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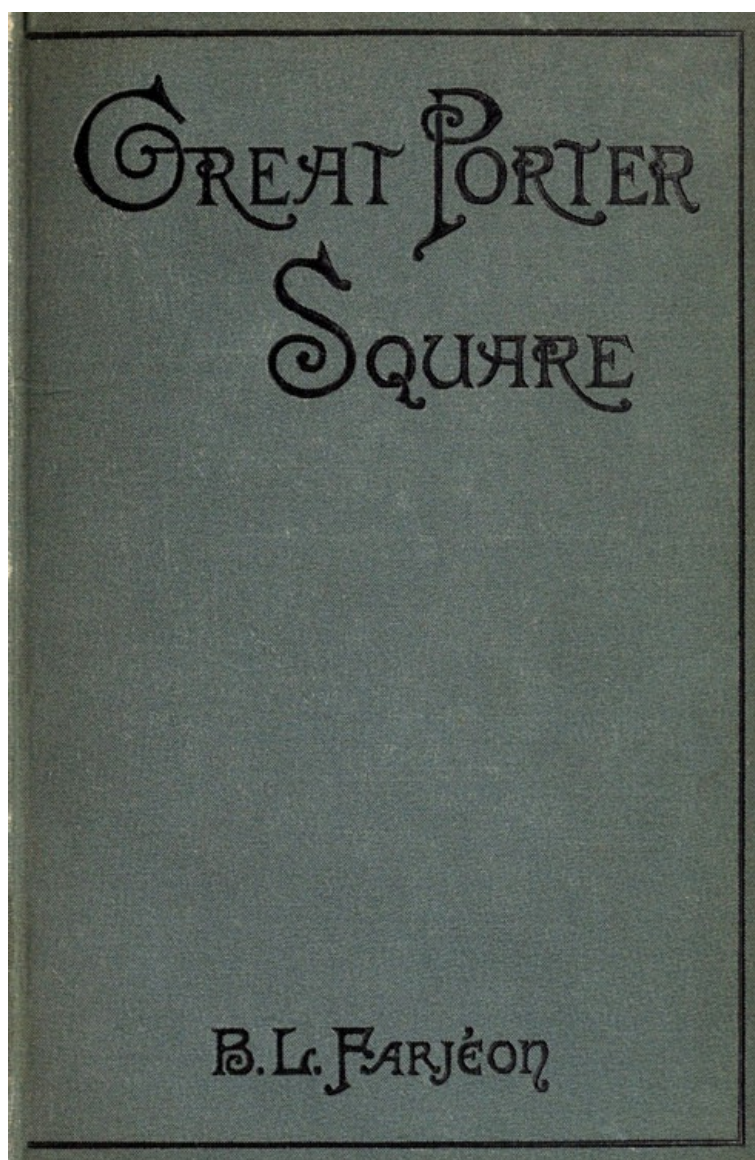
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*** START OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GREAT PORTER SQUARE: A MYSTERY. V. 2



GREAT PORTER SQUARE: A MYSTERY.

BY
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Shadows," etc.*

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOLUME II.

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GREAT PORTER SQUARE: A MYSTERY.

[1]

CHAPTER XX.

THE "EVENING MOON" CONCLUDES ITS NARRATIVE, AND AFFORDS A FURTHER INSIGHT INTO THE CHILD-LIKE

IN the hope of her husband's return, and looking forward with sweet mysterious delight to the moment when she would hold her baby to her breast, Mrs. Holdfast was a perfectly happy woman—a being to be envied. She had some cause for anxiety in the circumstance that she did not hear from her husband, but she consoled herself with the reflection that his last letter to her afforded a sufficient explanation of his silence. She mentally followed his movements as the days passed by. Some little time would be occupied in settling his son's affairs; the young man most likely died in debt. Mr. Holdfast would not rest satisfied until he had ascertained the exact extent of his unhappy son's liabilities, and had discharged them. With Frederick's death must be cleared away the dishonour of his life.

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"Now that he was dead," said the widow, "I was ready to pity and forgive him."

Her baby was born, and her husband had not returned. Day after day she looked for news of him, until she worked herself into a fever of anxiety. The result was that she became ill, and was ordered into the country for fresher air. But she could not rest. Her husband's return appeared to be delayed beyond reasonable limits. Could anything have happened to him in the wild part of the world in which Frederick had met his death? She did not dream that in the tragedy which had occurred in the very heart of London, the murder in Great Porter Square, with which all the country was ringing, lay the answer to her fears. In her delicate state of health she avoided the excitement of the newspapers, and for weeks did not look at one. Thus, when her health was to some extent established, and she had returned to her house in London, she had no knowledge of the murder, and was in ignorance of the few particulars relating to it which the police had been enabled to bring to light. She knew nothing of the arrest of Antony Cowlrick, of the frequent adjournments at the police-court, and of the subsequent release of this man whose movements have been enveloped in so much mystery.

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It happened during her illness that a friend, who witnessed the anxiety of her mind and sympathised with her, wrote to America for information concerning Mr. Holdfast, anticipating that the reply to his letter would enable him to communicate good news to her; and it also happened, most singularly, after a lapse of time, that it was to this very friend Mrs. Holdfast appealed for advice as to how she should act.

"I felt as if I was going mad," are the widow's words. "I could endure the terrible suspense no longer."

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She called upon her friend, not being aware that he had written to America on her behalf. On the table was a letter with the American post-mark on the envelope, and as her friend, in a hurried manner, rose to receive her, she observed that he placed his hand upon this letter, as though wishing to conceal it from her sight. But her quick eyes had already detected it.

"I did not know," she said, after she had explained the motive of her visit, "that you had correspondence with America."

He glanced at his hand, which still covered the letter, and his face became troubled.

"This," he said, "is in answer to a special letter I sent to the States concerning Mr. Holdfast."

"Ah," she cried, "then I am interested in it!"

"Yes," he replied, "you are interested in it."

Her suspicions were aroused. "Is that the reason," she asked, "why you seek to hide it from me?"

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"I would not," he replied, "increase your anxiety. Can you bear a great shock?"

"Anything—anything," she cried, "rather than this terrible torture of silence and mystery!"

