evening, but the effects had about worn off.

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The story of the past two weeks—since Jack's return from India—was a sad one. He tried his best to drown the bitter memories of Madge, of what he had lost. He cut loose from Jimmie and other old friends, took lodgings in an out-of-the-way quarter, and turned night into day. He had plenty of money, and he had not been near the office of the *Universe*. He found boon companions among the wildest acquaintances of his Paris days, including Tony Mostyn and his set. But a fortnight had dispelled the glamour, and life looked blacker to him than it had ever looked before. Courage and manhood were at a low ebb. He laughed recklessly as he wondered what the end would be.

"Let us go and get a drink," he said to his companion.

As he spoke a tumult broke out at the far end of the room. Scuffling feet and men's angry voices mingled with cries of protest and women's shrill screams. Then followed a heavy fall, a groan, and a rush of people. The music had stopped and the dancers were still.

"There's been a row," exclaimed Mostyn. "It's bad for the club."

Idle curiosity led Jack to the spot, and Mostyn accompanied him. They elbowed their way through, and saw a flashily-dressed man with blue-black cheeks and a curling black mustache lying on the floor. He was bleeding from an ugly wound on the forehead, where he had been struck by a bottle. His assailant had slipped away, scared, and was being smuggled out of the room and down stairs by his friends.

"What a shame!" ejaculated a terrified woman.

"It's no fair fighting," added another.

"Shut up, all of you!" angrily cried a harsh-voiced man—clearly one in authority—as he elbowed his way to the front. "Do you want to bring the police down on us?"

The warning had a prompt effect, and comparative silence ensued. The injured man tried to rise, but his potations had weakened him more than the loss of blood.

"Where's the bloke what hit me?" he feebly demanded.

His maudlin speech and woe-begone manner roused Jack's sympathy. He knelt down beside him, and made a brief examination.

"It's nothing serious—the bottle glanced off," he said. "Fetch water and a sponge, and I'll soon stop the bleeding. Who has a bit of plaster?"

No sponge was to be had, but a basin of water was quickly produced. Jack tore his handkerchief in two and wet part of it. He was about to begin operations when a hand tapped him on the shoulder and a familiar voice pronounced his name.

CHAPTER XXI.

A QUICK DECISION.

Jack turned around, and when he saw Victor Nevill bending over him he looked first confused and then pleurably surprised.

“Hello, old chap,” he said. “Wait a bit, will you?”

“You’ve led me a chase,” Nevill whispered in a low voice. “I want to talk to you. Important!”

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"All right," Jack replied. "I'll be through in a couple of minutes."

He wondered if it could have anything to do with Diane, as he set to work on the injured man. With deft fingers he bathed the cut, staunched the blood, and applied a piece of plaster handed to him by a bystander; over it he placed the dry half of his handkerchief.

"You'll do now," he said. "It's not a deep cut."

With assistance the man got to his feet. The shock had sobered him, and he was pretty steady. He pulled his cap on his head, and winced with pain as it stirred the bandage.

"Where's the cowardly rat what hit me?" he demanded.

"Never you mind about 'im," put in the proprietor of the club—a very fat man with a ponderous watch-chain. "While the excitement was on 'e 'looked it. You be off, too—I don't want any more rowing." Sinking his voice to a faint whisper, he added: "You'd be worse off than the rest of us, 'Awker, should the police 'appen to come."

"Yes, go home, my good fellow," urged Jack. "You look ill; and what you need is rest. You'll be all right in the morning."

He pressed half a sovereign into the man's hand—so cleverly that none observed the action—and then slipped back and joined Nevill and Mostyn, who had a slight acquaintance with each other. The three had left the room, and were going downstairs, before Mr. Noah Hawker recovered from his surprise on learning that his gift was gold instead of a silver sixpence. It chanced that he was reduced to his last coppers, and so the half sovereign was a boon indeed. He nudged the elbow of a supercilious looking young gentleman in evening dress who was passing.

"That swell cove who fixed me up—he's just gone," he said. "He's a real gent, he is! Could you tell me his name, sir?"

"Aw, yes, I think I can," was the drawling reply. "He's an artist chap, don't you know! Name of Vernon."

"Might it be John Vernon?"

"That's it, my man."

The name rang in Noah Hawker's ears, and he repeated it to himself as he stumbled downstairs. He was in such a brown study that he forgot to tip the door-keeper who let him into the street. He pulled his cap lower to hide his bandaged head, and struck off in the direction of Tottenham Court road.

“Funny how I run across that chap!” he reflected. “Vernon—John Vernon—yes, it’s the same, no doubt about it. But he’s only an artist, and I know what artists are. There’s many on ’em, with claw-hammer coats and diamonds in their shirt-fronts, as hasn’t got two quid to knock together. You won’t suit my book, Mr. Vernon—you’re not in the running against the others. It’s a pity, though, for he was a real swell, what I *call* a gent. But I’ll keep him in mind, and it sort of strikes me I’ll be able to do him a good turn some day.”

Meanwhile, as Noah Hawker walked northward in the direction of Kentish Town, Jack and his companions had reached Piccadilly Circus. Here Mostyn left them, while Jack and Nevill went down Regent street.

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"A bit of a rounder, that chap," said Nevill. "He's not your sort. What have you been doing with yourself for the last two weeks? I've not seen you since you sailed for India, early in the summer."

"How did you find me to-night?" asked Jack, in a tone which suggested that he did not want to be found.

"I met a Johnny who told me where you were. I vowed he was mistaken at first, but he stuck to it so positively—"

"You said you wanted to talk to me," Jack interrupted. "I suppose it is about—"

"No; you're wrong. *She* is in Paris, and she won't trouble you again. The fact is, I have a message for you from Lamb and Drummond. They've been trying to find you for a fortnight."

"Lamb and Drummond looking for me? Ah, yes, I think I know what they want."

"It's a queer business, isn't it? My uncle is mixed up in it—Sir Lucius Chesney, you know."

"Then he has told you—"

"Only a little. It's not my affair, and I would rather not speak about it. Can I tell Mr. Lamb that you will call upon him at five o'clock to-morrow afternoon—or this afternoon, to be correct? They will want to get my uncle from the country."

"I will be there at that hour," Jack assented, and with a hasty "Good-night" he was gone, striding rapidly away. Nevill looked after him for a moment, and then sauntered home. The street lights showed a sneering smile of satisfaction on his face.

Jack could easily have picked up a cab, but he preferred to walk. He went along the Strand, now waking up to the life and traffic of early morning. Turning into Wellington street, he crossed Waterloo Bridge, and the gray dawn was breaking when he let himself into a big, dingy house not far from the river. Here, remote from his friends, he had chosen to live, in two rooms which he had fitted up more than comfortably with recent purchases. Even Jimmie did not know where he was—never dreamed of looking for him on the Surrey side. His brain was too active for sleep, and he sat up smoking another hour.

It was two o'clock in the afternoon when Jack awoke from an unrefreshing slumber; his head was heavy, and he would have liked to remain in bed for the rest of the day. He remembered that he had two engagements; he had promised to attend a "do" at a studio in Joubert Mansions, Chelsea, where he would meet a lot of Tony Mostyn's set, and make night noisy until the wee hours of the morning. At four o'clock he started to

dress for the evening. At five a cab put him down in Pall Mall, opposite the premises of Lamb and Drummond. A clerk conducted him to the private office, which was well lighted. Mr. Lamb was present, and with him a soldierly, aristocratic-looking gentleman who had been summoned by wire from Sussex. Victor Nevill would have been there also, but he had pleaded a previous engagement.

The military gentleman was formally introduced as Sir Lucius Chesney. Jack shook hands with him nonchalantly, and wondered what was coming next; he did not much care. Sir Lucius regarded Jack carelessly at first, then with a stare that was almost impertinent. He adjusted a pair of gold-rimmed eye-glasses, and looked again. He leaned forward in his chair, under the influence of some strong agitation.

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"Bless my soul!" he muttered, half audibly. "Very remarkable!"

"I beg your pardon, sir," said Jack.

"Nothing! nothing!" replied Sir Lucius, in some confusion. "So you are Mr. Vernon?"

"That is my name, sir."

Sir Lucius pulled himself together, and thoughtfully stroked his mustache. An awkward pause was broken by Mr. Lamb, who proceeded to state at some length the business that had rendered Jack's presence imperative. Sir Lucius listened with rising indignation, as the story poignantly recalled to him his bitter experience with the Munich Jew. Jack, seeing the ludicrous side, with difficulty repressed an inclination to smile.

"Let me have the picture," he said. "I can settle the question at once."

Sir Lucius rose eagerly from his seat. Mr. Lamb took the canvas from an open safe and spread it on the table. Jack bent over it, standing between the two. He laughed as he pointed to a peculiar brush-stroke—insignificant in the general effect—down in the lower right-hand corner.

"There is my mark," he said, "and this is the duplicate I painted for Martin Von Whele, nearly six years ago."

"I thought as much," exclaimed Mr. Lamb.

"Are you sure of what you are saying, young man?" asked Sir Lucius.

"Quite positive, sir," declared Jack. "I assure you that—"

"Yes, there can be no doubt about it," interrupted Mr. Lamb. "I was pretty well satisfied from the first, but I would not trust my own judgment, considering the pooriness of my eyesight. This is the copy, and the person who stole it from Mr. Vernon's studio disposed of it later to the Jew in Munich, who succeeded—very naturally, I admit—in selling it to you as the real thing, Sir Lucius."

There was a *double entendre* about the "very naturally" which Sir Lucius chose, rightly or wrongly, to interpret to his own disadvantage.

"Do you mean to insinuate—" he began, bristling up.

"As for the genuine Rembrandt—*my* picture," resumed Mr. Lamb, "its disappearance is still shrouded in mystery. It can be only a matter of time, however, until the affair is cleared up. But that is poor consolation for the insurance people, who owe me L10,000."

"It is well you safeguard yourself in that way," observed Jack. "I shouldn't be surprised if your picture turned up as unexpectedly as mine has done, and perhaps before long. But I can hardly call this my property. Sir Lucius Chesney is out of pocket to the tune of eleven hundred pounds—"

"D—n the money, sir!" blurted out Sir Lucius. "I can afford to lose it. And pray accept the Rembrandt from me as a gift, if you think you are not entitled to it legally."

"You are very kind, but I prefer that you should keep it."

"I don't want it—won't have it! Take it out of my sight!—it is only a worthless copy!" Sir Lucius, purple in the face, plumped himself down in his chair. "I beg your pardon, Mr. Vernon," he added. "As a copy it is truly magnificent—it does the greatest credit to your artistic skill. It deceived *me*, sir! Whom would it not have deceived? There is an end of the matter! I shall forget it. But I will go to Munich some day, and beat that rascally Jew within an inch of his life!"

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"If you can catch him," thought Jack. "I had better leave the painting with you for the present, Mr. Lamb," he said. "It may be of some use in your search for the original."

"Quite so," assented the dealer. "I will gladly retain it for the present."

"If that is all," Jack continued, "I will wish you good afternoon."

"One moment, Mr. Vernon," said Sir Lucius, whose choleric indications had completely vanished. "I—I should like to have an interview with you, if you will consent to humor an old man. Your face interests me—I admire your work. I propose to remain in town for a brief time, though I am off to Oxford to-night, to visit an old friend, and will not be back until to-morrow afternoon. Would you find it convenient to give me a call to-morrow night at eight o'clock, at Morley's Hotel?"

Jack was silent; his face expressed the surprise he felt.

"I should like you to come down to Sussex and do some landscapes of Priory Court," Sir Lucius further explained.

"I am not working at present," Jack said, curtly.

"But there is something else—a—a private matter," Sir Lucius replied, confusedly. "I beg that you will oblige me, Mr. Vernon."

"Very well, sir, since you wish it so much," Jack consented. "I will come to Morley's Hotel at eight to-morrow evening."

"Thank you, Mr. Vernon."

Jack shook hands with both gentlemen, picked up his hat and stick, and went off to an early dinner. Sir Lucius looked after him wistfully.

CHAPTER XXII.

ANOTHER CHANCE.

Sir Lucius Chesney remained for an hour to further discuss the affair of the two Rembrandts with Mr. Lamb, and the conversation became so interesting that he almost forgot that he had arranged to leave Paddington for Oxford at eight o'clock; when he suddenly remembered the fact he hurried off, fearful of losing his dinner, and St. Martin's in the Fields indicated a quarter to seven as he entered Morley's Hotel.

At that time a little party of three persons were sitting down to a table in one of the luxurious dining-rooms of the Trocadero. Victor Nevill was the host, and his guests

were Stephen Foster and his daughter; later they were all going to see the production of a new musical comedy.

Madge, as lovely as a dream in her lustrous, shimmering evening gown, fell under the sway of the lights and the music, and was more like her old self than she had been for months; the papers had been kept out of her way, and she did not know that Jack had returned from India. Stephen Foster was absorbed in the *menu* and the wine-card, and Nevill, in the highest of spirits, laughed and chatted incessantly. He was ignorant of something that had occurred that very day, else his evening's pleasure would surely have been spoiled.

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To understand the incident, the reader must go back to the previous night, or rather an early hour of the morning. For the last of the West End restaurants were putting out their lights and closing their doors when Jimmie Drexell, coming home from a “smoker” at the Langham Sketch Club, ran across Bertie Raven in Piccadilly. It was a fortunate meeting. The Honorable Bertie was with a couple of questionable companions, and he was intoxicated and very noisy; so much so that he had attracted the attention of a policeman, who was moving toward the group.

Jimmie, like a good Samaritan, promptly rescued his friend and took him to his own chambers in the Albany, as he was obviously unfit to go elsewhere. Bertie demurred at first, but his mood soon changed, and he became pliant and sullen. He roused a little when he found himself indoors, and demanded a drink. That being firmly refused, he muttered some incoherent words, flung himself down on a big couch in Jimmie’s sitting-room, and lapsed into a drunken sleep.

Jimmie threw a rug over him, locked up the whisky, and went off to bed. His first thought, when he woke about nine the next morning, was of his guest. Hearing footsteps in the outer room, he hurriedly got into dressing-gown and slippers and opened the communicating door. He was not prepared for what he saw. Bertie stood by the window, with the dull gray light on his haggard face and disordered hair, his crushed shirt-front and collar. A revolver, taken from a nearby cabinet, was in his hand. He was about to raise it to his forehead.

Jimmie was across the room at a bound, and, striking his friend’s arm down, he sent the weapon clattering to the floor.

“Good God!” he cried. “What were you going to do?”

“End it all,” gasped Bertie. He dropped into a chair and gave way to a burst of tears, which he tried hard to repress.

“What does it mean?” exclaimed Jimmie, breathing quick and deep. “Are you mad?”

Bertie lifted a ghastly, distorted face.

“It means ruin, old chap,” he replied. “That’s the plain truth. I wish you had let me alone.”

“Come, this won’t do, you know,” said Jimmie. “You are not yourself this morning, and I don’t wonder, after the condition I found you in last night. Things always look black after a spree. You exaggerate, of course, when you talk about ruin. You are all unstrung, Bertie. Tell me your troubles, and I’ll do what I can to help you out of them.”

Bertie shuddered as his eyes fell on the pistol at his feet.

“It’s awfully good of you, old fellow,” he answered huskily, “but you can’t help me.”

“How do you know that? Come, out with your story. Make a clean breast of it!”

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Moved by his friend's kind appeal, the wretched young man confessed his troubles, speaking in dull, hopeless tones. It was the old story—a brief career on the road to ruin, from start to finish. A woman was at the bottom of it—when is it otherwise? Bertie had not reformed when he had the chance; Flora, the chorus-girl of the Frivolity, had exercised too strong an influence over him. His income would scarcely have kept her in flowers, and to supply her with jewels and dinners and a hundred other luxuries, as well as to repay money lost at cards, he had plunged deeper into the books of Benjamin and Company, hoping each time that some windfall would stave off disaster. Disregarding the advice of a few sincere friends, he had continued his mad course of dissipation. And now the blow had fallen—sooner than he had reason to expect. A bill for a large amount was due that very day, and Benjamin and Company refused to renew it; they demanded both interest and principal, and would give no easier terms.

"You'd better let me have that," Bertie concluded, desperately, pointing to the pistol.

Jimmie kicked the weapon under the table, put his hands deep into the pockets of his dressing gown, and whistled thoughtfully.