"I wrote to America," then said her friend, "to an agent, requesting him to ascertain how and where your husband was. An hour before you entered the room I received his answer. It is here. It will be best to hide nothing from you. I will read what my correspondent says." He opened the letter, and read: "I have made inquiries after Mr. Holdfast, and am informed, upon undoubted authority, that he left America for England some weeks ago."

Mrs. Holdfast's friend read this extract without comment, but Mrs. Holdfast did not appear to realize the true import of the information.

"Do you not understand?" asked her friend. "Mr. Holdfast, some weeks ago, left America for England."

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"Impossible," said the bewildered woman; "if he were here—in England—I should not be with you at this moment, asking you to assist me to find him."

Her friend was silent.

"Help me!" she implored. "Do you think he is here?"

"I am certain that he has left America," was the reply.

A new fear assailed her. "Perhaps," she whispered, "the ship he sailed in was wrecked."

"That is not probable," said her friend. "Mr. Holdfast, as a man of the world and a gentleman of means, undoubtedly took passage in a fast steamer. In all human probability your husband landed at Liverpool within nine or ten days of his departure from New York."

"And then?" asked Mrs. Holdfast.

"Who can say what happened to him then? It is, of course, certain that his desire was to come to you without delay."

"He would not have lingered an hour," said Mrs. Holdfast. "An hour! He would not have lingered a moment. He would be only too eager, too anxious, to rejoin me. And there was another motive for his impatience—his child, whose face he has never seen, whose lips he has never kissed! Unhappy woman that I am!"

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Her friend waited until she had somewhat mastered her grief, and then he asked her a question which opened up another channel for fear.

"Was your husband in the habit of carrying much money about with him?"

"A large sum; always a large sum. He often had as much as a thousand pounds in notes in his pocket-book."

"It was injudicious."

"He was most careless in money matters," said Mrs. Holdfast; "he would open his pocket-book in the presence of strangers, recklessly and without thought. More than once I have said to him that I should not wonder if he was robbed of it one day. But even in that case—suppose he *had* incited some wretch's cupidity; suppose he *was* robbed—it would not have prevented him from hastening to me and his child."

"Do not imagine," said her friend, "that in what I am about to say I desire to add to your difficulties and distress of mind. The length of time since you have heard from your husband—the fact that he left America and landed in England—make the case alarming. Your husband is not a man who would calmly submit to an outrage. Were an attempt made to rob him he would resist."

"Indeed he would—at the hazard of his life."

"You have put into words the fear which assails me."

"But," said Mrs. Holdfast, clinging to every argument against the horrible suspicion now engendered, "had anything of the kind happened, it would have been in the newspapers, and would have been brought to my ears."

"There are such things," said her friend, impressively, "as mysterious disappearances. Men have been robbed and murdered, and never more heard of. Men have left their homes, in the midst of crowded cities, intending to return within an hour, and have disappeared for ever."

It is easier to imagine than to describe the state of Mrs. Holdfast's mind at these words. They seemed, as she expressed it, "to drain her heart of hope."

"What would you advise me to do?" she asked, faintly.

"To go at once to a lawyer," was the sensible answer, "and place the matter in his hands. Not an hour is to be lost; and the lawyer you consult should be one who is familiar with criminal cases. I have the address of such a gentleman, and I should recommend you to drive to his office immediately, and lay the whole case before him."

Mrs. Holdfast took the advice given to her, and drove at once to the lawyer who was recommended to her. He listened to her story, and allowed her to tell it in her own way without interruption; and when she had finished, he put a variety of questions to her, many of which appeared to her trivial and unnecessary. Before she left the office the lawyer said,

"If your husband is in England, we will find him for you."

With this small modicum of comfort she was fain to be satisfied; but as she rode home she shuddered to think that she had seen on the lawyer's lips the unspoken words, "dead or alive." That is what the lawyer meant to express: "If your husband is in England, we will find him for you, dead or alive." Another of his actions haunted her. At a certain point of the conversation, the lawyer had paused, and upon a separate sheet of paper had made the following memorandum—"Look up the murders. How about the murder in Great Porter Square?" She was curious to see what it was he had written with so serious an air, and she rose and looked at the paper, and read the words. How dreadful they were! "Look up the murders. How about the murder in Great Porter Square?" The appalling significance of the memorandum filled her with terrible forbodings.

But what were the particulars of the murder in Great Porter Square, of which till now she had never heard, and what possible relation could they bear to her? She could not wait for the lawyer; she had placed the matter in his hands, but the issue at stake was too grave for her to sit idly down and make no effort herself to reach the heart of the mystery. That very evening she ascertained that in a certain house, No. 119 Great Porter Square, a cruel murder had been committed, and that the murdered man had not been identified. On the date of this murder she was in the country, endeavouring by quietude to regain her health and peace of mind; her baby at that time was nearly two months old, and for weeks before the date and for weeks afterwards she had not read a newspaper. Now that she learned that the murder might, even by the barest possibility, afford a clue to the mystery in which she was involved, she felt as if it would be criminal in her to sleep until she had made herself fully acquainted with all the details of the dreadful deed. She went from shop to shop, and purchased a number of newspapers containing accounts of the discovery of the murder, and of the accusation brought against Antony Cowlrick. When the lawyer called upon her the following morning he found her deeply engaged in the study of these papers. He made no remark, divining the motive for this painful duty.

"I have not closed my eyes all night," she said to him plaintively. "Where is Great Porter Square?"

"My dear lady," he replied, "it is not necessary for you to know the locality of this terrible crime. It will not help you to go there. Remain quiet, and leave the matter with me. I have already done something towards the clearing-up of the mystery. Do not agitate yourself needlessly; you will require all your strength."

He then asked her if she had a portrait of her husband. She had a photograph, taken at her request the day before their marriage.

"Mr. Holdfast was above these small vanities," she said, and suddenly checked herself, crying, "Good God! What did I say? *Was* above them! *Is* above them, I mean. He cannot be dead—he cannot, he cannot be dead! I had to persuade him to have the picture taken. It is here—in this locket."

She gave her lawyer the locket, and he departed with it. When he called upon her again in the evening, his manner was very grave and sad.

"Did your husband make a will?" he asked.

"Yes," she replied, "and gave it me in a sealed envelope. I have it upstairs, in a safe, in which I keep my jewels. It is dated on the day on which he forbade his son Frederick ever again to enter his house. Would you like to see it?"