"Yes, it's bad," he said. "So you've gone to the Jews! You ought to have known better—but that's the way with you chaps who are fed with silver spoons. I'm not a saint myself—"

"Are you going to preach?" put in Bertie, sullenly.

"No; my little lecture is over. Cheer up and face the music, my boy. It's not as bad as you think. Surely your father will get you out of the scrape."

"Do you suppose I would tell him?" Bertie cried, savagely. "That would be worse than—well, you know what I was going to do. It's just because of the governor that I can't bear to face the thing. He has paid my debts three times before, and he vowed that if I ran up any more bills he would ship me off to one of his ranches in Western America. He will keep his word, too."

"Ranch life isn't bad," said Jimmie.

"Don't talk about it! I would rather kill myself than go out there, away from England and all that one cares for. You know how it is, old man, don't you? London is the breath of life to me, with its clubs and theaters, and suppers, and jolly good fellows, and—"

"And Flora!" Jimmie supplemented drily.

"D—n Flora! She threw up the Friv yesterday and slipped off to the Continent with Dozy Molyneaux. I'm done with *her*, anyway! But what does it all matter? I'm ruined, and I must go under. Give me a drink, old chap—a stiff one."

“You can’t have it, Bertie. Now, don’t get riled—listen to me. Where was your father while you were going the pace so heavily?”

“In Scotland—at Runnymede Castle. He’s there still, and knows nothing of what I’ve been doing. I dare say he thinks I’ve been living comfortably on my income—a beggarly five hundred a year!”

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"What amount is the bill that falls due to-day?"

"Seven hundred and fifty pounds, with interest."

"And there are others?"

"Yes; three more—all renewals."

"And the total sum? Can you give it to me?"

"What's the use?" Bertie muttered. "But if you want to know—" He took a bit of paper from his pocket. "I counted it up yesterday," he added. "I can't get clear of the Jews for less than twenty-five hundred pounds."

"It's a heavy sum!"

"I can't raise a fraction of it. And the worst of it is that Victor Nevill is on—By Jove, I shouldn't have let that out!"

"You mean that Nevill indorsed the paper—all of it?"

"Only the first bill, and the next one Benjamin and Company took without an indorsement, as they did with the later ones. Nevill warned me what would happen if I kept on. I wish I had listened to him!"

Jimmie looked very grave.

"So Nevill steered you to the Jews!" he said, in a troubled tone. "It was hardly the act of a friend. Have you spoken to him in regard to this matter?"

"Yes, but he was short of money, and couldn't help me," Bertie replied. "He was awfully cut up about it, and went to see the Jews. It was no good—they refused to renew the bill on his indorsement."

"And heretofore they have accepted paper bearing your own signature only! Of course they knew that you had future expectations, or that your father would protect them from loss. It's the old game!"

"My expectations are not what they were," Bertie said sullenly, "and that's about what has brought things to a crisis. I can see through a millstone when there is a hole in it. I have a bachelor uncle on my mother's side—a woman-hater—who always said that he would remain single and make me his heir. But he changed his mind a couple of months ago, and married."

"Be assured that Benjamin and Company know that," Jimmie answered; "it's their reason for refusing to renew the bill."

"Yes; Nevill told me the same. He advised me to own up to the governor."

"How about your eldest brother—Lord Charters?"

"No good," the Honorable Bertie replied, gloomily; "we are on bad terms. And George is in New York."

"Then I must put you on your feet again."

"You!"

"Yes; I will lift your paper—the whole of it."

"Impossible! I can't accept money from a friend!"

"I'm more than that, my boy—or will be. Isn't your brother going to marry my cousin? And, anyway, we'll call it a loan. I'll take your I O U for the amount, and you can have twenty years to repay it—a hundred if you like. I can easily spare the money."

"I tell you I won't—"

"Don't tell me anything. It's settled. I mean to do it."

Bertie broke down; his scruples yielded before his friend's persistence.

"I'll pay it back," he cried, half sobbingly. "I'll be able to some day. God bless you, Jimmie—you don't know what you've saved me from. Another chance! I will make the most of it! I'll cut the old life and run straight—I mean it this time. I'm done with cards and evil companions, and all the rest of it!"

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"Glad to hear it," said Jimmie. "I want your word of honor that you won't exceed your income hereafter, and that you will leave London for six months and go home."

"I will; I swear it!"

"And you will have nothing more to do with Flora and her kind?"

"Never again!"

"I believe you," said Jimmie, patting the young man on the shoulder. "Cheer up now and we'll breakfast together presently, and meanwhile I'll send a man round to your rooms for some morning togs. Then I'll leave you here while I go down to the city to see my bankers. I'll be back before noon, and bring a solicitor with me; I want the thing done ship-shape."

With that, Jimmie retired to the bedroom, where he was soon heard splashing in his tub. An hour later, when breakfast was over, he hurried away. He returned at half-past twelve, accompanied by an elderly gentleman of legal aspect, Mr. Grimsby by name. Bertie was ready, dressed in a suit of brown tweeds, and the three went on foot to Duke street, St. James'. They passed through the narrow court, and, without knocking, entered the office of Benjamin and Company. No one was there, but two persons were talking in a rear apartment, the door of which stood open an inch or so. And one of the voices sounded strangely familiar to Jimmie.

"Listen!" he whispered to Bertie. "Do you hear that?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

ON THE TRACK.

In answer to Jimmie's question, Bertie gave him a puzzled look; he clearly did not understand. At the same instant the conversation in the next room was brought to a close. Some person said "Good-morning, Benjamin," and there was a sound of a door closing and of retreating footsteps; one of the speakers had gone, probably by another exit. The house, as Jimmie suspected, fronted on Duke street, and it was the rear portion that was connected with the court.

The elderly Jew, who was Mr. Benjamin himself, promptly entered the office, adjusting a black skull-cap to his head. He gave a barely perceptible start of surprise at sight of his visitors; he could not have known that they were there. He apologized extravagantly, and inquired what he could have the pleasure of doing for them. Mr. Grimsby stated their business, and the Jew listened with an inscrutable face; his deep-sunken eyes blinked uneasily.

“Do I understand,” he said, addressing himself to the Honorable Bertie, “that you wish to take up not only the bill which is due to-day—”

“No; all of them, Benjamin,” Bertie interrupted. “My friend wants to pay you to the last penny.”

“I shall be happy to oblige,” said the Jew, rubbing his hands. “I always knew that you were an honest young gentleman, Mr. Raven. I am sorry that I had to insist on payment, but my partner—”

“Will you let me have the paper, sir,” Jimmie put in, curtly.

The Jew at once bestirred himself. He opened a safe in which little bundles of documents were neatly arranged, and in a couple of minutes he produced the sheaf of bills that had so nearly been the ruin of his aristocratic young client. The first one was among the number; it had been renewed several times, on Nevill's indorsement.

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The affair was quickly settled. The solicitor went carefully over Mr. Benjamin's figures, representing principal and interest up to date, and expressed himself as satisfied; it was extortionate but legal, he declared. The sum total was a little over twenty-five hundred pounds—Bertie had received less than two-thirds of it in cash—and Jimmie promptly hauled out a fat roll of Bank of England notes and paid down the amount. He took the canceled paper, nodded coldly to the Jew, and left the money-lender's office with his companions.

Mr. Grimsby, declining an invitation to lunch, hailed a cab and went off to the city to keep an appointment with a client. The other two walked on to Piccadilly, and Bertie remembered that morning, months before, when Victor Nevill had helped him out of his difficulties, only to get him into a tighter hole.

"No person but myself was to blame," he thought. "Nevill meant it as a kindness, and he advised me to pull up when he found what I was drifting into—I never mentioned the last bill to him. Dear old Jimmie, he's given me another chance! How jolly to feel that one is rid of such a burden! I haven't drawn an easy breath for weeks."

"We'll go to my place first," said Jimmie. "I want a wash after the atmosphere of that Jew's den. And then we'll lunch together."

It was a dull and cheerless day, but the sitting-room in the Albany looked quite different to Bertie as he entered it. Was it only a few hours before, he wondered, that he had stood there by the window in the act of taking that life which had become too great a burden to bear? And in the blackness of his despair, when he saw no glimmer of hope, the clouds had rolled away. He glanced at the pistol, harmlessly resting on a shelf, and a rush of gratitude filled his heart and brought tears to his eyes. He clasped his friend's hand and tried incoherently to thank him.

"Come, none of that," Jimmie said, brusquely. "Let us talk of something more interesting. I have a pot of money; and this stuff," pulling out the packet of bills, "don't even make a hole in it. It was a jolly little thing to do—"

"It wasn't a little thing for me, old chap. I shall never forget, and be assured that you will get your money back some day, with interest."

"Oh, hang the money!" exclaimed Jimmie. "If I'm ever hard up I'll ask for it. If you want to show your gratitude, my boy, see that you stick to your promise and run straight as a die hereafter."

"I swear I will, Jimmie. I would be worse than a blackguard if I didn't. Don't worry—I've had my lesson!"

“Then let it be a lasting one. There are plenty of fellows who *never* get clear of the Jews.”

Jimmie vanished into the next room, and in a few moments reappeared, rubbing his face vigorously with a towel.

“Do you remember in the Jew’s den,” he said abruptly, “my calling your attention to the men talking in the back office?”

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"Yes, but I didn't know what you meant."

"Didn't one of the voices sound familiar to you?"

"By Jove, you're right, come to think of it. It reminded me of—"

"Of Victor Nevill," said Jimmie. "Benjamin's companion talked exactly like him, it struck me."

"That's it. Queer, wasn't it? But, of course, it was only a coincidence. Nevill couldn't have been there."

"No; I hardly think so," Jimmie answered, slowly and seriously.

"I'm positive about it," exclaimed Bertie. "Surely you wouldn't insinuate that Nevill is a ___"

"No, I can't believe him to be that—a tout for money-lenders. But it was wonderfully like his voice."

"Don't get such an idea into your head," protested Bertie. "Nevill was only in the place twice, and then he went to oblige me. He hates the Jews, and won't have anything to do with them himself. And he don't need to. He has a settled income of two or three thousand a year."

"Yet he refused to help you, and pleaded that he was hard up?"

"Yes," assented Bertie, "but he didn't put it exactly in that way. He explained how he was fixed, and I quite understand it. He must save all his spare cash just now. He is going to be married soon."

"That's news," said Jimmie. "I hadn't an inkling of it."

"Nor I," declared Bertie, "until a week ago. I was dining with Nevill, and he had taken half a bottle too much, you know. That's when he let it out."

"Who is the girl?"

"A Miss Foster, I believe. She lives somewhere near Kew Bridge, in a big, old-fashioned house on the river. I suppose her father has money. From what Nevill said—"

A sharp exclamation fell from Jimmie's lips, and his face expressed blank astonishment.

"By Jove! Nevill engaged to Madge Foster?" he cried.

"That's the girl, and he's going to marry her!"

Jimmie turned away to hide his feelings. This was a most astounding piece of news, but under the circumstances he was satisfied that it must be true. So Nevill knew Miss Foster! That in itself was a strange revelation! And suddenly a vague suspicion came into his mind—a chilling doubt—as he recalled Nevill's demeanor, and certain little actions of his, on the night when Jack Vernon's French wife confronted him under the trees of Richmond Terrace. Had a jealous rival planned that Diane should be there?—that she should come to life again to blast the happiness of the man who believed her dead? He tried to put away the suspicion, but it would not be stifled; it grew stronger.

"I say, old man, what's gone wrong?" asked Bertie. "You're acting queerly. I hope *you've* not been hit in that quarter."

Jimmie faced around and laughed.

"No fear, Bertie," he said. "I'm not a marrying man. I wouldn't know Miss Foster from your precious Flora, for I've never seen either of them." He suddenly remembered the photograph Jack had shown him, and his cheeks flushed. "It gave me a bit of a start to hear that Nevill was going to be married," he added, hastily. "I thought he was too fond of a bachelor's existence to tie himself to a wife."

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"It's funny what a woman can do with a chap," Bertie sagely observed.

"*You* ought to know," Jimmie replied, pointedly, as he pulled on his coat. "Come along! It's past my lunch hour, and I'm hungry."

On their way to a noted restaurant in the vicinity Jimmy engaged in deep reflection.

"I'll do it," he vowed, mentally. "I'll keep an eye on Mr. Victor Nevill, and get to the bottom of this thing. I remember that I took a dislike to him in Paris from the first. I hate a traitor, and if Nevill has been playing the part of a false friend, I'll block his little game. He seemed rather too anxious to take Diane away that night. And he'll bear watching for another reason—I'm almost certain that it was his voice I heard in the Jew's back room. Benjamin and Company, like charity, may cover a multitude of sins. Nevill was going a rapid pace when he was abroad, and he couldn't well have kept it up all these years on his legacy."

* * * * *

It was eleven o'clock at night, and the theatres were pouring their audiences from pit and stalls, galleries and boxes, into the crowded, tumultuous, clamoring Strand, blazing and flashing like a vast, long furnace, echoing to the roar of raucous throats, and throbbing to the rumble of an endless invasion of cabs and private carriages. A fascinating scene, and one of the most interesting that London can show.

The uniformed commissioner of the Ambiguity, reading the wishes of a lady and gentleman who pressed across the pavement to the curb, promptly claimed a hansom and opened the door. Stephen Foster helped his daughter into it and followed her. Madge looked fragile and tired, but her sweet beauty attracted the attention of the bystanders; she drew her fluffy opera-cloak about her white throat and shoulders as she nestled in a corner of the seat. Nevill, who had been separated from them by the crush, came forward just then.

"I'm sorry you won't have some supper," he said. "It is not late."

"It will be midnight before we get home," Stephen Foster replied. "We are indebted to you for a delightful evening."

"Yes, we enjoyed it so much," Madge added, politely.

"I hope you will let me repeat it soon," Nevill said.

The girl did not answer. She held out her hand, and it was cold to Nevill's touch. He bade them both good-night, and stepped aside to give the cabby his directions. He watched the vehicle roll away, and then scowled at the commissioner, who waited expectantly for a tip.

“As beautiful as a dream,” he thought, savagely, “but with a heart of ice—at least to me. Will I never be able to melt her?”

It is no easy matter to cross the Strand when the theaters are dismissing their audiences, and five minutes were required for Nevill to accomplish that operation; even then he had to avail himself of a stoppage of the traffic by a policeman. He bent his steps to the grill-room of the Grand, and enjoyed a chop and a small bottle of wine. Lighting a cigar, he sauntered slowly to Jermyn street, and as he reached his lodgings a man started up suddenly before him.

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"Beg pardon, sir," he said humbly, "but ain't you Mr. Victor Nevill?"

CHAPTER XXIV.

A FATEFUL DECISION.

Nevill paused, latch-key in hand; a cautious impulse checked the admission of his identity. The individual who had accosted him, seen by the glow of a distant street-lamp, was thickset and rakish-looking, with a heavy mustache. He repeated his question uneasily.

"If I've made a mistake—" he went on.

"No, you are not mistaken," said Nevill. "But how did you learn my name, and what do you want with me?"

On a natural impulse, fancying he recognized a racing tipster who had been of service to him in the past, he reached for his pocket; the jingling of coin was heard.

"Stow that—I'm not a beggar!" the man said, sharply.

"I beg your pardon! I thought I recalled—"

"We never met before, Mr. Nevill."

"Then it's a queer time of night for a stranger to hunt me up. If you have business with me, come in the morning; or, better still, write to me."

"I've got to talk to you to-night, sir, and I ain't to be put off. For two blessed hours I've been hanging around this house, watching an' waiting—"

"A sad waste of time! You are an impudent fellow, whoever you are. I refuse to have anything to do with you."

"I think you'll change your mind, sir. If you don't you'll be sorry till your dying day."

"You scoundrel, do you dare to threaten me?" cried Nevill. "There is only one remedy for ruffians of your kind—" He looked up and down the street in search of a policeman.

"You can call an officer if you like," the man said, scornfully; "or, if you choose to order me away, I'll go. But in that case," he bent nearer and dropped his voice to a whisper, "I'll take my secret straight to Sir Lucius Chesney. And I'll warrant *he* won't refuse to hear it."

Nevill's countenance changed, and he seemed to wilt instantly.