"It will be as well," said the lawyer, "for you to place it in my care. I shall not break the seal until the present inquiry is terminated. It will be very soon—very soon. Are you strong enough to hear some bad news, or will you wait till to-morrow? Yes, yes—it will be better to wait till to-morrow. A good night's rest—"

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She interrupted him impetuously. It would be death to her to wait, she declared, and she implored him to tell her the worst at once. Reluctant as he was, he saw that it would be the wisest course, and he told her, as tenderly and considerately as he could, that the portrait she had given him exactly resembled the description of the man who was found murdered in Great Porter Square.

"To-morrow morning," he said, "we shall obtain the order to exhume the body. A most harrowing and painful task awaits you. It will be necessary for you to attend and state, to the best of your belief, whether the body is that of your lost husband?"

Our readers will guess how this painful inquiry terminated. Mr. Holdfast bore upon his person certain marks which rendered identification an easy task; a scar on his left wrist, which in his youth had been cut to the bone; a broken tooth, and other signs, have placed beyond the shadow of a doubt the fact that he is the man who took a room on the first floor of No. 119 Great Porter Square, and was there ruthlessly and strangely murdered on the night of the 10th of July. So far, therefore, the mystery is cleared up.

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But the identification of the body of the murdered man as that of a gentleman of great wealth, with a charming wife, and shortly after the strange death of his son Frederick, who was the only person whose life was likely to mar his happiness—the facts that this gentleman arrived in London, and did not return immediately to his home; that he proceeded, instead, to a common Square in a poor neighbourhood, and engaged a room without giving his name; that during the few days he lived there he received only one visitor, a lady who came and went closely veiled—these facts have added new and interesting elements of mystery to the shocking affair. Whether they will assist in bringing the murderer to justice remains to be seen.

Mrs. Holdfast has been and is most frank and open in her communications to our Reporter, who, it will be presently seen, has not confined his inquiries to this lady alone. In other circumstances it would have been natural, on the part of Mrs. Holdfast, that she should have been less communicative on the subject of the domestic trouble between herself and Mr. Holdfast and his son; but as she justly observed,

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"Perhaps by and bye something may occur which will render it necessary that I shall be examined. The murderer may be discovered—I shall pray, day and night, that he or she may be arrested! In that case, I should have to appear as a witness, and should have to tell all I know. Then I might be asked why I concealed all these unhappy differences between father and son. I should not know how to answer. No; I will conceal nothing; then they can't blame me. And if it will only help, in the smallest way, to discover the wretch who has killed the noblest gentleman that ever lived, I shall be more than ever satisfied that I have done what is right."

We yield to this lady our fullest admiration for the courageous course she has pursued. She has not studied her own feelings; she has laid bare a story of domestic trouble and treachery as strange as the most ingenious drama on the French stage could present—such a story as Sardou or Octave Feuillet would revel in; and, without hesitation, she has thrown aside all reserve, in the light of the great duty which is before her, the duty of doing everything in her power to hunt the murderer down, and avenge her husband's death. It is not many who would have the moral courage thus to expose their wounds to public gaze, and we are satisfied that our narrative will have the effect of causing a wide and general sympathy to be expressed for this most unfortunate lady.

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We now come to other considerations of the affair. The gentleman who was murdered was a gentleman of wealth and position in society. He loved his wife; between them there had never been the slightest difference; they were in complete accord in their views of the conduct of the unhappy young man at whose door, indirectly, the primary guilt of the tragedy may be laid. The reason why Mr. Holdfast did not write to his wife for so long a period is partly explained by the account he gives, in his last letter to her, of the injury he received in his right hand. We say partly, because, a little further on, our readers will perceive that this reason will not hold good up to the day of his death. Most positively it may be accepted that the deepest and strongest motives existed for his endeavour to keep the circumstance of his being in London from the knowledge of his wife. Could these motives be discovered—could any light be thrown upon them—a distinct point would be established from which the murderer might be tracked. Our Reporter put several questions to Mrs. Holdfast.

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"Is it an absolute certainty that Frederick Holdfast is dead?" he asked.

She gazed at him in wonderment. "Who can doubt it?" she exclaimed. "There is my husband's letter, saying he had traced his son to Minnesota, and was journeying after him. There is the account in the newspaper of the death of the misguided young man in a small town in Minnesota. The editor of the newspaper, knowing nothing whatever of any of us, could scarcely have invented such a paragraph—though we know they *do* put strange things in the American papers; but this, unhappily, is too near the truth."

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"Certainly," said our Reporter, "the presumption would be a wild one—but it is possible; and I seldom shut my mind to a possibility."

Mrs. Holdfast was very agitated. "It is *not* possible—it is *not* possible!" she cried, repeating the asseveration with vehemence. "It would be too horrible to contemplate!"

"What would be too horrible to contemplate?"

"That he followed his father to London"—

She paused, overcome by emotion. Our Reporter took up the cue. "And murdered him?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the lovely widow, in a low tone, "and murdered him! I would not believe it—no, I would not believe it! Bad and wicked as he is, he *could* not be guilty of a crime so horrible. And, after all, it was partly my fault. Why did I not grow up into the likeness of an ugly old witch—?"

She paused again, and smiled. There is in this lovely lady so much animation and vitality, so much pure love of life, so much sunlight, that they overcome her against her will, and break out in the midst of the gloomiest fits of melancholy and depression. Hers is a happy, joyous, and impulsive nature, and the blow that has fallen upon her is all the more cruel because of her innate brightness and gaiety of disposition. But it is merciful, also, that she is thus gifted. She might not otherwise have sufficient strength to bear up against her affliction.

"We will, then," said our Reporter, "dismiss the possibility—which I confess is scarcely to be indulged in even by such a man as myself. As to your being beautiful, a rose might as reasonably complain that nature had invested it with grace of form and loveliness of colour." Mrs. Holdfast blushed at this compliment. "You are right in saying that such an idea as Frederick Holdfast being alive is too horrible to contemplate. The American newspaper says that his body was identified by a gentleman who knew him in Oxford, and who happened to be travelling through the State of Minnesota. It is a strange coincidence—nothing more—that on the precise day on which Frederick Holdfast ended his career, a friend should have been travelling in that distant State, and should have given a name to the dead stranger who was found near the laughing waters of Minnie-ha-ha."

Mrs. Holdfast replied with a sweet smile. "Yes, it is a strange coincidence; but young gentlemen now-a-days have numbers of acquaintances, hundreds I should say. And everybody travels now—people think nothing of going to America or Canada. It is just packing up their Gladstone bag, and off they go, as happy as you please. *I* couldn't do it. I *hate* the sea; I hate everything that makes me uncomfortable. I love pleasure. Strange, isn't it, for me, a country girl, to be so fond of life and gaiety, and dancing and theatres? But we can't help our natures, can we? I would if I could, for you must think me a dreadful, dreadful creature for talking in this way just after my husband has been brutally killed! Don't think ill of me—don't! It is not my fault, and I am suffering dreadfully, dreadfully, though I *do* let my light heart run away with me!"

"How can I think ill of you?" said our Reporter; "you are child and woman in one."

"Really!" she cried, looking up into his face with a beaming smile. "Are you really, really in earnest?"

"You may believe me," replied our Reporter, "for my errand here is not a personal one, but in pursuance of my professional duties; and although you charm me out of myself, I must be faithful."

"Ah," said Mrs. Holdfast, "that is the way of you men. So stern, and strict, and proper, that you never forget yourself. It is because you are strong, and wise—but you miss a great deal—yes, indeed, indeed you do! It would spoil the sunshine if one stopped while one was enjoying the light and warmth, to ask why, and what, and wherefore. Don't you think it would? Such a volatile, impressionable creature as Lydia Holdfast does not stop to do such a wise and foolish thing—we can be both wise and foolish in a breath, let me tell you. No; I enjoy, and am happy, without wanting to know why. There! I am showing myself to you, as if you were my oldest friend. *You* would not do the same by me. You are steadier, and wiser, and not half so happy—no, not half, not half so happy! O, I wish I had been born a man!"

Amused, and, as he had declared to her, charmed out of himself, our Reporter said, somewhat jocosely,

"Why, what would you have done if you had been born a man instead of a woman?"

"I am afraid," she said, in a half-whisper, and with her finger on her lips, as though enjoining him not to betray her, "I am afraid I should have been a dreadful rake."

Our Reporter resisted the beguilement of the current into which the conversation had drifted, although he would have been entitled to much excuse had he dallied a little in this vein with the charming and child-like woman.

"You forget your child," he said; "had you been born a man—"

Before he could complete the sentence, Mrs. Holdfast rushed out of the room, and in a few moments returned with the child in her arms. She sat in a rocking chair, and fondled the boy-baby, and kissed him, and sang to him. It was a picture of perfect and beautiful motherhood.

"Forget my child!" she murmured. "Forget my baby! You must either be mad or insincere to say such a thing. Ask the darling's forgiveness immediately."

"I do," said our Reporter, kissing the baby, "and yours. You have proved yourself a true woman. But my time is getting short, and I have already trespassed too long upon yours. Let us continue the conversation about Mr. Holdfast."

She instantly became serious, and with the baby in her arms, said, "Yes! Well!"

"The landlady of the house," continued our Reporter, "in which he lodged has declared that he had but one visitor—a lady, closely veiled."

"So I have read in the papers," said Mrs. Holdfast. "Is nothing known about her—where she came from, where she went to, whether she was a lady or a common woman?"

"Nothing is known," he replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Quite sure, as far as my information goes. One person says that she was tall, another that she

was short; another that she was fair, another that she was dark—though they all agree that she never raised her veil. There is absolutely not a dependable clue upon which a person can work; nothing reliable can be gathered from statements so conflicting. What I wish to know is, whether you yourself have any suspicion?"

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She flushed with indignation. "You do not mean to ask me whether Mr. Holdfast was enamoured of a woman with whom he made secret assignations? You insult me. I thought better of you; I did not believe you capable of harbouring such a suspicion against the dead?"

"You mistake me," said our Reporter; "no such suspicion was in my mind. My thoughts were travelling in a different direction, and I was curious to ascertain whether what has occurred to my mind has occurred to yours."

"About this woman?" asked Mrs. Holdfast.

"Yes, about this woman."

"I did not wish to speak of it," said Mrs. Holdfast, after a pause, and speaking with evident reluctance; "it is the one thing in this dreadful affair I desired to keep to myself. I had a motive—yes; I did not want to do anyone an injustice. But, what can a weak woman like myself do when she is in the company of such a man as you? Nothing escapes you. It seems to me as if you had studied every little incident in connection with the murder of my poor husband for the purpose of bringing some one in guilty; but you are better acquainted than I am with the wickedness of people. You want to know what reason my husband had in taking a common lodging in Great Porter Square instead of coming home at once to me and his child. In my weak way I have thought it out. Shall I tell you how I have worked it out in my mind?"

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"If you please."

"Above everything else in the world," said Mrs. Holdfast, looking tenderly at her baby lying in her lap, "even above his love for me, Mr. Holdfast valued the honour of his name. There is nothing he would not have sacrificed to preserve that unsullied. Well, then, after his son's death he discovered something—who can say what?—which touched his honour, and which needed skilful management to avoid public disgrace. I can think of nothing else than that the woman, who was connected in a disgraceful way with his son, had some sort of power over my poor husband, and that he wished to purchase her silence before he presented himself to me and our baby. He came home, and took the lodgings in Great Porter Square. There this woman visited him, and there he met his death. That is all I can think of. If I try to get any further, my mind gets into a whirl. Now you know all; I have concealed nothing from you. It is my firm belief that when you discover this woman everything else will be discovered. But you will never discover her—never, never! And my poor husband's death will never be avenged."

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"I will ask you but one more question," said our Reporter. "In what way do you account for the circumstance of your husband not writing to you after his return to London?"

"Do you forget," asked Mrs. Holdfast, in return, "that he had injured his hand, and that he did not wish to disclose his private affairs to a stranger?"

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Here the interview terminated; and here, with the exception of the statement of three facts, our narrative ends.