"Your secret?" he muttered. "Are you telling the truth? What is it?"

"Do you suppose I'm going to give that away here in the street? It's a private matter, and can only be told under shelter, where there ain't no danger of eavesdroppers."

"I'll trust you," replied Nevill, after a brief hesitation. "Come, you shall go to my rooms. But I warn you in advance that if you are playing a game of blackmail I'll have no mercy on you."

"I won't ask none. Don't you fear."

Nevill opened the house door, and the two went softly up the dimly lit staircase. The gas-lamps were turned on, revealing the luxuries of the front apartment, and the visitor looked about him with bewildered admiration; he seemed to feel his unfitness for the place, and instinctively buttoned his coat over his shabby linen. But that was only for a moment. With an insolent smile he took possession of a basket-chair, helped himself to a cigar, and poured some brandy from a *carafe* into a glass. Meanwhile Nevill had drawn the window curtains, and when he turned around he had hard work to restrain his anger.

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"What the devil—," he began, and broke off. "You are the cheekiest fellow I ever came across," he added.

"It ain't often," replied the man, puffing away contentedly, "that I get a chance to try a swell's tobacco and liquor. That's prime stuff, sir. I feel more like talking now."

"Then be quick about it. What is your business? And as you have the advantage of me at present, it would be better if you began by stating your name."

"My name," the man paused half a second, "is Timmins—Joe Timmins. It ain't likely that you—"

"No; I never heard it," Nevill interrupted. He sat down at the other side of the table, and endeavored to hide his anxiety and impatience. "I can't spare you much time," he added.

"Sure there ain't nobody within earshot?"

"Quite sure. Make your mind easy."

Mr. Joe Timmins—*alias* Noah Hawker—expressed his satisfaction by a nod. He produced a paper from his pocket, and slowly unfolded it.

"If you will kindly read that," he said.

Nevill took the document curiously. It consisted of half a dozen pages of writing, well-worded and grammatical, but done by a wretched, scrawling hand, and embellished with numerous blots and smudges. From the first he grasped its import, and as he read on to the end his face grew pale and his hands shook. With a curse he started to his feet and made a step toward the grate, where the embers of a coal fire lingered. Then, dropping down again, he laughed bitterly.

"Of course this is only a copy?" he exclaimed.

"That's all, sir," replied Mr. Timmins, with a grim smile. "It ain't likely I'd been fool enough to bring the original here. I did the copy myself, an' though I ain't much of a scholar, I do say as it reads for what it's meant to be, word for word."

"I want better proof than this, my man."

"Ain't you satisfied? Look at the date of the letter, an' where it was written, an' what it says. Could I invent such a thing?"

"No; you couldn't," Nevill admitted. "You have the original letter, you say?"

"I've had that and other papers for years, hid away in a safe place, which is where they lie now. It's only lately I looked into them deep, so to speak, and saw what they might be worth to me. I studied them, sir, and by putting things together I found there were three persons concerned—three chances for me to try."

"You are a cunning fellow," said Nevill. "Why did you bring the letter to me?"

"Because it pointed that way. I knew you were the biggest bird, and the one most likely to pay me for my secret. It was quite a different matter with the others—"

"You haven't seen them?"

"No fear!" Mr. Timmins answered, emphatically. "I spotted you as my man from the first, and I'm glad you've got the sense to look at it right. I hope we understand each other."

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"I don't think there can be much doubt about that," replied Nevill, whose quick mind had grasped the situation in all its bearings; he realized that there was no alternative—save ruin—but to submit to the scoundrel's terms. But the bargain must be made as easy as possible.

"I must know more than you have told me," he went on. "How did the letter come into your possession? And why have you waited more than five years to make use of it?"

Mr. Timmins was not averse to answering the questions. He pulled his chair closer, and in low tones spoke for some minutes, revealing all that Nevill wished to know, and much besides that was of interest.

"You'll find me a square-dealing customer," he concluded, "and I expect the same of a gent like you."

Nevill shrank from him with ill-concealed disgust and repulsion; contact with the lower depths of crime affected his aristocratic sensibilities.

"You swear that you have all the papers?" he asked.

"Yes."

"And they are in a safe place?"

"If I was to drop over dead, sir, they wouldn't be found in a hundred years."

"We'll proceed to the next question," Nevill said, abruptly. "To speak with brutal frankness, Mr. Timmins, what is your price?"

"One thousand pounds in cash, when the papers are handed over," was the prompt reply, "and a signed agreement to pay me as much more when you come into—"

"Do you take me for a millionaire?" cried Nevill. "It's all right about the agreement, but a thousand pounds is utterly beyond my means. Say two hundred."

Mr. Timmins shook his head, and glanced significantly about the room.

"I can't take a shilling less," he firmly replied. "I know a good thing when I have it, sir."

Nevill temporized. He argued and entreated, but without avail. He had an inflexible customer to deal with, who would not be put off with anything but his pound of flesh. A decision that night was impossible, and arrangements were made for another meeting within a few days. Then Mr. Timmins filled his pocket with cigars and took his leave.

Nevill let him out into Jermyn street, locked the door, and returned to his sitting-room. His face was distorted with evil passions, and he spilled the brandy on the table as he poured some into a glass.

“Curse him!” he said, hoarsely. “*He* again! Is he destined to blast my life and ruin my prospects?”

* * * * *

The “do” at Joubert Mansions, Chelsea, by no means fell short of Jack’s forecast; on the contrary, it exceeded it. His memory failed him as to what transpired after three in the morning; he woke at noon in a strange bed, with a sense of overmastering languor, and a head that felt too big for his body. Vance Dickens, with a palette on his thumb, was standing over him. He laughed till the roof threatened to come off.

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"I wish you could see yourself," he howled. "It's not exactly the awakening of Venus. You *wouldn't* be undressed, so we had to tuck you away as you were—some chaps helped to bring you here."

"You beggar!" growled Jack. "You look as fresh as a new penny."

"Two whiskies is my limit, old boy—I don't go beyond it. And I had a page black-and-white to do to-day. Stir yourself, and we'll have breakfast. The kettle is boiling. Wait—I'll bring you a pick-me-up."

The pick-me-up, compounded on the principle that like cures like, did not belie its name. It got Jack to his feet and soothed his head. The two men were about of a size, and Dickens loaned his friend a shirt and collar and a tweed suit, promising to send his dress clothes home by a trusty messenger.

"No; I'll attend to that," demurred Jack, who did not care to tell where he lived.

He nibbled at his breakfast, drank four cups of strong tea, and then sauntered to the window. It was drizzling rain, and the streets between the river and the King's road were wrapped in a white mist.

"This sort of thing won't do," he reflected. "I must pull up short, or I'll be a complete wreck." He remembered the brief, sad note—with more love than bitterness in it—which he had received from Madge in reply to his letter of explanation. "I owe something to her," he thought. "She forgave me, and begged me to face the future bravely. And, by heavens, I'll do it! I hope she doesn't know the life I've been leading since I came back. Work is the thing, and I'll buckle down to it again."

Fired by his new resolve, Jack settled himself in a cozy corner and lighted a pipe. With a stimulating interest he watched Dickens, who had finished his black-and-white, and was doing a water color from a sketch made that summer at Walberswick, a quaint fishing village on the Suffolk coast. He blobbed on the paint, working spasmodically, and occasionally he refreshed himself at the piano with a verse of the latest popular song.

"By Jove, this is Friday!" he said suddenly; "and I'm due at the London Sketch Club to-night. Will you come there and have supper with me at nine?"

"Sorry, but I can't," Jack replied, remembering his promise to Sir Lucius Chesney. "I'm off now. I'll drop in to-morrow and get my dress-suit—don't trouble to send it."

Dickens vainly urged a change of mind. Jack was not to be coerced, and, putting on a borrowed cap and overcoat, he left the studio. He walked to Sloane square, and took a train to the Temple; but he was so absorbed in a paper that he was carried past his station. He got out at Blackfriars, and lingered doubtfully on the greasy pavement,

staring at the sea of traffic surging in the thick, yellow fog. He had reached another turning-point in his life, but he did not know it.

“I’ll go to the ‘Cheese,’” he decided, “and have some supper.”

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CHAPTER XXV.

A FRUITLESS ERRAND.

The merest trifles often have far-reaching results, and Jack's careless decision, prompted by a hungry stomach, made him the puppet of fate. The crossing at Blackfriars station is the most dangerous in London, and he did not reach the other side without much delay and several narrow escapes. It was a shoulder-and-elbow fight to the mouth of the dingy little court in which is the noted hostelry he sought, and then compensation and a haven of rest—the dining-room of the "Cheshire Cheese!" Here there was no trace of the fog, and the rumble of wheels was hushed to a soothing murmur. An old-world air pervaded the place, with its low ceiling and sawdust-sprinkled floor, its well-worn benches and tables and paneling. The engravings on the walls added to the charm, and the head waiter might have stepped from a page of Dickens. Savory smells abounded, and the kettle rested on the hob over the big fireplace, to the right of which Doctor Johnson's favorite seat spoke eloquently of the great lexicographer, who in time past was wont to foregather here with his friends.

Jack was too hungry to be sentimental. He sat down in one of the high-backed compartments, and, glancing indifferently at a man sitting opposite to him, he recognized the editor of the *Illustrated Universe*.

"By Jove!" Hunston cried, in surprise, "you're the very chap I want to see. Where have you been hiding yourself, Vernon? I searched for you high and low."

"I've not been out of town," said Jack. "I intended to look you up, or to send my address, but one thing and another interfered—"

"Yes, I understand," Hunston interrupted. "London is fresh to a man who has just come back from India. I hope you've had your fling, and are ready to do some work."

"As soon as you like," Jack replied.

"I'm glad to hear it—I was afraid you had given me the slip altogether. I want some of your sketches enlarged to double-page drawings, and I am thinking of issuing a photographic album of the snap-shots you took on the frontier."

"That's not a bad idea. I'll come in to-morrow."

"I'll expect you, then. You haven't a studio at present?"

"No."

“Well, I can give you a room on the premises to work in. By the bye, there is a letter for you at the office. It came this morning.”

“I’ll get it to-morrow. I don’t suppose it’s important.”

“It is in a woman’s handwriting,” said Hunston, with a smile.

“A woman?” exclaimed Jack. “Where does it come from—England or abroad?”

“London postmark,” was the reply.

Jack changed color, and a lump seemed to rise in his throat.

“It must be from Madge,” he thought. “But why would she write to me?”

“If you would like the letter to-night—” Hunston went on.

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"If it's no trouble," Jack replied, eagerly.

"None whatever. I must go back to the office, anyway."

Jack was impatient to start, and he no longer felt hungry. He ordered a light supper, however, and ate it hurriedly. He finished at the same time as Hunston, and they left the "Cheese" and plunged into the outer fog and crowds. A short walk brought them to the *Universe* building, which was just closing its doors to the public. Hunston turned up the gas in his office.

"Here you are," he said, taking a letter from a pigeon-hole over the desk.

Jack looked at it sharply, and disappointment banished hope. He scowled savagely, and an half-audible oath slipped from his lips. He had recognized Diane's peculiar penmanship. She was in London, contrary to promise, and had dared to write to him.

"Sit down," said Hunston. "Have a cigar?"

"No; I'm off," Jack answered dully, as he thrust the letter into his pocket unopened.

Hunston regarded him anxiously.

"I'll see you to-morrow?" he asked. "You know it's rather important, and I'll want one of the double pages by next Wednesday."

"I'll turn up," Jack promised, in an absent tone.

With that he hastened away, and as he trod the Strand his brain was in a confused whirl, and he was oblivious of the frothing life about him. He groped across Waterloo Bridge in the fog, and looked wistfully toward the black river. He did not care to read the letter yet. It was enough for the present to know that his wife had broken her word and returned to London, doubtless with the intention of demanding more money. He vowed that she should not have a penny. Fierce anger and resentment rose in his heart as he remembered, with anguish as keen as it had ever been, the blow Diane had dealt him.

"I will show her no mercy," he resolved.

In the privacy of his room, when he had locked the door and lighted the gas, he took out the letter. His face was dark and scowling as he tore it open, and read the few lines that it contained:

"DEAR JACK:—You will fly into a passion when you find that I am in London, but you won't blame me when you learn the reasons that have brought me back. I knew that you had returned from India, and I want to see you. Not having your address, I am sending the letter to the *Universe* office, and I hope it will be delivered to you promptly.

Will you come to 324 Beak street, at half-past eight to-morrow night? The street door will be open. Go to the top of the stairs, and knock at the first door on the left. Do not fear that I shall ask for money, or make other demands. I have much to tell you, of the greatest importance to your future happiness. If you do not come you will regret it all your life. I will expect you. DIANE.”

With a bitter laugh Jack flung the letter on a table. It was not written in French, for Diane was herself of English birth, though of her history before she came to Paris her husband was ignorant; she had never spoken to him of her earlier years, nor had he questioned her about them.

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"Does she think I am a fool, to be taken in so easily?" he said to himself. "It is a lie—a trick! Money is her game, of course. She wants to decoy me to her lodgings, and hopes to make me yield by threats of exposure. And yet she writes with a ring of sincerity—something like her old self in the first days of our marriage. Bah! it is only her cunning."

He read the letter again, and pondered it.

"It was written yesterday," he muttered. "The appointment is for to-night. What could she possibly have to tell me that concerns my future happiness? Nothing! And yet, if she should really be remorseful—By Jove! I *will* go! It can do no harm. But if I find that she has deceived me, and is playing the old game, by heavens! I'll—"

Passion choked his utterance, and he concluded the sentence with a mental threat. He suddenly remembered that he had promised to meet Sir Lucius Chesney at eight o'clock that night.

"I can't do it," he thought. "I'm not fit to talk to any man in this mood. And he would probably detain me more than half an hour. No, I'll write a short note to Sir Lucius, putting off the engagement, and leave it at Morley's."

Whether his decision was a wise one or not, was a question that Jack did not attempt to analyze. He proceeded to carry his plans into effect. It was then seven o'clock, and it took him twenty minutes to write the note to Sir Lucius and exchange his borrowed clothes for a dark suit of his own. He put Diane's letter into a side pocket, so that he might be sure of the address, and then left the house. He did not take a cab, preferring to walk.

He handed the note in at Morley's Hotel, and steered across Trafalgar square. At the top of the Haymarket, to his chagrin, he encountered Jimmie Drexell, who urged him to have a drink at Scott's; he could not well refuse, as it was nearly a fortnight since they had met.

A quarter of an hour slipped by. Jimmie asked a great many questions, but Jack was preoccupied and uneasy, and scarcely answered them. He finally tore himself away on the plea of an urgent engagement, and promised to call at the Albany the next day; he was reluctant to confide in his friend. A distant clock was striking eight-thirty as he turned up the Quadrant.

Regent street was noisy and crowded, but Beak street was gloomy and misty, depressing and lonely, in contrast. Jack found the right number, and as he hesitated before the house—the door of which was partly open—a man came abruptly out. He was tall and slim, dressed in dark clothes, and with a soft hat that concealed all of his

features except an aquiline nose and a black beard and mustache. He stared hard at Jack for an instant, then strode rapidly off to the eastward and was lost in the fog.

“A foreigner, from his actions,” thought Jack.

He pushed the door open, and mounted a steep and narrow staircase. Reaching the first landing, he saw a door on his left. At the bottom a faint streak of light was visible, but his low rapping brought no response. He rapped again—three times, and each louder—but with the same result.

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"No use to keep this up," he concluded, vexatiously. "I am a few minutes late, and she has gone out, thinking that I would not come. There is no mistake about the room. I won't wait—I'll write to her to-morrow, and give her twenty-four hours to get out of London."

He went slowly down the dark stairs, and as he stepped into the street he brushed against a stout, elderly woman. With a muttered apology, he moved aside. The woman turned and looked after him sharply for an instant, then entered the house and closed the door.

Jack thought nothing of the incident. How to put in the evening was the question that concerned him. He was walking undecidedly down the Quadrant when he saw approaching an artist friend whom he did not care to meet. On the impulse of the moment he darted across the street, narrowly missing the wheels of a hansom, and in front of the Cafe Royal he ran into the arms of Victor Nevill.

"Hello, old chap; you *are* in a hurry!" cried Nevill. "What's up now? Seen my uncle?"

Jack was flushed and breathless.