Mrs. Holdfast is mistaken in her belief that her husband did not write to her because he had injured his hand, and was unwilling to employ an amanuensis. Our Reporter, after he left Mrs. Holdfast, had an interview with the former landlady of 119 Great Porter Square, who has left the house, and would under no consideration return to it. The landlady states that, on three occasions, she entered Mr. Holdfast's room when he was in it, and that on every occasion he was writing, and apparently writing freely. It did not appear to her that his hand was injured in the slightest degree. There was no bandage or plaister upon it, and he did not complain. We are in a position also to declare that, at the *post-mortem* examination, no recent injury of the right hand was perceptible.

The whole of Mr. Holdfast's property has been left by him, in a properly attested will, to his widow. When he made this will his son Frederick was alive. Not a shilling, however, is left to the son.

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Mrs. Holdfast has offered a reward of five hundred pounds for the discovery of the murderer of her husband.

We have no doubt our readers will appreciate our enterprise in presenting them with this circumstantial account of the latest phase of the Great Porter Square Mystery.

The question that now remains to be answered is—Where is Mr. Holdfast's son?



ON the morning following the publication of the Supplement to the *Evening Moon*, Becky had occasion to observe that her mistress, Mrs. Preedy, was earnestly engaged in the perusal of a newspaper. A great deal of house-work had to be done on this morning; there was a general "cleaning-up;" floors and stairs to be scrubbed, chairs and tables to be polished, and looking-glasses and windows to be cleaned; and as the greater portion of this work fell to Becky's share, she was kept busily employed until the afternoon. She was, therefore, in ignorance of the publication of the statement in the *Evening Moon*, and her curiosity was but languidly aroused by Mrs. Preedy's pre-occupation, until, by mere chance, she caught sight of the heading, "The Murder in Great Porter Square." She turned hot and cold, and her pulses quickened. [32]

"Is that something fresh about the murder next door?" she ventured to ask.

"Yes, Becky," replied Mrs. Preedy, but did not offer any explanation of the contents.

It was not Becky's cue to exhibit more than ordinary interest in the matter, and she merely remarked,

"I thought it might be something about the houses being haunted."

She noted that the paper was the *Evening Moon*, and she determined to purchase a copy before she went to bed. She did not until the afternoon get an opportunity to leave the house, and even then, there was so much to do, she had to leave it secretly, and without Mrs. Preedy's knowledge. There was another reason for her desire to go out. She expected a letter at the Charing Cross Post Office, and it was necessary she should be there before five o'clock to receive it. Mrs. Preedy generally took a half-hour's nap in the afternoon, and Becky's plan was to slip out the moment her mistress fell asleep, and leave the house to take care of itself. She felt the want of an ally at this juncture; the impression that she was fated to unravel the mystery of the murder, and thus clear the man she loved from suspicion, was becoming stronger; and to accomplish this it was necessary that she should keep her present situation. She needed help, and she could not take any person into her confidence. [33]

During the day Becky noticed that a great many persons passed through the Square, and stopped before the house. "Now that the houses are haunted," she thought, "we shall be regularly besieged. But if they look for a year they'll not see a ghost."

At four o'clock in the afternoon Mrs. Preedy arranged herself comfortably in an arm chair in her kitchen, and in a few moments was asleep. Now was Becky's opportunity. She quietly slipped out of the house by way of the basement, tying her hat strings as she mounted the steps, and walked quickly in the direction of Charing Cross. She was so intent upon her mission that she scarcely noticed the unusual number of persons in the Square. At Charing Cross Post Office she received the letter she expected. She did not stop to read it; she simply opened it as she retraced her steps, and, glancing hurriedly through it, put it into her pocket. She heard the boys calling out "*Hevenin' Moon!* More about the murder in Great Porter Square! Wonderful discovery! Romance in real life! A 'Underd Thousand Pounds!" and she stopped and purchased two copies. Although she was animated by the liveliest curiosity, she did not pause even to open the paper, she was so anxious to get back to the house before Mrs. Preedy awoke. Shortly before turning into the Square, she was overtaken, fast as she herself was walking, by their young man lodger, Richard Manx. He touched her arm, and smiling pleasantly at her, walked by her side. [34]

"My pretty one," he said, "your little feet walk fast."

"I am in a hurry," she replied, her nostrils dilating at his touch; but instantly remembering the part she was playing, she returned his pleasant smile. [35]

"You have been—a—out while the amiable Mrs. Preedy sleeps."

This observation warned her that Richard Manx knew more about the household movements than she expected. "I have no fool to deal with," she thought. "He shall have as much of my confidence as I choose to give him; he will find me his match."

"Yes," she said aloud, with a bright look; "but don't tell Mrs. Preedy; she might be angry with me."

"You speak," he said in a tone of lofty satisfaction, "to a gentleman."

"I wanted to buy a ribbon," said Becky, artlessly, "and it isn't easy to choose the exact colour one would like at night, so I thought I would steal out, just as I am, while Mrs. Preedy took her nap."

"Steal out—ah, yes, I understand—just as you are, charming!"

"And now, although I couldn't match my ribbon—it was a very light pink I wanted—I must get back quickly." [36]

All the while they were talking he was sucking and chewing a sweetmeat; having disposed of it, he popped another into his mouth.

"Quickly," he repeated, bending down, so that his face was on a level with hers. "That is—a—soon. Will you?"

This question was accompanied by the offer of a little packet of acid drops, half of which he had already devoured. She took a couple with the remark that she liked chocolate creams best.

"You shall have some," he said, "to-morrow. I shall walk with you; I myself am on my way to my small apartment. It is the—a—fashion for a gentleman to offer a lady one of his arms. Honour me."

He held out his arm, which she declined.

"I am not a lady," she said demurely; "I am only a poor servant girl."

"And I," he responded insinuatingly, "am a poor gentleman. Ah! If I were—a—rich, I should say to you, accept this ring." He made a motion as if offering her a ring. "Accept this—a—bracelet," with corresponding action. "Or this dress. But I have not—a—money." He took another acid drop. "It is a misfortune. But what can a poor devil do? You do not—a—despise me because I am thus?" [37]

"Oh, no. I hope you will be rich one day."

"It will happen," he said, in a quick, eager tone. "From my country"—he waved his hands vaguely—"shall come what I wait for here. Then shall I say to you, 'Becky'—pardon; I have heard the amiable Mrs. Preedy thus call you—'Becky,' shall I say, 'be no longer a servant. Be a lady.' How then, will you speak?"