"No; I couldn't manage it," he panted. "I left a note at Morley's for him. I had to make a call—party wasn't at home."

"Where are you bound for? Morley's?"

"No; it's too late. Shall we have some refreshment?"

"Sorry, but I can't," replied Nevill. "I'm going to a reception. Will you come to my rooms at eleven?"

"Yes, if I'm not too far away. But don't count on me. Good-night, in case I don't see you again."

"Good-night," echoed Nevill.

As he looked after Jack, the latter pulled out his handkerchief, and a white object fluttered from it to the pavement. He walked on, unconscious of its loss. Nevill hurried to the spot, and picked up a letter.

"A woman's!" he muttered, as he thrust it quickly into his pocket. "And the writing seems familiar. I'll examine this when I get a chance. Everything is fair in the game I am playing."

Jack wandered irresolutely to Piccadilly Circus, seeking distraction. In the American bar at the St. James' he met a man named Ingram, who suggested that they should go to

see a mutual friend—an artist—who lived in Bedford Park. Jack agreed, and they drove in a cab. They found a lot of other men they knew at the studio, and whisky and tobacco made the hours fly. They left at two o'clock in the morning—a convivial party of five—and they had to walk to Hammersmith before they picked up a hansom. They dropped off one by one, and Jack was the only occupant when he reached Sloane street. It was long past four when the cab put him down at his lodgings on the Surrey side.

CHAPTER XXVI.

A THUNDERBOLT FROM THE BLUE.

Another day dawned, as wet and gloomy as the preceding ones. It was the middle of the morning when Jack got out of bed, and as he dressed he heard the penetrating voices of newsboys ringing through the Waterloo Bridge road. He could not distinguish what they were saying, though he judged that the papers must contain some intelligence of unusual importance. He rang for his breakfast, and his landlady, Mrs. Jones, appeared in person, bringing coffee, rolls and bacon on a tray. Her face was flushed with excitement.

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"Oh, Mr. Vernon, 'ave you 'eard?" she exclaimed. "There was a 'orrible murder last night! I do pity the poor, dear creature—"

"I don't want to be shocked," Jack curtly interrupted. "Murders are common enough. But you might send me up a paper."

"And you won't 'ear—"

"Not now, my good woman."

Mrs. Jones put down the tray, tossed her head, and departed in a huff. The paper arrived five minutes later, and Jack glanced over it while he sipped his coffee. One of the inside pages suddenly confronted him with huge headlines: "The Beak Street Murder!" He read further down the column, and his face turned as pale as ashes; he swayed in his chair.

"My God!" he cried. "It is Diane!"

The report of the affair was enlarged from a briefer account that had appeared in a late edition on the previous night. It seemed that Mrs. Rickett, the landlady and proprietress of 324 Beak street, had discovered the crime at a quarter to ten in the evening. A red stain, coming through the ceiling of her sitting-room, attracted her attention. She went to the room overhead, which was occupied by a female lodger calling herself Diane Merode. The door was locked, and her demands for admittance brought no response. She promptly summoned the police, who broke in the door and found the unfortunate woman, Merode, lying dead in a pool of blood. She had been stabbed to the heart by a powerful blow dealt from behind.

"The murderer left no traces," the *Globe* continued. "He carried off the weapon, and, after locking the door, he took the key. According to medical opinion, the deed was committed about half-past eight o'clock. At that time there were several other lodgers in the top part of the house, but they heard no noise whatever. Fortunately, however, there is a clew. Mrs. Ricketts, who was out making purchases for breakfast, returned about a quarter to nine. As she entered the doorway a man slipped by her and hastened in the direction of Regent street. She had a good look at him, and declares that she would be able to recognize him again. The police are searching for the suspected person."

Jack's breakfast was untasted and forgotten. His trembling hand had upset the coffee, spilling it over the paper. He felt cold in every vein, and his thoughts were in a state of wild chaos. It was hard to grasp the truth—difficult to realize the import of those staring headlines of black type!

"Diane murdered! Diane dead!" he repeated, vacantly. "I can't believe it!"

After the first shock, when his brain began to throw off the numbing stupor, he comprehended the terrible fact. The crime gave him no satisfaction; it never occurred to him that he was a free man now. On the contrary, a dull remorse stirred within him. He remembered his wife as she had been five years before, when she had loved him with as much sincerity as her shallow nature would permit, and her charms and beauty had bound him captive by golden chains. There were tears in his eyes as he paced the floor unsteadily.

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"Poor Diane!" he muttered. "She has paid a frightful penalty for the sins of her wayward life—more than she deserved. She must have been lying dead when I rapped on her door last night. Yes, and the fatal blow had been struck but a short time before! The assassin was the foreign-looking man who came down the stairs as I went up! There can be no doubt of it! But who was he? And what was his motive? A discarded lover, perhaps! What else could have prompted the deed?"

He suddenly paused, and reeled against the wall; he clenched his hands, and a look of sharp horror distorted his face.

"By heavens, this is awful!" he gasped. "I never thought of it before! The police are looking for me—I remember now that I met the landlady when I left the house. I brushed against her and apologized, and she stared straight at me! And the real murderer—the foreigner—appears to have been seen by nobody except myself. What shall I do? It is on me that suspicion has fallen!"

The realization of his danger unnerved and stupefied Jack for an instant. Dread phantoms of arrest and imprisonment, of trial and sentence, rose before his eyes. One moment he determined to flee the country; the next he resolved to surrender to the police and tell all that he knew, so that the real murderer might be sought for without loss of time. But the latter course was risky, fraught with terrible possibilities. The evidence would be strong against him. He remembered Diane's letter. He must destroy it! He hurriedly searched the pockets of the clothing he had worn on the previous night, but in vain.

"The letter is gone—I have lost it!" he concluded, with a sinking heart. "But where and how? And if it is found—"

There was a sharp rap at the door, and as quickly it opened, without invitation. Two stern-looking men, dressed in plain clothes, stepped into the room. Jack knew at once what the visit meant, and with a supreme effort he braced himself to meet the ordeal. It was hard work to stand erect and to keep his face from twitching.

"You are John Vernon?" demanded one of the men.

"Yes."

"I will be very brief, sir. I am a Scotland Yard officer, and I am here to arrest you on suspicion of having murdered your wife, known as Diane Merode, at Number 324 Beak street, last night."

"I expected this," Jack replied. "I have just seen the paper—I knew nothing of the crime before. I am entirely innocent, though I admit that the circumstances—"

"I warn you not to say anything that may incriminate yourself. You must come with me, sir!"

"I understand that, and I will go quietly. I am quite ready. And at the proper time I will speak."

There was no delay. One of the officers remained to search the apartments, and Jack accompanied the other downstairs. They got into a cab and drove off, while Mrs. Jones shook her fist at them from the doorway, loudly protesting that she was a disgraced and ruined woman forever.

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The magistrate was sitting in the court at Great Marlborough street, and Jack was taken there to undergo a brief preliminary formality. Contrary to advice, he persisted in making a statement, after which he was removed to the Holloway prison of detention to await the result of the coroner's inquest.

About the time that the cell-door closed on the unfortunate artist, shutting him in to bitter reflections, Victor Nevill was in his rooms on Jermyn street. Several of the latest papers were spread out before him, and he brushed them savagely aside as he reached for a cigar-box. He looked paler than usual—even haggard.

"They have taken him by this time," he thought. "I was lucky to pick up the letter, and it was a stroke of inspiration to send it to the police. He is guilty, without doubt. I vowed to have a further revenge, my fine fellow, if I ever got the chance, and I have kept my word. But there are other troubles to meet. The clouds are gathering—I wonder if I shall weather the storm!"

* * * * *

Enterprising reporters, aided by official leaking somewhere, obtained possession of considerable facts, including the prisoner's arrest and statement, before two o'clock, and the afternoon journals promptly published them, not scrupling to add various imaginary embellishments. The simple truth was enough to cause a wide-spread and profound sensation, and it did so; for John Vernon's reputation as an artist, and his Academy successes, were known alike to society and to the masses. It was a rare morsel of scandal!

Madge Foster's first knowledge of the murder was gleaned from a morning paper, which, delayed for some reason, was not delivered until her father had gone up to town. Toward evening she bought a late edition from a newsboy who had penetrated to the isolated regions of Grove Park and Strand-on-the-Green, and she saw Jack's name in big letters. When she had read the whole account, the room seemed to swim around her, and she dropped, half fainting, into a chair.

"He is innocent—his story is true!" she cried, feebly. "I will never believe him guilty! Oh, if I could only go to him and comfort him in his great trouble!"

Stephen Foster came home at seven o'clock, but he dined alone. Madge was in her room, and would not come out or touch food. Her eyes were red and swollen, and she had wept until the fountain of her tears was dried up.

At four o'clock that same afternoon Mr. Tenby, the famous criminal solicitor, was sitting in his private office in Bedford street, Strand, when two prospective clients were announced simultaneously, and, by a mistake on the part of the office-boy, shown in together. The visitors were Jimmie Drexell and Sir Lucius Chesney, and, greatly to their

mutual amazement and the surprise of the solicitor, it appeared that they had come on the same errand—to engage Mr. Tenby to look after the interests of Jack Vernon. They were soon on the best of terms.

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"Mr. Vernon is an old friend of mine," Jimmie explained, "and I am going to see him through this thing. I will stake my life on his innocence!"

"I am glad to hear you say that," replied Sir Lucius. "I am convinced myself that he is guiltless—that his story is true in every particular. His face is a warranty of that. I am deeply interested in the young man, Mr. Drexell. I have taken a fancy to him—and I insist on aiding in his defense. Don't refuse, sir. Expense is no object to me!"

"Nor to me," said Jimmie. "But it shall be as you wish."

This understanding being reached, the matter was further gone into. The solicitor, by adroit questioning, drew from Jimmie various bits of information relating to the accused man's past life. His own opinion—he had read all the papers—Mr. Tenby held in reserve behind a sphinx-like countenance, nor did he vouchsafe it when it was finally settled that he should defend the case.

"The circumstantial evidence appears strong—very strong," he said drily. "The situation looks black for Mr. Vernon. But I trust that the police will find the foreign-looking individual whom the accused met coming out of the house, if it is certain that—" He broke off sharply.

"At all events, gentlemen," he added, "be assured that I shall do my best."

This promise from the great Mr. Tenby meant everything. He dismissed his visitors, and they walked as far as Morley's Hotel together, discussing the situation as hopefully as they could. It was evident to both, however, that the solicitor was not disposed to credit Jack's innocence or the truth of his statement.

"I'll spend every dollar I have to get him free," Jimmie vowed, as he went sadly on to the Albany. And much the same thing was in the mind of Sir Lucius, though he wondered why it should be. He was the creature of a whim that dominated him.

The next day was Sunday, and on Monday the coroner held his inquest. The accused was not present, but he was represented by Mr. Tenby, who posed mainly as a listener, however, and asked very few questions. Nothing fresh was solicited. Mrs. Rickett repeated her story, and the letter from the murdered woman, which the prisoner admitted having lost, was put in evidence. The proceedings being merely a prelude to a higher court, the jurors rendered an undecisive verdict. They found that the deceased had been murdered by a person or persons unknown, but that suspicion strongly pointed to her husband, John Vernon. They advised, moreover, that the police should try to find the stranger whom the accused alleged to have seen coming from the house.

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On Tuesday the unfortunate woman was decently buried, at Jimmie Drexell's expense, and on the following day a more formal inquiry was held at Great Marlborough street. Jack was there, and he had a brief and affecting interview with Sir Lucius and Jimmie; he had previously seen his solicitor at Holloway. He repeated to the magistrate the story he had told before, and he was compelled to admit, by the Crown lawyers, that the murdered woman had been his wife, that they had lived apart for nearly six years, and that she had recently prevented him from marrying another woman. What prompted these damaging questions, or how the prosecution got hold of the lost letter, did not appear. Mrs. Rickett positively identified the prisoner, and medical evidence was taken. The police stated that they had been unable as yet to find the missing man, concerning whose existence they suggested some doubt, and that they had discovered nothing bearing on the case in the apartments occupied by either the accused or Diane Merode. Mr. Tenby, who was suffering from a headache, did little but watch the proceedings. The inquiry was adjourned, and John Vernon was remanded in custody for a week.

But much was destined to occur in the interval. The solicitor had a formidable rival in the person of Jimmie Drexell. The shrewd American, keeping eyes and ears open, had formed suspicions in regard to the principal witness for the Crown. And he lost no time in making the most of his clew, wild and improbable as it seemed.

CHAPTER XXVII.

AN AMATEUR DETECTIVE.

On the day of the inquiry at Great Marlborough street, about five o'clock in the afternoon, Jimmie Drexell walked slowly and thoughtfully up the Quadrant. The weather had turned cold, and his top hat and fur-lined coat gave him the appearance of an actor in luck. He was bound on a peculiar errand, and though he hoped to succeed, he was not blind to the fact that the odds were very much against him.

"I shall probably put my foot in it somehow," he reflected dolefully, "and make a mess of the thing. But if I fail, it won't convince me that I am wrong. I had my eye on that woman in court, and she was certainly keeping something back. She seemed confused—in dread of some question that was never asked. And once or twice I thought she was on the point of making some startling revelation. I must play a cunning game, for poor old Jack's sake. If Mrs. Rickett can't save him, and the police don't find the mysterious stranger, I'm afraid he will be in a devilish bad way."

Jimmie turned into Beak street, and pulled the bell of Number 324. He waited several minutes before the landlady came, and then she opened the door but a couple of inches, and peered distrustfully out. Jimmie craftily thrust a foot in, so that the door could not be closed.

“You do not know me, madam,” he said, “but I come as a friend. I wish to have a short conversation with you.”

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Mrs. Rickett's distrust turned to alarm. In her agitation she retreated a little, and Jimmie carried the first outworks and entered the hall.

"I must talk to you privately," he added. "We may be overheard here."

In a tremulous voice the landlady invited him to follow her, and she led the way to a cozy apartment on the ground floor that was half kitchen and half sitting-room. A kettle was steaming merrily on the fire, and overhead an ominous red stain was visible on the ceiling.

Mrs. Rickett sank limply into a chair, and Jimmie, after closing the door and removing his hat, seated himself opposite. He assumed an air of grave importance.

"My good woman, perhaps you can guess why I am here," he began. "I was present to-day at Great Marlborough street police-court. I watched the proceedings closely, and my experience in such cases, and my infallible sense of discrimination, enabled me to make a discovery." He paused for breath, and to note the effect of his peroration; he wondered if the words were right. "I am satisfied," he went on, "that the evidence you gave—"

"Oh, Lor', it's come! it's come!" interrupted Mrs. Rickett. "I knew it would! I've been in fear and tremblin'! Why didn't I speak at the right time? Indeed, I tried to, but I sorter got choked up! Oh, sir, have pity on a lone widow!"

Her face grew white, and she gasped for breath; she threatened to go into a fit of hysterics.

"Come, come; there is nothing to be alarmed about," said Jimmie, who could scarcely hide his delight. "Take comfort, my good woman. You may have been foolish and thoughtless, but I am sure you have done nothing criminal. I am here as a friend, and you can trust me. I wish to learn the truth—that is all. From motives which I can understand, you kept back some important evidence in connection with this sad tragedy —"

"I did, sir—I don't deny it. I didn't tell what I should, though I nearly got the words out a 'eap of times. Please don't carry me off to prison, sir. I knowed you was a police officer in disguise the minute I clapped eyes on you—"

"I have nothing to do with the police," Jimmie assured her.

"Really? Then perhaps you're a detective—a private one?"

"Yes, it is something like that. I am making inquiries privately, in behalf of my unfortunate friend."



“Meaning Mr. Vernon.”

“That’s right. I am convinced of his innocence, and I want to prove it. You need have no fear. On the contrary, if you tell me freely all that you know, you shall be well rewarded.”

Mrs. Rickett took comfort, and fervently declared that her visitor was a real gentleman. She offered him a cup of tea, which he tactfully accepted, and then fortified her inner self with one, preliminary to making her statement.

“I’m that flustered I ’ardly know what I’m doing,” she began, wiping her lips with a corner of her apron. “As to why I didn’t speak before, it’s just this, sir. I liked that young man’s face, ‘im I met comin’ out of my ’ouse that night, and I thought afterward the woman might ’ave done ‘im a bitter wrong, which, of course, ain’t excusin’ ‘im for the dreadful crime of murder, and I wouldn’t ’ave you think it—”

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"Then you know something that might be harmful to Mr. Vernon?" Jimmie interrupted. He began to suspect the situation.

"That's it, sir!"

"But, my good woman, Mr. Vernon is absolutely innocent. Take my word for it. The other man, who left the house just before my friend, is the guilty person."

"I didn't believe in that other man at first," Mrs. Rickett replied; "but it looks like the story might be true, after all. And if it is—"

"Well?"

"Then I can tell something about *him*; leastwise I think so."

"Go on!" Jimmie said, eagerly.

"I 'eard it from that French woman, Dinah Mer—I never *can* pernounce the name," continued Mrs. Rickett. "Pore creature, what a 'orrible end; though it's a mercy it was so sudden like. But, as I was saying, sir, she lodged in my 'ouse last spring, and she come back only three days before the murder. She never 'ad much to say for 'erself, an' I judged she was stiff and proud. You'll believe I was taken all aback, then, when she walked into this 'ere very room one evening—it was last Thursday, the day before the murder—an' takes off her cloak as cool as you please. 'Mrs. Rickett,' she says, 'I'm feelin' badly. Can you give me a cup of tea?' Of course I says yes. I was 'aving my own tea at the time, and I asked 'er to join me, sociable like. By an' by she got to tellin' me about 'erself. It appears she wasn't really French, but was born at Dunwold, a village in Sussex, an' lived there till she was grown up, after which she went abroad. Then she says to me, of a sudden: 'I met a man to-day—'"

"One moment!" Jimmie interrupted. He took a note-book and pencil from his pocket, and jotted down a few lines. "Please resume now," he added. "What did the deceased tell you?"

"She told me that she'd met a man on Regent street from her native English village, meaning Dunwold," Mrs. Rickett went on, "and that he give her a bad fright. 'Is he an enemy of yours?' I asked. 'Yes, a bitter one,' she says, 'an' I'm mortal afraid of him. An' the worst of it is I'm sure he saw me, though I give 'im the slip by going into Swan and Edgar's at one door and out at another. If he finds me, Mrs. Rickett, 'e'll kill me.' I told 'er not to worrit 'erself, an' I clean furgot the matter till the next night, when the pore dear creature was stabbed to the 'eart. I thought I should 'ave lost my 'ead, what with the crowds that gathered, an' the police in the 'ouse, an' the doctors a viewin' the departed corpse, an'—"

Jimmie checked her by a gesture.

“Are you sure you have told me everything?” he asked.

“Every blessed word, sir. It’s the first and only time the woman spoke to me of ’erself.”

Jimmie jotted down a few more notes, and his hand shook like a leaf, so greatly was he thrilled by the value of his discovery. Then he put Mrs. Rickett through a cross-examination, in what he flattered himself was a strictly legal style. Certainly Mr. Tenby could not have done it better, for the landlady had nothing more to tell.

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"I 'ope you're satisfied," she said. "And you won't forget what you promised—that I shouldn't get into trouble?"

"I'll see to that," Jimmie replied. "It can be easily managed. I trust that what you have told me will lead to the acquittal of my friend. Here are ten pounds for you, and, if all goes well, I shall probably add to it at another time."

The landlady thrust the bank notes into her broad bosom. She was overpowered by the munificence of the gift, and poured out her gratitude copiously.

"I've just recollected something," she went on. "There's a secret closet in the room where the pore woman lodged, an' last spring I 'appened to show it to 'er. It sort of took 'er fancy, and—"

"Did the police find it or examine it?" cried Jimmie.

"No, sir. I forgot to speak of it."

"Let me see it, please! It may lead to something of importance."

Mrs. Rickett willingly conducted her visitor through the hall and up the staircase. A sense of the recent tragedy seemed to haunt the room, with its drawn curtains and tawdry furnishings, and the dark stain on the floor. The landlady shuddered, and glanced fearfully around. She made haste to open a narrow closet, and to slide open a disguised panel at the back of it, which disclosed a small recess. Jimmie, who was at her shoulder, uttered a cry of surprise. He saw a gleam of white, and reached for it quickly. He drew out an envelope, unaddressed and sealed, with contents of a bulky nature.

"Bless me! She *did* 'ide something!" gasped Mrs. Rickett. "What can it be?"

"Writing, perhaps," replied Jimmie. "Will you permit me to have this, Mrs. Rickett? I will examine it at my leisure, and tell you about it later."

"I've no objections, sir," the landlady replied, as another five-pound note was slipped into her hand. "Take it and welcome!"

Jimmie thanked her, and pocketed the envelope.

"I will see you again," he said, "and tell you whether I succeed or fail. And, meanwhile, I must ask you to keep my visit a strict secret—to inform no one of what you have told me. And don't breathe a whisper in regard to anything being found in the murdered woman's room. Keep your own counsel."

"I'll do that, sir, never fear. I'm a close-mouthed woman, and know how to hold my tongue, which there ain't many females can say the same. And I'm sure you'll do the right thing by me."

"I will, indeed," Jimmie promised. "You shan't have cause to regret your confidence. And if I can clear my friend through the assistance you have given me, I will be more liberal than I have been on this occasion."

"Thank you, sir, and I 'ope with all my 'eart you'll find the guilty man," Mrs. Rickett declared, vehemently. "I never *did* think Mr. Vernon murdered that pore creature. Ah, but it's a wicked world!"

She accompanied her visitor to the door, showered further effusive gratitude upon him, and gazed after him till he had turned the corner. Overjoyed by his unexpected success, hopeful of achieving great results, Jimmie strode down Regent street, amid the lights and the crowds. The crisp, cold air had dried the pavements, and the stars shone from a clear sky.

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"What luck!" he thought, exultantly. "It was a happy inspiration to go there to-night! Gad, I ought to be in Scotland Yard! There is no doubt that the man who killed Diane was the same fellow she met the day before. He hailed from her native village, and of course he was a discarded lover. It is even possible that he was her husband, in the days before she went to Paris, became a dancer, and married Jack. I must utilize the information to the best advantage. The first thing is to run down to Dunwold, find out all I can, and then put the police on the track. For the present I will dispense with their services, though it seems a bit risky to take matters into my own hands. But I rather fancy the idea of playing detective, and I'll have a go at the business. I won't tell the solicitor what I have discovered, but I think it will be wise to confide in Sir Lucius Chesney. By the bye, he lives somewhere in Sussex. He may be able to help me at the start."

Jimmie remembered the mysterious envelope in his pocket, and it occurred to him that the contents might alter the whole situation, and make a trip to Dunwold unnecessary. He walked faster, impatient to reach the Albany and investigate his prize in safety.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A DISCOVERY.

Jimmie's first move, on entering his chambers, was to lock the door behind him and turn up the gas. Then he produced the envelope, and tore it open, wondering as he did so what penalty the law would exact for such an offense. The enclosure consisted of a dozen closely-written pages of note-paper, dated two days before the murder. It was in the nature of a statement, or confession, which some whim had prompted Diane to put down in writing. Her motive became clearer to Jimmie as he read on. She had meant no treachery to Jack in her letter. She had come to London, a repentant woman, to do him a real service—to open his eyes to various things—and for that purpose she had made the appointment at Beak street on the fatal night. In all likelihood the document hidden in the closet was due to a premonition of impending evil—a haunting dread of the danger that was creeping upon the unfortunate woman.

The statement was in the form of a letter, addressed to Jack Vernon on the first page, and signed "Diane Merode" on the last. It ended quite abruptly, and did not refer directly to the mysterious stranger or to Diane's early life, though it hinted at certain things of importance which she was resolved to tell. But what she disclosed was astounding in itself, and when Jimmie threw down the pages, after reading them attentively, his face showed how deeply he was agitated. It took much to rouse his placid nature to anger, but now his eyes blazed with rage and indignation.

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“By heavens, this is awful!” he said, hoarsely. “It is far worse than I dreamed of! The consummate scoundrel! The treacherous blackguard! There is no need to keep further watch on Victor Nevill. His record is exposed. How true were my suspicions about that money-lending business! He dropped some letters in Diane’s room last spring, which she declares proved him to be a partner in the firm of Benjamin and Company. I believe her—I don’t doubt it. The cursed tout! For how many years has he made use of his social advantages to ruin young men—to decoy them into the clutches of the Jews? It makes my blood boil! And the worst of it all is the part he has played toward poor Jack—a false, black-hearted friend from beginning to end; from the early days in Paris up to the present time. If I had him here now—”

He finished the sentence by banging his clenched fist on the table with a force that made it quiver.

Little wonder that Jimmie was indignant and wrathful! For Diane, weary of being made a cat’s-paw for an unscrupulous villain, remorseful for the misery she had brought on one who once loved her, had confessed in writing all of Victor Nevill’s dark deeds. She had not known at first, she said, that his sole aim had been to injure his trusting friend, else she would have refused to help him. She had learned the truth since, and she did not spare her knowledge of Nevill’s dark deeds and cunning tricks. She told how he had tempted her to desert her husband and flee from Paris with him; how he had met her five years later in London, and planned the infamous scheme which brought Jack and Diane together on Richmond Terrace; and she declared that it was Victor Nevill also who sent the anonymous letters to Madge Foster, the second of which had led to the painful *denouement* in the Ravenscourt Park studio. It was all there in black and white—a story bearing the unmistakable evidence of truth and sincerity.

“This is a private matter,” thought Jimmie, when he had calmed down a little, “and I’m bound to regard it as such. The statement can’t affect the case against Jack—it is useless to Mr. Tenby—and it would be unwise to make it public for the purposes of denouncing Nevill—at least at present. I will put it away carefully, and give it to Jack when his innocence is proved, which I trust will be very soon. As for Nevill, I’ll reckon with the scoundrel at the proper time. I’ll expose him in every club in London, and drive him from the country. He shall not marry Miss Foster—I’ll nip that scheme in the bud and open her eyes—and I’ll let Sir Lucius Chesney know what sort of a man his nephew is. He’ll cut him off with a penny, I’ll bet. But all these things must wait until I find Diane’s murderer, and meanwhile I will lock up the confession and keep my own counsel.”

Taking the letter, he reread the closing lines, studying the curiously-worded phrases.

“I am not writing this to send to you,” Diane concluded, “but to hide in a secret place where it will be found if anything happens to me; life is always uncertain. I have much

more to tell, but I am too weary to put it on paper. You will know all when we meet, and when you learn my secret, happiness will come into your life again.”

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"It's a pretty clear case," reflected Jimmie. "The secret refers, without doubt, to the man who murdered her. And the motive for it must be traced back to her early life at Dunwold. She left a discarded lover behind when she went to Paris. Ah, but why not a husband? Suppose she was never really Jack's wife! In that case it is easy to see what she meant by saying that she would make him happy again. By Jove, I'm anxious to ferret the thing out!"

Jimmie looked at his watch; it was just seven o'clock. He put the letter in his desk, safe under lock and key, and went straight to Morley's Hotel. He dined with Sir Lucius Chesney, and told him what he had learned from his visit to Mrs. Rickett. He made no mention of what he had found in the secret closet, nor did he refer to Victor Nevill.

Sir Lucius was amazed and delighted, hopeful of success. He thoroughly approved Jimmie's plan, and gave him a brief note of introduction to the Vicar of Dunwold.

"I wish I could go with you," he said; "but, unfortunately, I have two important engagements in town to-morrow."

The interview was a long one, and it was eleven o'clock when Jimmie left the hotel. He went straight home to bed, and an early hour the next morning found him gliding out of Victoria station in a South Coast train.

* * * * *

On the previous night, while Jimmie and Sir Lucius were dining at Morley's, Victor Nevill emerged from his rooms in Jermyn street, and walked briskly to Piccadilly Circus. He looked quite unlike the spruce young man of fashion who was wont to disport himself in the West End at this hour, for he wore tweeds, a soft hat, and a rather shabby overcoat. He took a cab in Coventry street, and gave the driver a northern address. As he rode through the Soho district he occasionally pressed one hand to his breast, and a bundle of bank notes, tucked snugly away there, gave forth a rustling sound. The thought of them aggravated him sorely.

"A thousand pounds to that black-mailing scoundrel!" he muttered. "It's a steep price, and yet it means much more than that to me. There was no other way out of it, and I can't blame the fellow for making a hard bargain and sticking to it. If all goes smoothly, and I get possession of the papers, it's ten to one I will be secure, with nothing more to fear. It was fortunate that Timmins picked *me* out. It would have meant ruin to my prospects had he sold his knowledge elsewhere. He is a clever rascal, and he knows that it will be to his interest to keep his mouth shut hereafter. What risk there may be from other quarters is so slight that I needn't worry about it."

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It had not been an easy matter to find the thousand pounds, and in the interval he had twice seen Mr. Timmins, and vainly tried to beat down his price. The money was finally squeezed out of Stephen Foster, with extreme reluctance on his part, and by means which he resented bitterly but was powerless to combat. He had angrily upbraided his unscrupulous young confederate, who would not even tell him for what purpose he wanted the sum. Nevill was indifferent to Stephen Foster's wrath and reproaches. He had accomplished his object, and he was too hardened by this time to feel any twinges of conscience. He was now going to meet the man Timmins by appointment, and buy from him the valuable papers in his possession.

It was nine o'clock when the cab put him down in one of the noisy thoroughfares of Kentish Town. He paid the driver, and entered a public house on the corner. He ordered a light stimulant, and on the strength of it he re-examined the rather vague written directions Mr. Timmins had given him. He came out five minutes later, and turned eastward into a gloomy and squalid neighborhood. He lost his bearings twice, and then found himself at one end of Peckwater street. He took the first turn to the left, and began to count the houses and scan their numbers.

While Nevill was speeding along the Kentish Town road in a cab, Mr. Timmins, *alias* Noah Hawker, was at home in the dingy little room which he had selected for his residence in London. With a short pipe between his teeth, he reclined in a wooden chair, which was tipped back against the wall. On a table, within easy reach of him, were a packet of tobacco and a bottle of stout. A candle furnished light.

"I wonder if the bloke'll turn up," he reflected, as he puffed rank smoke from his mouth. "If he don't he knows what to expect—I ain't a man to go back on my word. But I needn't fear. He'll come all right, and he'll have the dust with him. Is it likely he'd throw away a fortune, such as I'm offerin' him? Not a bit of it! I'll be glad when the thing is done and over with. A thousand pounds ain't to be laughed at. I'll go abroad and spend it, where the sun shines in winter and—"

At this point Mr. Hawker's soliloquies were interrupted by footsteps just outside the room.

"That's my swell," he thought, "and he's a bit early. He must be in a hurry to get hold of the documents."

The door opened quickly and sharply, and two sinewy, plainly-dressed men stepped into the room. Hawker knew his visitors to be detectives.

His jaw dropped, his face turned livid with rage and fear, and he tried to thrust one hand behind him. But the move was anticipated, and he abandoned all thought of resistance when the muzzle of a revolver stared him in the eyes.

“None of that, Hawker,” said the detective who held the weapon. “You’d best come quietly. Didn’t expect to catch us napping, did you?”

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"I ain't done nothin'," panted Hawker, who was breathing like a winded beast.

"I didn't say you had," was the reply, "but you've been missing for a few months. Last spring you stopped reporting yourself and went abroad. We want you for that—nothing else *at present*."

The two final words were spoken with an emphasis and significance that did not escape the prisoner, and brought a desperate look to his face. He seemed about to show fight, but the next instant a pair of irons were clapped on his wrists, and he was helpless.

A brief time was required to search the room, but nothing was found, for all that Hawker owned was on his person. The bedding was pulled apart, and the strip of ragged carpet was lifted up. Then the detectives went downstairs with their prisoner, followed by the indignant and scandalized Mrs. Miggs. She angrily upbraided Mr. Hawker, who received her reproaches in sullen silence. Her breath was spent when she slammed the door shut.

The affair had been managed quietly, without attracting public attention, and the street was as lonely and dark as usual. One of the detectives whistled for a cab, which he had in waiting around the corner, and just then a man walked quickly by the house, glancing keenly at the little group as he passed. He slouched carelessly on into the gloom, but not until he had been recognized by Noah Hawker.