"I must not listen to you," replied Becky, coquettishly; "you foreign gentlemen have such smooth tongues that they are enough to turn a poor girl's head." They were now in Great Porter Square. "What a number of people there are in the square," she said.

"It is—a—remarkable, this murder. The man is—a—found."

"What man?" cried Becky, excitedly. "The murderer!"

"Ah, no. That is not yet. It is the dead man who is—what do you call it?—discovered. That is it. He *was* not known—he *is* known. His name has come to the light. Yesterday he was a beggar—to-day he is rich. What, then? He is dead. His millions—in my country's money, sweet Becky, veritably millions—shall not bring life into his bones. His money is—a—here. *He* is"—Richard Manx looked up at the sky—"Ah, he is there! or"—he cast his eyes to the pavement—"there! We shall not know till there comes a time. It is sad."

"He was a rich gentleman, you say. What could have induced a rich man to live in such a neighbourhood?"

"In such a neighbourhood!" Richard Manx smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. "Ah! he came here not to die, surely—no, to live. It would have been well—for him—that he came not; but so it was. What should induce him here? you ask of me. Becky, I shall ask of the air." He put himself into the attitude of listening. "Ha! ha! I hear perhaps the reason. There was a lady. Enough. We shall not betray more. I propose to you a thought. I live in the amiable house of Mrs. Preedy. It is high, my apartment. Wherefore? I am a poor gentleman—as yet. I am one morning discovered—dead. Startle not yourself. It will not be—no, it will not be; but I propose to you my thought. You would not be glad—you would not laugh, if so it should be?"

"It would be a shocking thing," said Becky, gravely.

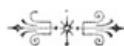
"It is well. I thank you—your face is sad, your eyes are not so bright. Then when I am thus, as I have said—dead!—from my country comes what I wait for here—money, also in millions. 'Ah,' says the amiable Mrs. Preedy, 'what could induce'—your word is good—'what could induce one who was rich to live in such a neighbourhood?' Observe me, Becky. I place my hand, on my heart and say, 'There is a lady.' Ah, yes, though you call yourself not so, I say, 'There is a lady.' I say no more. We are at home. You are beautiful, and I—till for ever—am your devoted. If it were not for so many people—I am discreet, Becky—I should kiss your hand."

And, indeed, the remark that he was discreet was proved by the change in his manner, now that he and Becky were in closer contact with strangers; the tenderness left his face, and observers at a distance would never have guessed that he was making something very much like a declaration of love to the girl. He opened the street door with his latch-key, and went up to his garret, sucking his acid drops. Becky opened the little gate and went down to her kitchen, where her mind was set at ease by seeing Mrs. Preedy still asleep in her arm chair.

Becky looked at her hand. It was a pretty hand and small, but the work she had done lately rather detracted from its prettiness. There was dirt on it, too, from the scrubbing and cleaning of the day. "He would kiss my hand," she murmured. "I am afraid our innocent young man lodger is a bit of a flirt. Be careful, young man. You are not in this house without a motive; you are in danger if that motive touches the welfare of the man I love!"

This soliloquy, in which she indulged in the kitchen, might have been of greater length had not Mrs. Preedy stirred in her sleep. The slight movement was sufficient to wake her.

"I do believe, Becky," she said, opening her eyes, "that I have overslept myself."



CHAPTER XXII.

IN WHICH BECKY GIVES WAY TO HER FEELINGS, AND RENEWS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

GR^{EAT} PORTER SQUARE had really been in a state of excitement the whole of the day, almost equalling that which raged on the day of the discovery of the murder. The strange revelation made in the columns of the *Evening Moon*—whose account of the identification of the body of the murdered man was presented in a form so attractive that edition after edition was sold with amazing rapidity—invested the murder with features romantic enough to engross general attention. There was love in it, there was a beautiful and fascinating woman in it, there was a baby in it, there were a hundred thousand pounds in it. The newsboys drove a rare trade; it brought so much grist to their mill that, as they jingled the copper and silver in their pockets,

they sighed for another murder as good to-morrow.

The public-houses, also, throve wonderfully; their bars were crowded, and the publicans rubbed their hands in glee. People from all parts of London came to Great Porter Square to look at the deserted house. They stared at the bricks, they stared at the street door, they stared at the window. With a feeling of enjoyable awe, they peeped over and through the iron railings which surrounded the basement. The downlook was not inviting. The ironwork was covered with rust; the paint was peeling off the doors and shutters; watchful spiders, ever ready for fresh murder, lurked in the corners of their webs. There was nothing to be frightened at in these natural signs of neglect and decay; but when a man cried out, "There! there!" and pointed downwards, the people rushed from the pavement into the road. They soon returned, and craned their heads and necks to gaze upon the melancholy walls. Occasionally a man or a woman ascended the three stone steps which led to the street door, and touched the woodwork with open hand, as if the contact brought them closer to the tragedy which had been enacted within. [44]

As night approached, the number of persons who made a point of passing through the Square decreased; but up till ten o'clock there were always about a dozen sightmongers lingering in the roadway before No. 119, and, among these dozen, generally one who appeared to be acquainted with the construction and disposition of the rooms, and who described the particulars of the murder with gloating satisfaction. The police did not interfere with them, the entertainment being one which a free people was privileged to enjoy.

During the whole of the evening Becky had not found time to read her letter or the newspaper. "They'll burn a hole in my pocket, I am sure," she thought, "if I keep them there much longer." But when the clock struck ten a period was put to her state of suspense.