The cab came up, and the prisoner was bundled into it. He was apparently very submissive and unconcerned as he sat with manacled hands between his captors, but when the vehicle rolled into a more populous neighborhood, the street lamps revealed the expression of burning, implacable hatred that distorted his face.

"It was that swell who betrayed me to the police," he thought bitterly. "I was a fool to trust him. I know his little game, but he'll be badly mistaken if he expects to find the papers. They'll be safe enough till I want them again. I'll get square in a way he don't dream of, curse him! Yes, I'll do it! I'd rather have revenge than money. A few days yet, and then—"

"What's that?" asked one of the detectives.

"Nothing," Mr. Hawker replied, in a tone of sarcasm. "I was thinkin' of a friend of mine, what'll be sorry I was took."

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE VICAR OF DUNWOLD.

At a safe distance Victor Nevill stopped and turned around. When the cab rolled away, he walked slowly back, looking keenly at the house as he passed it. His demeanor was calm, but it was only skin deep. He felt like swearing loudly at everybody and everything. His brain was in a whirl of rage and fear, sharp anxiety and keen disappointment. He had recognized Noah Hawker and seen the gleam of steel at his wrists, which explained the situation as clearly as words could have done.

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"The poor chap has been tracked and arrested," he thought; "possibly for some past burglary. Our negotiations are ended for the present, confound the luck! But the papers! By Jove, suppose Hawker had them on his person! If so, they will be found when he is searched. They will be opened and examined, and the whole truth will come out. I can't be sure that Hawker won't give away my part in the affair. I shall be ruined—nothing short of it! What a luckless devil I am!"

The iron hand of Nemesis seemed reaching out to grasp Nevill, and he shuddered as he realized his danger. The rustle of the bank notes in his breast pocket afforded him a momentary relief as he remembered that they would give him a fresh start in case he had to flee from England. Then a sudden thought lightened the gloom still more, and he clutched eagerly at the ray of hope thus thrown out.

"Hawker was too shrewd a man to be caught unawares," he reasoned. "He kept the papers in a secure hiding-place, and he certainly would not have taken them from it until I came and he saw the color of the money. Nor is it likely that the police found them, though they must have searched the place. If they are still in the room, why should I not try to get possession of them? I could square up with Hawker afterward, when he recovers his liberty. By Jove, it's worth risking!"

Nevill walked as far as Peckwater street, debating the question. He did not hesitate long, for there was too much at stake. He quickly made up his mind, and retraced his steps to the dingy house from which the detectives had taken their prisoner. He had planned his course of procedure when the door opened to his knock, and Mrs. Miggs revealed her distrustful countenance. Nevill tendered her half a sovereign on the spot, and asked to see the room lately occupied by Mr. Noah Hawker.

"It's a private matter," he explained. "Yes, I know that Mr. Hawker has just been arrested and taken away. District detectives did that—they were onto him for some breach of the law. I was after him myself, with a Scotland Yard warrant, but I arrived too late, unfortunately."

"Then what do you want?" grumbled the woman.

"I want to search Hawker's room for some papers which I believe he hid there. If I find them you shall be rewarded."

Mrs. Miggs relaxed visibly. She had a wholesome respect for the police, and she did not doubt that Nevill was other than he purported to be—a Scotland Yard officer. She let him into the hall and closed the door.

"You can come up," she said ungraciously, "but I don't think there's anything there."



She lighted a candle and guided Nevill upstairs. He could scarcely restrain his excitement as he entered the little room. He glanced keenly about, noting the half-empty bottle of stout and the dirty glass.

"Did the police search here?" he inquired.

"Of course they did, but they didn't find nothin', 'cause there wasn't anything to find. 'Awker was as poor as Job!"

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"They examined his person?—his clothes, I mean?"

"Yes, an' all they got was a knife, and a pistol, and some loose silver and coppers."

"They didn't discover any papers?"

"No; I'm sure o' that," asserted Mrs. Miggs. "I can't stand 'ere all night," she impatiently added.

Nevill took the hint, and set to work in good spirits. The landlady watched him scornfully while he hauled the carpet and bedding about, and examined all the joints of the few articles of furniture. He then proceeded—there was no fireplace in the room—to tap every part of the walls, and to try the flooring to see if any boards were loose. But the walls were solid and untampered with, and the nails in the floor had clearly not been disturbed for many years. He spent half an hour at his task, and the result was a barren failure. He realized that it would be useless to search further. He looked sharply at the landlady, and said, on a sudden impulse:

"You knew Mr. Hawker pretty well, I think. Perhaps he asked you to oblige him by taking care of the papers I am looking for; they could not possibly be of any advantage to you in the future, and if you have them I should be glad to buy them from you. I would give as much as—"

"I only wish I *did* 'ave them!" interrupted Mrs. Miggs. "I wouldn't 'esitate a minute to turn 'em into money. But I don't know nothin' of them, sir, an' you see yourself they ain't 'id in this room, an' Mr. 'Awker never put foot in any other part of the 'ouse."

The woman's expression of disappointment, her manner, satisfied Nevill that his suspicion was baseless. There was nothing more to be done, so he gave Mrs. Miggs an additional half-sovereign, cautioned her not to speak of his visit, and left the house. His last state of mind was worse than his first, and dread of exposure, tormenting visions of a dreary and perpetual exile from England, not to speak of more bitter things, haunted him as he strode moodily toward the lights of the Kentish Town road.

"The papers may be in that room, hidden so securely as to baffle any search," he said to himself, "and if that is the case there is still hope. But it is more likely that Hawker had them concealed under his clothing or in his boots. I will know in a day or two—if the police find them, they will make the matter public. All I can do is to wait. But the suspense is awful, and I wish it was over."

The next day was cold, sunny and bracing—more like the end of February than the end of November. At nine o'clock in the morning Victor Nevill crawled out of bed after a troubled night; with haggard face and dull eyes he looked down into Jermyn street,

wondering, as he recalled the events of the previous night, what another day would bring forth.

At the same hour, or a little later, Jimmie Drexell was at Hastings. Having to wait some time for another train, he walked through the pretty town to the sea, and the sight of its glorious beauty—the embodiment of untrammelled freedom—made him think sadly of poor Jack in a prison cell.

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"Never mind, I'll have him out soon!" he vowed.

He returned to the station, and was whirled on through the flat, green country to the charming Sussex village of Pevensey, with its ruined old castle and rambling street, and the blue line of the Channel flashing in the distance. His journey did not end here, and he was impatient to continue it. He procured a horse and trap at the Railway Arms, gleaned careful instructions from the landlord, and drove back a few miles along the hedge-lined roads, while the sea faded behind him.

It was eleven o'clock when he reached the retired little hamlet of Dunwold. He put up his vehicle at a quaint old inn, and refreshed himself with a simple lunch. Then he sought the vicarage, hard by the ancient church with its Norman tower, and, on inquiring for Mr. Chalfont, he was shown into a sunny library full of books and Chippendale furniture, with flowers on the deep window-seats and a litter of papers on the carved oak writing-desk.

The vicar entered shortly—an elderly gentleman of benevolent aspect and snowy beard, but sturdy and lithe-limbed for his years, clearly one of those persons who seemed predestined for the placidity of clerical life. After a penetrating glance he greeted his visitor most graciously, and expressed pleasure at seeing him.

"I am sure that you are a stranger to the neighborhood," he continued. "Our fine old church draws many such hither. If you wish to go over it, I can show you many things of interest—"

"At another time," Jimmie interrupted, "I should be only too delighted. I regret to say that it is quite a different matter that brings me here—hardly a pleasant one. This will partly explain, Mr. Chalfont."

He presented the letter Sir Lucius had given him, and when it had been opened and read he poured out the whole story of Diane's life and end, of the charge against Jack Vernon, and the clew that the murdered woman had revealed to her landlady.

The vicar rose from his chair, showing traces of deep agitation and distress.

"A friend of Sir Lucius Chesney is a friend of mine," he said, hoarsely. "I shall be glad to help you—to do anything in my power to clear your friend. I believe that he is innocent. Your sad story has awakened old memories, Mr. Drexell. And it is a great shock to me, as you will understand when I tell you all. I seldom read the London papers, and it comes as a blow and a surprise to me that Diane Merode has been murdered."

"Then you know her by that name?" exclaimed Jimmie. "This is indeed fortunate, Mr. Chalfont. I feared that you would find it difficult to identify the woman—to recall her. And the man whom she proclaimed as her enemy—do you know *him*?"

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“Judge for yourself,” replied the vicar, as he sat down and settled back in his chair. “I will state the facts, distinctly and briefly. That will not be hard to do. To begin, I have been in this parish for thirty years, and I am familiar with its history. I remember when Diane Merode’s father came home with his young bride. He was a doctor, with some small means of his own, and he lived in the second house beyond the church. His wife was a French girl, well educated and beautiful, and he met and married her while on a visit to France; his name was George Hammersley. They settled here in the village, but I do not think that they lived very happily together. Their one child, christened Diane, was born two years after the marriage. She inherited her mother’s vivacious disposition and love of the world, and I always felt misgivings about her future. She spent five years at a school in Paris, and returned at the age of sixteen. Within less than two years her parents died within a week of each other, of a malignant fever that attacked our village. A friend of George Hammersley’s took Diane to his home—it appeared that she had no relatives—and nine months later she married a man, nearly twenty years her senior, who had fallen passionately in love with her.”

“By Jove, so she was really married before!” cried Jimmie. “But I beg your pardon, Mr. Chalfont, for interrupting you.”

“This man, Gilbert Morris, was comparatively well-to-do,” resumed the vicar. “He owned a couple of ships, and when at home he lived in Dunwold; but he was away the greater part of his time, sailing one or the other of his vessels to foreign ports. Six months after the marriage he started on such a voyage, leaving his youthful bride with an old housekeeper, and just three weeks later Diane disappeared. Every effort was made to trace her, but in vain, and it was believed that she had gone to London. Before the end of the winter our village squire returned from abroad, and declared that he had recognized Diane in Paris, and that she was a popular dancer under the name of Merode. About the same time it was reported in the papers that the vessel on which Gilbert Morris had set sail, the *Nautilus*, had been lost in a storm, with all hands on board. There was every reason to credit the report—”

“But it was not true,” exclaimed Jimmie. “I can read as much in your eyes, Mr. Chalfont. What became of Gilbert Morris?”

CHAPTER XXX.

RUN TO EARTH.

The vicar hesitated for a moment, and then looked his companion straight in the face.

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"That unhappy man, Gilbert Morris, was spared by the sea," he answered in a low voice. "The ship was lost, as reported, but he and two of the crew were picked up by a sailing vessel and carried to South America. Months elapsed before they were heard of, and Diane had been gone for a year when Gilbert Morris returned to Dunwold. The news was a terrible shock to him, for he had loved his wife with all the depth of a fierce and fiery nature. His affection seemed to turn to rage, and it was thought best to keep him in ignorance of the fact that Diane had been seen in Paris. Brain fever prostrated him, and when he recovered physically from that his mind was affected—in other words, he was a homicidal lunatic, with a fixed determination to find and kill his wife."

"By heavens!" exclaimed Jimmie. "The scent is getting warm! What was done with the man?"

"He was sent to a private madhouse in Surrey."

"And is he there still?"

"No, he is not," the vicar replied agitatedly. "He succeeded in making his escape more than a week ago. The matter was hushed up, because it was hoped that he would come back to Dunwold, and that he could be quietly captured here. But, in spite of the utmost vigilance, he was not found or traced; and this very morning I received a letter from Doctor Bent, the proprietor of the madhouse, stating that he had furnished the London police with a description of his missing patient."

"That settles it!" cried Jimmie, jumping up in excitement. "Gilbert Morris is the man!"

"Yes, I fear he is the murderer," assented the vicar. "But, pray sit down, Mr. Drexell, and we will talk further of the sad affair. Lunch will be ready in a few minutes, and I shall be glad to have you—"

"Thanks, but I can't stop," Jimmie interrupted, as he put on his hat. "I'm off to town to help the police to find the guilty man."

"But surely, my dear sir, this is a very hasty conclusion—"

"Can you doubt for one moment, in your heart, that Gilbert Morris killed that unfortunate woman?"

"The circumstances all point that way," admitted Mr. Chalfont. "Yes, it is a pretty clear case. It is distressing to think that the crime might have been prevented, had the police been promptly informed of the madman's escape. But only Doctor Bent and myself were aware of the fact—excepting the attendants of the institution. As I told you, I knew nothing of the murder until you informed me, and it was unlikely that the doctor—though he must have read the papers—should have associated the deed with Morris; he took

charge of the place quite recently, and could not have been well posted regarding the history of his patient.”

“He ought to be arrested for criminal neglect,” Jimmie said, indignantly. “He is in a measure responsible for the murder. Gilbert Morris might have been retaken almost at once had the police been informed at the time of the escape.”

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"Just so!" the vicar agreed.

"I'm off now," continued Jimmie. "I can't thank you enough, Mr. Chalfont, for the information you have given me. I shall never forget it, nor will my friend."

"It was Providence that guided you here," replied the vicar. "His ways are indeed marvelous. I wish you every success, Mr. Drexell. I trust that your friend will speedily be at liberty, and if I can be of any further service, count upon me."

"I'll do that, sir," Jimmie assured him.

The next minute he was striding away from the vicarage, and it was a very perspiring and foam-flecked horse that pulled up outside the Railway Arms at Pevensey half an hour later. Jimmie jumped out of the trap, paid the account, and dashed over to the station. His arrival was timely, for he learned that a through London train was due in ten minutes. During the interval he found some vent for his impatience in sending a wire to Sir Lucius Chesney, as follows:

"Success! Back in town at three o'clock."

Never had a railway journey seemed so long and tiresome to Jimmie as that comparatively short one, in a fast train, from Pevensey to London. He had a book and a newspaper, but he could not read; he smoked like a furnace, and glared from the window at the flying landscape. He reached Victoria station at five minutes past three, and just outside the gates he met Sir Lucius.

"I barely got here—I was afraid I'd miss you," the latter exclaimed breathlessly; his face was a more ruddy color than usual. "I have something to tell you," he went on; "something that happened—"

"It's a jolly good thing, sir, that I went down to Pevensey," Jimmie interrupted, as he drew his companion aside to a quieter spot. "You'll scarcely believe what I have found out. The vicar told me a most amazing story, and we spotted the murderer at once. He is Diane's real husband—Jack was never legally married to her—and his name is Gilbert Morris. He is an escaped lunatic—"

"Gad, sir, the man is arrested!" gasped Sir Lucius. "He is in custody!"

"Arrested?" cried Jimmie.

"Yes; the afternoon papers are full of it. The police, furnished with a description of the man and other information, apprehended him this morning early in a Lambeth lodging-house. There were blood-spots on his clothing, and in his pocket they found a bloodstained knife. He became violent the moment he was arrested, and raved about his wife Diane, who had deserted him, and how he had killed her to avenge his honor."

“That’s the man!” said Jimmie. “He’s as mad as a March hare. Thank God, they have got him!”

“We’ll soon have Mr. Vernon out,” Sir Lucius replied, cheerfully.

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Jimmie told the rest of the story in the privacy of a cab, which drove the two rapidly from Victoria station to Bedford street, Strand. They found Mr. Tenby in his office, and had a long interview with him. The solicitor had read the papers, and when he was put in possession of the further important facts bearing on the case, he promised to secure Jack's release as soon as the necessary legal formalities could be complied with. Moreover, he promised to go to Holloway within the course of an hour or two, and communicate the good news to the prisoner. Jimmie was anxious to go with him, but he reluctantly abandoned the project when the solicitor assured him that it would be most difficult to arrange.

"Be patient, gentlemen, and leave the matter in my hands," said Mr. Tenby. "I think we shall have Mr. Vernon out of Holloway to-morrow, and without a stain on his character."

Sir Lucius and Jimmie walked to Morley's and separated. The former went into the hotel, half resolved to pack up his luggage and take an early train in the morning to Priory Court; he was tired of London and the recent excitement he had passed through, and longed for his country home. But, on second thought, he altered his mind, and concluded to wait until Jack Vernon was a free man again; he was strangely interested in the unfortunate young artist, and was as anxious as ever to have a talk with him on matters of a private nature.

Jimmie went to his chambers in the Albany, where he removed the dust of travel and changed his clothes. He did not at once go out to dinner, though he was exceedingly hungry. He was impulsive and impatient, and he had conceived a plan whereby he might punish Victor Nevill's perfidy without a public exposure, and at the same time, he fondly hoped, do Jack a good turn.

"It will hardly be safe to wait longer," he reflected, "for all I know to the contrary, the girl may be married to-morrow. She will be glad to have her eyes opened—I can't believe that she is in love with that blackguard. As for Sir Lucius, I would rather face a battery of guns than tell the dear old chap the shameful story to his face. But it must be told somehow."

Jimmie proceeded to carry out his plans. He took Diane's last letter from its hiding-place, and sitting down to his desk he made two copies of it, prefacing each with a brief explanation of how the statement had come into his hands. It was a laborious task, and it kept him busy for two hours. At nine o'clock he went out to dinner, and on the way to the Cafe Royal he dropped two bulky letters into a street-box. One was addressed to "Miss Madge Foster, Strand-on-the-Green, Chiswick, W." The other to "Sir Lucius Chesney, Morley's Hotel."

* * * * *



It was ten o'clock in the morning, and the phenomenal November weather showed no signs of breaking up. The sun shone brightly in Trafalgar Square, and the people and busses, the hoary old Nelson Column and its guardian lions, made a picture more Continental than English in its coloring.

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But to Sir Lucius Chesney the world looked as black as midnight. He paced the floor of his room, purple of countenance and savage of eye, letting slip an occasional oath as he glanced at the sheets of Jimmie's letter scattered over the table. The blow had hit him hard; it had wounded him in his most tender spot—his family honor. His first paroxysm of rage had passed, but he could not think calmly. His brain was on fire with pent-up emotions—shame and indignation, bitter grief and despair, a sense of everlasting disgrace. One moment he doubted; the next the damning truth overwhelmed him and defied denial.

"I can't believe it!" he muttered hoarsely. "It is too terrible! How blindly I trusted that boy! I heard rumors about him, and turned a deaf ear to them. I knew he was inclined to be dissolute and extravagant, but I never dreamed of this! To drag the name of Chesney in the dirt! My nephew a liar and a traitor, a scoundrel of the blackest dye to a confiding friend, a seducer, a tout for money-lenders, a consort of blood-sucking Jews! By heavens, I will confront him and hear the truth from his own lips! How do I know that this letter is not a forgery? Perhaps young Drexell never saw it."

It was a slim ray of hope, but Sir Lucius took some comfort from it. He put on his hat, took his stick, and marched down stairs. As he passed through the office, a clerk handed him a letter that had just been brought in. He waited until he was outside to open it, and with the utmost amazement he read the contents:

"Pentonville Prison.

"My Dear Sir Lucius—I see by the papers that you are in town temporarily, so I address you at Morley's instead of Priory Court. A very curious thing has happened. A few days ago a prisoner who was arrested for a breach of the police-supervision rules, but who was really wanted for a much more serious affair, was put in my charge. This man, Noah Hawker by name, sent for me and made a secret communication. He stated that in his room in Kentish Town, where he was arrested, he had hidden some papers of the greatest importance to yourself. He told me how to find them, and yesterday I got them and brought them here. They are in a sealed parcel, and the prisoner begs that they shall not be opened except in your presence, as he wishes to tell you the whole story. So I thought it best to send for you, and if convenient I should like to see you about noon to-day. I am posting this early in the morning, and hope you will receive it in good time.

"Sincerely your old friend,

"Major Hugh Wyatt."

"I don't understand it," thought Sir Lucius. "It is certainly most perplexing. What can it mean? I haven't seen Wyatt for years, but I remember now that he was appointed Governor of Pentonville some time ago. But who the deuce is the man Hawker? I

never heard the name. Papers of importance to me? What could they be, and how did the fellow get them? There must be some mistake. And yet—”

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He read the letter a second time, and it turned his curiosity into a desire to probe the mystery. He concluded to put off the interview with his nephew, and see him later in the day. He hailed a cab, and told the driver to take him to Pentonville.

CHAPTER XXXI.

NOAH HAWKER'S DISCLOSURE.

True to his word, Mr. Tenby set the machinery of the law in motion as speedily as possible. About the time when Sir Lucius entered the dreary prison that lies Islington way, Gilbert Morris was brought to the court in Great Marlborough street. Jack was present—a warder had driven him from Holloway—and he promptly identified the prisoner as the man he had seen coming out of the Beak street house on the night of the murder. Other evidence was given by the police, and by Doctor Bent, the proprietor of the Surrey madhouse, and the lunatic was remanded for a week; he boasted of his crime while in the dock. Then a brief formality ensued. Mr. Tenby applied for the discharge of his client, and the magistrate granted it without delay.

A free man again! The words seemed to ring in Jack's ears as he left the court, but they meant little to him, so broken was he in spirit, so ashamed of his unmerited disgrace. Jimmie was waiting for him, and congratulated him fervently. The two shook hands with the solicitor, and thanked him for what he had done, and they went quickly off in a cab.

They drove to the Albany, and Jimmie ordered a lunch to be sent in from a Piccadilly restaurant. Jack ate listlessly, but a bottle of prime claret made him slightly more cheerful and brought some color to his bleached features. He listened to all that Jimmie had to tell him—sat with stern eyes and compressed lips while the black tale of Victor Nevill's treachery was recounted. He could not doubt when he had read the murdered woman's statement; it breathed truth in every word. He crushed the letter in his hand, as though he wished it had been the throat of his enemy.

"Nevill, of all men!" he said, hoarsely. "A creeping serpent, masked as a friend, who struck in the dark! And he was Diane's seducer! The night he stole her from me we were drinking together in a *brasserie* in the Latin Quarter! And, as if that was not deep enough injury, he brought her to England, years afterwards, to ruin my new-found happiness. There was never such perfidy! I was not even aware that he knew Madge, much less that he loved her. But she surely won't marry him now."

"No fear!" replied Jimmie. "His retribution has come. I hope you will pay him with interest, old chap."

"I should like to confront him," Jack answered, "but it is wiser not to; my passion would get the better of me. No, his punishment is sufficient—you have avenged me, Jimmie."

Think of what it means! Public exposure, perhaps, exile from England, and the loss of his uncle's fortune. He will suffer more keenly than any low-born criminal who goes to the gallows. I will leave him to his conscience and his God."

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"You are too merciful—too kind-hearted," said Jimmie. "But it is useless to argue with you. Come, we'll talk of something more cheerful and forget the past. What are you going to do with yourself? Go back to the art?"

"I have no plans," Jack replied, bitterly, "except that I shall get away from London as speedily as possible. I can't live down my disgrace here. I shall probably return to India. I have lost faith in human nature, Jimmie, and learned the mockery of friendship—no, by heavens, I shouldn't say that! I have found out what true friendship is. I can never forget what you did for me—how you worked to prove my innocence!"

"It was a pleasure, old fellow. I would have done a hundred times as much. But don't talk blooming nonsense about leaving London. Many an innocent man falls under suspicion—there is not a shadow of disgrace attached to it. Stay here and work! Go back to your studio! And marry the woman you love. Why shouldn't you, now that you are free in every sense? I'll bet anything you like that she cares for you as much as ever—"

"Stop; don't speak of *her*!" cried Jack. "I can't bear it!—the memory of Madge brings torments! It is too late, too late! She can never be mine!"

"That's where you're wrong, old chap," said Jimmie. "I know how you feel about it, but do listen to reason—"

He broke off at the sound of a couple of sharp raps, and jumping up he opened the door. Into the room strode Sir Lucius Chesney, with a bewildered, agitated look on his face that had been there when he drove away from Pentonville Prison an hour before, after a lengthy and most startling interview with Major Wyatt and Noah Hawker.

"I hope you will excuse my abrupt intrusion," he said quickly. "I went to Tenby's office, and he told me where you had gone. I have something very important to say—I will come to it presently. Mr. Vernon, I congratulate you! No one can rejoice more sincerely than myself that this black cloud has passed away from your life. You have paid dearly for your youthful folly—your boyish infatuation with a French dancer."

"You are very kind, sir," said Jack, as he accepted the proffered hand. "I hear that I owe very much to you."

"Thank God that I have found you—that I am not left desolate in my old age!" exclaimed Sir Lucius, to the wonder of his companions. "Prepare for a great surprise! Your name is not Vernon, but Clare?"

"John Clare is my real name, sir."

"And your father was Ralph Vernon Clare?"

“Yes!”

“I knew as much—it was needless to ask,” replied Sir Lucius, in tremulous tones; something glistened in his eye. He rested an arm on Jack’s shoulder and looked into his face. “My dear boy, your mother was my youngest sister,” he added. “And you are my nephew!”

A rush of color dyed Jack’s cheeks, and he stared in amazement; he could not grasp the meaning of what he had just heard.

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"You my uncle, Sir Lucius?" he asked, hoarsely.

"Yes, your uncle!"

"By Jove, another mystery!" gasped Jimmie. "It knocks me breathless! I don't know what to make of it—it beats the novels that wind up with the discovery of the lost heir. At all events, Jack, you seem to be in luck. I'm awfully glad!"

"I—I'm afraid I don't quite understand," said Jack. "I never suspected anything of the sort, though I remember that my mother rarely spoke of her early life."

"That was her secret," replied Sir Lucius, "and she intended that it should be revealed to you after her death. Read these; they will tell you all!"

Sir Lucius produced three papers from his pocket. Jack took them, and he uttered an exclamation of astonishment as he saw that one was a certificate of his mother's marriage, and another one of his own birth. The third paper was a letter of a dozen closely written sheets, in the dead hand that was so familiar to him. As he read on, his face showed various emotions.

"My poor mother, how she suffered!" he said when he had finished the letter. "It is a strange story, Sir Lucius. So my mother was your sister, and Victor Nevill was the son of another sister, which makes him my cousin. My mother knew all these things, and yet she never told me!"

"She had the family pride," Sir Lucius answered, with a sigh. "As for Victor Nevill, I regret that the blood of the Chesneys runs in his veins. But he is no longer any kin of mine—I disown him and cast him out. The letter does not speak so harshly of me as I deserve. Your mother, Mary, was my youngest and favorite sister—I loved her the more because my wife had died childless soon after my marriage. I got a clever young artist, Ralph Clare, down to Priory Court to paint Mary's portrait, little foreseeing what would happen. She fell in love with him, and fled to become his wife. It was a blow to my family pride, and my anger was stronger than my grief. I vowed that I would never forgive her, and when she wrote to me—once a short time after her flight, and again ten years later—I returned her letters unopened. Her elder sister was as obdurate as myself, and refused to have anything to do with her. After the death of Elizabeth—that was Victor Nevill's mother—I began to feel that I had been too harsh with Mary. My remorse grew, giving me no rest, until recently I determined to find her. But I might never have succeeded had not mere chance helped me. I was struck by your resemblance to Mary when I first met you in Lamb and Drummond's shop—"

He paused for a moment, struggling with emotion.

“My boy, believe that I am truly repentant,” he added. “I have no kith or kin left but you—you alone can fill the empty void in my heart. You must reign some day at Priory Court. Will you forgive me, as your mother did at the last?”

For an instant Jack hesitated. He remembered the sad story he had just read—the story of his father’s illness and death, his mother’s subsequent privations, and the grief caused by her brother’s cruel conduct, which continued to cloud her life after a distant relative bequeathed to her a comfortable legacy. Then he recalled the last words of the letter, and his face softened.

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"I forgive you freely, Sir Lucius," he said. "My mother wished me to bear you no malice, and I cannot disregard that."

"God bless you, my boy," replied Sir Lucius. "You have made me very happy."

"Come, cheer up!" put in Jimmie. "This is an occasion for rejoicing. I have a bottle of champagne, and we'll drink it to the health of the new heir."

The wine was produced and opened, and Jack responded to the toast.

"There is one thing that puzzles me, Sir Lucius," he said. "How did these papers come into your hands? They could not have been among my mother's effects."

"Are you aware," replied Sir Lucius, "that on the night after your mother's death her house in Bayswater was broken into by a burglar?"

"Yes; I remember that."

"Well, the burglar carried off, among other things that were of little value, this packet of papers. He concealed them at his lodgings in Kentish Town, and he chose a curious and ingenious hiding-place—a recess behind a loose brick in the wall of the house, just below his window. Shortly afterward the rascal—his name was Noah Hawker—was caught at another crime, and sent to penal servitude for a term of years. On his release last spring, on ticket-of-leave, he went abroad, and when he returned to England several weeks ago he resurrected the papers from their place of security, studied them, and saw an opportunity for gain. He knew that they concerned three persons—you, Victor Nevill and myself—and he was cunning enough to start with Victor. He hunted him up and offered to sell the papers for a thousand pounds. My nephew agreed to buy them, intending to destroy them and thus retain his position as my sole heir—"

"Then Nevill knew who I was?" exclaimed Jack.

"Yes, he knew recently," Sir Lucius replied. "I must break off to tell you that while I was abroad this summer, Victor promised, at my request, to try to trace your mother; but I am thoroughly convinced now that he made no effort whatever, and that he lied to me basely, with the hope of making me believe that the task was impossible. To proceed, the man Hawker was traced by the police, and arrested while awaiting the arrival of my nephew to complete the sale of the papers. He believed that Victor had betrayed him, and he determined to be revenged. So he confided in the Governor of Pentonville Prison, who went to the house in Kentish Town and found the papers. Then, at the prisoner's earnest request, he sent for me this morning. I went to Pentonville and Hawker told me the whole story and gave me the papers. By the way, he knows you, my boy, and declares that you did him a kindness not long ago. It was at a night-club, I think, and you bandaged a wound on his head."

"I remember!" exclaimed Jack. "By Jove, was that the man?"

"The fellow *must* have been intent on revenge," said Jimmie, "to incriminate himself so deeply."

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"That can't make much difference to Hawker, and he knows it," Sir Lucius replied. "It seems that he was really wanted for something more serious than failing to report himself to the police. In fact, as you will be surprised to learn, he is said to be mixed up in the robbery of the Rembrandt from Lamb and Drummond. His pal was arrested in Belgium, and has confessed. Hawker is aware that there is a clear case against him, and I understand that he has made some sensational disclosures. I heard this from the Governor of Pentonville, who happens to be an old friend of mine. He hinted that the matter was likely to be made public in a day or two."

"Meaning the theft of the real Rembrandt," said Jack. "I don't suppose it will throw any light on the mystery of the duplicate one."

"It may," replied Sir Lucius; and he spoke more truly than he thought. Major Wyatt had been too discreet to tell all that he knew.

CHAPTER XXXII.

HOW THE DAY ENDED.

It was a day of strange events and sudden surprises. To Jack the propitious fates gave freedom and a relative whose existence he had never even suspected before; to Sir Lucius Chesney they brought a fresh interest in life, a nephew whom he was prepared to take to his heart. Let us see how certain others, closely connected with our story, fared before the day was ended.

Victor Nevill spent the afternoon at one of his clubs, where he won pretty heavily at cards and drank rather more brandy than he was accustomed to take. Feeling consequently in good spirits, he determined to carry out a plan that he had been pondering for some time. He left the club at six o'clock, and an hour later a cab put him down at the lower end of Strand-on-the-Green. Mrs. Sedgewick admitted him to Stephen Foster's house. The master had not returned from town, she said, but Miss Foster was at home. Nevill asked to see her, and was shown into the drawing-room, where a couple of red-shaded lamps were burning. He was too restless to sit down, and, sauntering to the window, he drew aside the curtains and looked out at the river, with the lights from the railway bridge reflected on its dark surface.

"There is no reason why I shouldn't do it—no reason why I should fear a refusal on her part," he thought. "The clouds have blown over. Noah Hawker's silence can be explained only in one way. The papers are hidden where he is certain that they cannot be found, and no doubt he intends to let the matter rest until he gets out of jail. As for Jack, it is not likely that he will ever learn the truth or cross my path again. The grave tells no secrets. I hope he will leave England when he is released. That will probably be to-day, since the real murderer has been found."

He turned away from the window, and smiled complacently as he dropped into a big chair.