"I've been in the 'ouse all day, Becky," said Mrs. Preedy; "and what with the state of my feelings and the excitement in the Square, I'm quite worn out. I shall run round to Mrs. Beale's for arf-an-hour; take care of the place while I'm gone." [45]

Becky nodded, and the moment she heard the street-door close, she sat down at the table, and pulled from her pocket the letter and the copies of the *Evening Moon*. She read the letter first, kissing it as she drew it from the envelope. It ran as follows:—

"MY DARLING GIRL,—Your letter has surprised and startled me, and I do not know whether to be alarmed or pleased at the strange news it contains. That you have placed yourself in a perilous position for my sake would make it all the harder for me to bear should anything happen to you. You would do anything, I know, rather than cause me sorrow or add to my anxieties, and I am satisfied that the strange fancy you have carried into execution sprang from a heart full of love. I have reason to know how firm you can be in any task you undertake, and I am not hopeful that I shall succeed in turning you from your purpose. If, until I return to London, you still continue in service, I implore you to be careful, to run no risk, and never to forget that the whole happiness of my life is in your hands. For if the mission upon which I am at present engaged should fail (although filial love and duty will not allow me to relinquish it until I see no possibility of bringing it to a successful issue), the opportunity of our living happily together in another part of the world will always be open to us. But first to perform a son's duty, then to offer you a husband's love and care. All that a man *can* do shall be done to hasten the day on which I shall be privileged to call you wife. [46]

"You have placed such trust and confidence in me, you have so firmly relied upon my truth and honour, that I often reproach myself for having kept from you some of the most important incidents in my life. But I was pledged to secrecy. I had given my solemn word never to speak of certain matters without the sanction of my father. Thus much you know, and you know, also, that I am now in search of that father for whose mysterious disappearance I am unable to account. When I find him he will release me from a vow I made to him under the most painful and distressing circumstances; then I can offer you the name which is my own, and which I renounced; then I can unfold to you the sad and painful story of my life; then I can hold up my head with honour once more, and take my place among men—the place I lost. [47]

"You say that you have something to communicate to me which bears upon the murder in Great Porter Square. It is, of course, of the greatest importance to me that I should be cleared of the suspicion which must still attach to me; the police have sharp eyes, and although I gave a false name—as true however, as the charge brought against me—it is quite possible that some person who was in the Police Court might recognise me, and cause me fresh trouble. Therefore I shall scarcely ever feel myself safe in the London streets until the murderer is discovered and punished. But above even this in importance I place the strange disappearance of my father. To find him is my first and paramount desire. [48]

"The picture you have drawn of Mrs. Bailey, the bedridden old lodger, and her deaf and nearly blind old sister, with the languid linnnet, and the moping bullfinch, is most amusing. I shall not be at all surprised if, in your next letter, you inform me that the old lady's mattress is stuffed with bank notes.

"How highly I value your true womanly attempts to cheer and comfort me! To read your letters is almost to hear you speak, you write so feelingly and earnestly. My fullest love is yours, and yours only. What a loving grateful heart, what willing hands can do, to make you happy when the clouds have cleared, shall be done by me. Rely upon me; have faith in me; and believe me to be,

"Your faithful lover,
"FRED."

Becky read the letter slowly, with smiles and tears; then kissed it repeatedly, and placed it in the bosom of her dress. [49]

Before turning her attention to the newspaper she had bought in the afternoon, she ran

upstairs to Mrs. Bailey. The old woman was awake, staring at her birds. She asked Becky to rub her side with the liniment, and the girl—to whose heart Fred's affectionate letter had imparted fresh happiness—did so in a blithe and cheerful manner.

"You're better than a doctor, Becky," said the old woman, "a thousand times better. I was as young and merry as you once—I was indeed. Pretty—too—eh, Becky?"

"That's to be seen," said Becky, rubbing away. "You have the remains now."

"Have I, Becky, have I—eh?"

"Indeed you have—you're a good-looking old lady."

A gleam of vanity and delight lit up the old creature's eyes for a moment.

"Am I, Becky—eh? You're a good girl—listen; I shall leave you something in my will. I'm going to make one—by and bye, but I don't want any lawyers. You shall do it for me. I can trust you, eh, Becky?"

"Indeed you can," replied Becky, tucking the old woman in; "you feel more comfortable now, don't you?"

"Yes, your soft hands rub the pain away. But it comes again, Becky, it comes again."

"So will I, to rub it away again. I must go down now, I have so much to do." She patted the old woman's shoulder, and reached the door, when she stopped and asked, in a careless tone,

"Have you heard any more mice to-night scratching at the wall in the next house, Mrs. Bailey?"

"Not a sound, Becky. It's been as quiet as a churchyard."

As she left the room, Becky heard the old woman mumbling to herself, with the vanity of a child,

"I was pretty once, and I've got the remains now. I'm a good-looking old lady—a good-looking old lady—a good-looking old lady! Becky's a clever girl—I won't forget her."

As Becky descended to the kitchen, she heard a newsboy calling out a new edition of the *Evening Moon*. Becky went to the street door and asked the boy if there was anything fresh in the paper about the murder.

"A lot," replied the boy; "I've only two copies left, and I thought I could sell 'em in the Square."

Becky bought the two copies, and the boy, whose only motive for coming into the Square was to look at No. 119, refreshed himself by running up and down the steps, and then, retreating to the garden railings, almost stared his eyes out in the endeavour to see the ghost that haunted the deserted house.

Once more in the kitchen, Becky sat down, and with a methodical air, opened last evening's paper, and read the "Romance in Real Life" which had caused so much excitement. The writer of the narrative would have been gratified had he witnessed the interest Becky took in his clever manipulation of his facts. The most thrilling romance could not have fascinated her as much as this story of to-day, formed as it was out of what may be designated ordinary newspaper material. Not once did she pause, but proceeded steadily on, column after column, every detail being indelibly fixed upon her mind. Only when she came to the concluding words did she raise her head, and become once more conscious of her surroundings.

She drew a long breath, and looked before her into the air, as though endeavouring to obtain from invisible space some connecting links between the new ideas formed by this romance in real life. The dominant thought in her mind as she read the narrative was whether she would be able to obtain from it any clue to connect Richard Manx with the murder. Her desire lay in this direction, without reference to its justice or injustice, and she would have felt better satisfied had such a clue been supplied. But she was compelled to confess that, as far as her knowledge of him went in their brief personal intercourse, he was not in the remotest way connected with the crime. Say that this *was* so—say that he was as little implicated in it as she herself, what, then, was his motive in making his way secretly into the room in which the murder had been committed? Of the fact that he had done so, without having been an eye-witness of it, Becky was morally convinced. What was his motive for this proceeding?

But Richard Manx did not entirely monopolise her thoughts. With the threads of the story, as presented in the Supplement of the *Evening Moon*, she wove possibilities which occasioned her great distress, for in these possibilities she saw terrible trouble in the future. If there was a grain of truth in them, she could not see how this trouble was to be avoided.