“Yes, I will do it,” he resolved. “I shall ask Madge to marry me within a fortnight or three weeks, and we will go down to Nice or Monte Carlo—I’ll risk taking half of that thousand pounds. I dare say my uncle will be a bit cut up when he hears the news; but I won’t tell him for a time, and after he sees my wife he will be only too eager to congratulate me. Any man might be proud of such—”

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Soft footsteps interrupted his musing, and the next instant the door opened. Madge entered the room, holding in one white hand a crumpled letter. She wore a gown of lustrous rose-colored material, with filmy lace on the throat and bosom, and her splendid hair strayed coyly over her neck and temples. She had never looked more dazzlingly lovely, Nevill thought, and yet—

He rose quickly from the chair, and then the words of greeting died on his lips. He recoiled like a man who sees a ghost, and a sharp and sudden fear stabbed him. In Madge's face, in her flushed cheeks and blazing, scornful eyes, he read the signs of a woman roused to supremest anger.

"How dared you come?" she cried, in a voice that he seemed never to have heard before. "How dared you? Have you no shame, no conscience? Go! Go!"

"Madge! What has happened?"

"Not that name from you! I forbid it; it dishonors me!"

"I will speak! What does this farce mean?"

"Need you ask? I know all, Victor Nevill! I know that you are a liar and a traitor—that you are everything wicked and vile, infamous and cowardly! Heaven has revealed the truth! I know that Diane Merode was never Jack's wife! It was you, his trusted friend, who stole her from him in Paris six years ago! You, who found her in London last spring, and persuaded her to play the false and wicked part that crushed the happiness out of two lives! That is not all; but it would be useless to recount the rest of your dastardly deeds. Oh, how I despise and hate you! Your presence is an insult—it is loathsome! Go! Leave me!"

Nevill had listened to this tirade with a madly throbbing heart, and a countenance that was almost livid. He was stunned and bewildered; he did not understand how it was possible for detection to have overtaken him. His first impulse was to brazen the thing out, on the chance that the girl's accusations were prompted more by surmise than knowledge.

"It is false!" he cried, striving to compose himself. "You will be sorry for what you have said. Has John Vernon told you these lies?"

"I have not seen him; he probably knows nothing as yet. But he *will* learn all, and if you are within his reach—"

"This is ridiculous nonsense," Nevill hoarsely interrupted. "It is the work of an enemy. Some one has been poisoning your mind against me. Who is my accuser?"

"Diane Merode!" cried Madge, hissing the words from her clenched teeth. "She accuses you from the grave! Here! Take this and read it—it is a copy of the original. And then deny the truth if you dare!"

Nevill clutched the proffered letter—the girl did not give him Jimmie's extra enclosure. He read quickly, merely scanning the written pages, and yet grasping their fateful import. He must have been more than human to hide his consternation. The blow fell like a thunderbolt: betrayal had come from the quarter whence he would have least expected it—from the grave. His lips quivered uncontrollably. The pages dropped to the floor.

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"Now do you deny it?" Madge demanded. "Answer, and go!"

"I deny everything," he snarled hoarsely. "It is a forgery—a tissue of lies! Believe me, Madge! Don't spurn me! Don't cast me off! I will prove to you—"

"I say go!"

The girl's voice was as hard and cold as steel. She pointed to the door as Nevill made a step toward her. Her ravishing beauty, lost to him forever, maddened him. For an instant he was tempted to fly at her throat and bruise its loveliness. But just then a bell pealed loudly through the house. The front door was heard to open, and voices mingled with rapid steps. An elderly man burst unceremoniously into the room, and Nevill recognized Stephen Foster's clerk and shop assistant. Bad news was stamped on his agitated face.

"What is the matter, Hawkins?" Madge asked, breathlessly.

"Oh, how can I tell you, Miss Foster? It is terrible! Your father—"

"What of him?"

"He is dead! He shot himself in his office an hour ago. The police—"

The girl's cheeks turned to the whiteness of marble. She gave one cry of anguish, reeled, and fell unconscious to the floor. Mrs. Sedgewick rushed in, wringing her hands and wailing hysterically.

"See to your young mistress—she has fainted," Nevill said, hoarsely. "Fetch cold water at once."

He looked once at Madge's pale and lovely face—he felt that it was for the last time—and then he took Hawkins by the arm and pulled him half-forcibly into the hall.

"Tell me everything," he whispered, excitedly. "What has happened?"

"There isn't much to tell, Mr. Nevill," the man replied. "Two Scotland Yard men came to the shop at five o'clock. They arrested my employer for stealing that Rembrandt from Lamb and Drummond, and they found the picture in the safe. Mr. Foster asked permission to make a statement in writing—he took things coolly:—and they let him do it. He wrote for half an hour, and then, before the police could stop him, he snatched a pistol from a drawer and shot himself through the head. I was so flustered I hardly knew what I was doing, but I thought first of Miss Madge, whom I knew from often bringing messages and parcels to the house—"

"The statement? What was in it?" Nevill interrupted.

“I don’t know, sir!”

“Then I must find out! I am off to town—I can’t stop! You will be needed here, Hawkins. Do all that you can for Miss Foster.”

With those words, spoken incoherently, Nevill jammed on his hat and hurried from the house. He turned instinctively toward Grove Park, remembering that the nearest railway station was there. He was haunted by a terrible fear as he traversed the dark streets with an unsteady gait. Worse than ruin threatened him. He shuddered at the thought of arrest and punishment. He could not doubt that Stephen Foster had written a full confession.

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"He would do it out of revenge—I put the screws on him too often!" he reflected. "*I must* get to my rooms before the police come; all my money is there. And I must cross the Channel to-night!"

All the past rose before him, and he cursed himself for his blind follies. He just missed a train at Chiswick station, and in desperation he took a cab to Gunnersbury and caught a Mansion House train. He got out at St. James' Park, and pulling his coat collar up he hastened across to Pall Mall. He chose the shortest cut to Jermyn street, and on the north side of St. James' Square, in the shadow of the railings, he suddenly encountered the last man he could have wished to meet.

"My God, my uncle!" he cried, staggering back.

"You!" exclaimed Sir Lucius, in a voice half-choked by anger. "Stop, you can't go to your rooms—the police are there. What do they want with you?"

"You will find out in the morning," Nevill huskily replied; he reeled against the railings.

"It can't be much worse—I know all about your dastardly conduct!" said Sir Lucius. "Hawker has given me the papers, and I have found poor Mary's son—the friend you betrayed. But there is no time for reproaches, nor could anything I might say add to your punishment. If you have a spark of conscience or shame left, spare me the further disgrace of reading of your arrest in the papers. Get out of England—"

"My money is in my rooms!" gasped Nevill. "I can't escape unless you help me!"

Sir Lucius took a handful of notes and gold from his pocket.

"Here are a hundred pounds—all I have with me," he said. "It will be more than sufficient. Don't lose a moment! Go to Dover, and cross by the night boat. And never let me see you or hear from you again! I disown you—you are no nephew of mine! Do you understand? You have ruined your life beyond redemption—you can't do better than finish it with a bullet!"

Nevill had no words to reply. He seized the money with a trembling hand, and crammed it into his pocket. Then he slunk away into the darkness and disappeared.

On the following day a new sensation thrilled the public, and it may be imagined with what surprise Sir Lucius Chesney and Jack Vernon—who had especial cause to be interested in the revelation—read the papers. The story was complete, for Mr. Shadrach, the Jew who managed business for the firm of Benjamin and Company, took fright and made a full confession. The *Globe*, after treating at length of the arrest and subsequent suicide of Stephen Foster, continued its account as follows:

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“The history of the two Rembrandts forms one of the most curious and unique episodes in criminal annals, and not the least remarkable feature of the story is the manner in which it is pieced together by the statement of Stephen Foster and the confession of Noah Hawker. When Lamb and Drummond purchased the original Rembrandt from the collection of the late Martin Von Whele, and exhibited it in London, Stephen Foster and his confederate, Victor Nevill, laid clever plans to steal the picture. They knew that a duplicate Rembrandt, an admirable copy, was in the possession of Mr. John Vernon, the well-known artist, who was lately accused wrongfully of murder. By a cunning ruse Foster stole the duplicate, and on the night of the robbery he exchanged it for the real picture, while Nevill engaged the watchman in conversation in the Crown Court public-house. But two other men, Noah Hawker and a companion called the Spider, had designs on the same picture. Hawker, while prowling about, saw Stephen Foster emerge from Crown Court, but thought nothing of that circumstance until long afterward. So he and the Spider stole the false Rembrandt which Foster had substituted, believing it to be the real one.

“Hawker and his companion went abroad, and when they tried to dispose of their prize in Munich they learned that it was of little value. They sold it, however, for a trifling sum, and the dealer who bought it disposed of it as an original to Sir Lucius Chesney. On his return to England, hearing for the first time of the robbery, Sir Lucius took the painting to Lamb and Drummond and discovered how he had been tricked. Meanwhile Hawker and his companion quarreled and separated. Both had been under suspicion since a short time after the theft of the Rembrandt, and when the Spider was arrested in Belgium, for a crime committed in that country, he made some statements in regard to the Lamb and Drummond affair. Hawker, coming back to London, fell into the hands of the police. He had before this suspected Stephen Foster’s crime, and when he found how strong the case was against himself, he told all that he knew. Scotland Yard took the matter up, and quickly discovered more evidence, which warranted them in arresting Foster yesterday. They found the original Rembrandt in his safe, and the unfortunate man, after writing a complete confession, committed suicide. His fellow-criminal, Victor Nevill, must have received timely warning. The police have not succeeded in apprehending him, and it is believed that he crossed to the Continent last night.”

It was not until the middle of the day that the papers printed the complete story. Sir Lucius and Jack had a long talk about that and other matters, and in the afternoon they went together to the house at Strand-on-the-Green, and left messages of sympathy for Miss Foster; she was too prostrated to see any person, Mrs. Sedgewick informed them. Three days later, after the burial of Stephen Foster, Jack returned alone. He found the house closed, and a neighbor told him that Madge and Mrs. Sedgewick had gone away and left no address.

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It was a bitter disappointment, and it proved the last straw to the burden of Jack's troubles. For a week he tried vainly to trace the girl, and then, at the earnest request of Sir Lucius, he went down to Priory Court. There fever gripped him, and he fell seriously ill.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONCLUSION.

For weeks Jack hovered between life and death, and when the crisis was finally passed, and he found himself well on the road to convalescence, the new year was a month old. His first thoughts were of Madge, whose disappearance was still a mystery; he learned this from Jimmie, who came down to Priory Court more than once to see his friend. He had decided to spend the winter in England, and since Jack's illness he had been trying to find the girl.

By medical advice the patient was sent off to Torquay, in Devonshire, to recuperate, and Sir Lucius, who was anxious to restore his nephew to perfect health again, accompanied him. Jimmie remained in London, determined to prosecute his search for Madge more vigorously than ever. Sir Lucius, who, of course, knew the whole story, himself begged Jimmie to spare no pains.

In the mild climate of Devon the days dragged along monotonously, and Jimmie's letters spoke only of failure. But Jack grew stronger and stouter, and in looks, at least, he was quite like his old self, with a fine bronze on his cheeks, when he returned with Sir Lucius to Priory Court in March. It was the close of the month, and many a nine days' wonder had replaced in the public interest the tragic death of Stephen Foster, the exposure of Benjamin and Company's nefarious transactions, and the solved mystery of the two Rembrandts. The world easily forgets, but not so with the actors concerned.

Jack had been at Priory Court two days, and was expecting a visit from Jimmie, when the latter wired to him to come up to town at once if he was able. Sir Lucius was not at home; he was riding over some distant property he had recently bought. So Jack left a note for him, drove to the station, and caught a London train. He reached Victoria station at noon, and the cab that whirled him to the Albany seemed to crawl. Jimmie greeted him gladly, with a ring of deep emotion in his mellow voice.

"By Jove, old fellow," he cried, "you are looking splendidly fit!"

"Have you succeeded?" Jack demanded, impatiently.

"Yes, I have found her," Jimmie replied. "It was by a mere fluke. I went to a solicitor on some business, and it turned out that he was acting for Miss Foster—you see her father left a good bit of money. He was close-mouthed at first, but when I partly explained how

matters stood, he told me that the girl and her old servant, Mrs. Sedgewick, went off to a quiet place in the country—”

“And he gave you the address?”

“Yes; here it is!”

Jack took the piece of paper, and when he glanced at it his face flushed. He wrung his friend's hand silently, looking the gratitude that he could not utter, and then he made a bolt for the door.

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"I'm off," he said, hoarsely. "God bless you, Jimmie—I'll never forget this!"

"Sure you feel fit enough?"

"Quite; don't worry about that."

"Well, good luck to you, old man!"

Jack shouted good-by, and made for Piccadilly. He sprang into the first cab that came along, and he reached Waterloo just in time to catch a Shepperton train. He longed to be at his destination, and alternate hopes and fears beset him, as he watched the landscape flit by. He drew a deep breath when he found himself on the platform of the rustic little station. It was a beautiful spring-like day, warm and sunny, with birds making merry song and the air sweet and fragrant. He started off at a rapid pace along the hedge-bordered road, and, traversing the length of the quaint old village street, he stopped finally at a cottage on the farther outskirts. It was a pretty, retired place, lying near the ancient church-tower, and isolated by a walled garden full of trees and shrubbery.

Jack's heart was beating wildly as he opened the gate. He walked up the graveled path, between the rows of tall green boxwood, and suddenly a vision rose before him. It was Madge herself, as lovely and fair as the springtime, in a white frock with a pathetic touch of black at the throat and waist. She approached slowly, then lifted her eyes and saw him. And on the mad impulse of the moment he sprang forward and seized her. He held her tight against his heart, as though he intended never to release her.

"At last, darling!" he whispered passionately. "At last I have found you! Cruel one, why did you hide so long? Can you forgive me, Madge? Can you bring back the past?—the happiness that was yours and mine in the old days?"

At first the girl lay mutely in his arms, quivering like a fragile flower with emotions that he could not read. Then she tried to break from his embrace, looking at him with a flushed and tear-stained face.

"Let me go!" she pleaded. "Oh, Jack, why did you come? It was wrong of you! I have tried to forget—you know that the past is dead!"

"Hush! I love you, Madge, with a love that can never die. I won't lose you again. Be merciful! Don't send me away! Is the shadow of the past—the heavy punishment that fell upon me for boyish follies—to blast your life and mine? Have I not suffered enough?"

The girl slipped from his arms and confronted him sadly.

“It is not that,” she said. “I am unworthy of you, Jack. What is your disgrace to mine? Would you marry the daughter of a man who—”

“Are you to blame for your father’s sins?” Jack interrupted. “Let the dead rest! He would have wished you to be happy. You are mine, mine! Nothing shall part us, unless—But I won’t believe that. Tell me, Madge, that you love me—that your feelings have not changed.”

“I do love you, Jack, with all my heart, but—”

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He stopped her lips with a kiss, and drew her to his arms again.

"There is no but," he whispered. "The shadows are gone, and the world is bright. Dearest, you will be my wife?"

He read his answer in her eloquent eyes, in the passion of the lips that met his. A joy too deep for words filled his heart, and he felt himself amply compensated for all that he had suffered.

* * * * *

The marriage took place in June, at old Shepperton church, and Jimmie was best man. Sir Lucius Chesney witnessed the quiet ceremony, and then considerably went off to Paris for a fortnight, while the happy pair traveled down to Priory Court, to spend their honeymoon in the ancestral mansion that would some day be their own. And, later, Jack took his wife abroad, intending to do the Continent thoroughly before buckling down in London to his art; he could not be persuaded to relinquish that, in spite of the sad memories that attached to it.

Jimmie took a sudden longing for his native heath, and returned to New York; but it is more than likely that he will spend a part of each year in England, as so many Americans are eager to do. Madge does not forget her father, unworthy though he was of such a daughter; and to Jack the memory of Diane is untempered by bitter feelings; for he knows that she repented at the last. The Honorable Bertie Raven has learned his hard lesson, and his present conduct gives reasonable assurance that he will run a straight course in the future, thanks to the friend who saved him. Noah Hawker is doing five years "hard," and Victor Nevill is an outcast and an exile in Australia, eking out a wretched existence on a small income that Sir Lucius kindly allows him.

As for the two Rembrandts, the original, of course, reverted to Lamb and Drummond. The duplicate hangs in the gallery at Priory Court, and Sir Lucius prizes it highly because it was the main link in the chain of circumstances that gave him a nephew worthy of his honored name.

THE END.