Of the name of the murdered man, Mr. Holdfast, she was utterly ignorant. She had never heard of him, nor of Lydia Holdfast, his second wife, who, living now, and mourning for the dead, had supplied the facts of the case to the Special Reporter of the *Evening Moon*.

"Had I been in her place," thought Becky, "I should, for very shame's sake, if not out of consideration for the dead, have been less free with my tongue. I would have run every risk rather than have allowed myself to be the talking-stock of the whole country. Lydia Holdfast must be a poor, weak creature. Can I do nothing, nothing?"

Becky's lips quivered, and had she not been sustained by a high purpose, she might have sought relief in tears.

"Let me set down my thoughts in plain words," she said aloud. "I shall then be able to judge more clearly."

She produced pen, ink, and paper, and wrote the names:

"Mr. Holdfast.

"Lydia Holdfast.

"Frederick Holdfast."

She gazed at the names and said,

"My lover's name is Frederick."

It was as though the paper upon which she was writing represented a human being, and spoke

the words she wrote.

She underlined the name "*Frederick*," saying, as she did so, "For reasons which I shall one day learn, he has concealed his surname."

The next words she wrote were: "Frederick Holdfast was educated in Oxford."

To which she replied, "*My* Frederick was educated in Oxford."

Then she wrote: "Between Frederick Holdfast and his father there was a difference so serious that they quarrelled, and Frederick Holdfast left his father's house."

"My Frederick told me," said Becky aloud, "that he and his father were separated because of a family difference. He could tell me no more, he said, because of a vow he had made to his father. He has repeated this in the letter I received from him this evening."

Becky took the letter from her dress, kissed it, and replaced it in her bosom. "I do not need this," she said, "to assure me of his worth and truth." [56]

She proceeded with her task and wrote: "Frederick Holdfast went to America. His father also went to America."

And answered it with, "*My* Frederick went to America, and his father followed him."

Upon the paper then she wrote: "Mr. Holdfast and his son Frederick both returned to England."

"As my Frederick and his father did," she said.

And now Becky's fingers trembled. She was approaching the tragedy. She traced the words, however, "From the day of his return to England until yesterday nothing was heard of Mr. Holdfast; and there is no accounting for his disappearance."

"Frederick's father also has disappeared," she said, "and there is no accounting for *his* disappearance."

These coincidences were so remarkable that they increased in strength tenfold as Becky gazed upon the words she had written. And now she calmly said, [57]

"If they are true, my Frederick is Frederick Holdfast. If they are true, Frederick Holdfast is a villain." Her face flushed, her bosom rose and fell. "A lie!" she cried. "My lover is the soul of honour and manliness! He is either not Frederick Holdfast, or the story told in the newspaper is a wicked, shameful fabrication. What kind of woman, then, is this Lydia Holdfast, who sheds tears one moment and laughs the next?—who one moment wrings her hands at the murder of her husband, and the next declares that if she had been born a man she might have been a dreadful rake? But Frederick Holdfast is dead; the American newspapers published the circumstances of his death and the identification of his body. Thousands of persons read that account, and believed in its truth, as thousands of persons read and are reading this romance of real life, and believe in its truth." Contempt and defiance were expressed in Becky's voice as she touched the copy of the newspaper which had so profoundly agitated her. "Yet both may be false, and if they are false ——" She paused for a few moments, and then continued: "Lydia Holdfast is Frederick Holdfast's enemy. She believes him to be dead; there is no doubt of that. But if he is alive, and in England, he is in peril—in deadlier peril than my Frederick was, when, as Antony Cowlrick, he was charged with the murder of an unknown man, and that man—as now is proved—his own father. What did I call Lydia Holdfast just now? a poor weak creature! Not she! An artful, designing, cruel woman, whose safety, perhaps, lies in my Frederick's death. If, without the suspicions which torture me, so near to the truth do they seem, it was necessary to discover the murderer of the poor gentleman who met his death in the next house, how much more imperative is it now that the mystery should be unravelled! Assist me, Eternal God, to bring the truth to light, and to punish the guilty!" [58]

She fell upon her knees, and with tears streaming down her face, prayed for help from above to clear the man she loved from the shameful charges brought against him by his father's wife. Her prayers comforted her, and she rose in a calmer state of mind. "I must look upon this creature," she thought, "upon this woman in name, who has invented the disgraceful story. To match her cunning a woman's cunning is needed. Lydia Holdfast, I declare myself your enemy!" [59]

A noise in the street attracted Becky's attention, and diverted her thoughts. She hurried from her kitchen, and opened the street door. Twenty or thirty persons were crowding round one, who was lying insensible upon the pavement. They cried, "Give her air!" and pressed more closely upon the helpless form.

"A glass of water!" "Poor child!" "Go and fetch a little brandy!" "Fetch a policeman!" "She's shamming!" "Starving, more likely!" "Starving? she's got three boxes of matches in her hands!" "Well, you brute, she can't eat matches!"

These and other cries greeted Becky as she opened the door, and looked out into the Square. [60]

"What's the matter?" she asked, striving to push her way into the crowd, which did not willingly yield to her.

It was a poor child, her clothes in rags, who had fainted on the flagstones before the house.

"She's coming to!" exclaimed a woman.

The child opened her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" asked a man, roughly.

"I came to see the ghost!" replied the child, in a weak, pleading little voice.

The people laughed; they did not see the pathetic side of the picture.

But the child's voice, faint as it was, reached Becky's heart. It was a voice familiar to her. She pushed through the crowd vigorously, and bent over the child.

"Blanche!" screamed the child, bursting into hysterical sobs. "O, Blanche! Blanche!"

It was Fanny, the little match girl.

"Hush, Fanny!" whispered Becky. "Hush my dear!" [61]

She raised the poor child in her arms, and a shudder of pain and compassion escaped her as she felt how light the little body was. Fanny's face was covered with tears, and through her tears she laughed, and clung to Becky.

"I know her," said Becky to the people, "I will take care of her."

And kissing the thin, dirty face of the laughing, sobbing, clinging child, Becky carried her into the house, and closed the street-door upon the crowd.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed the man who had distinguished himself by his rough words. "If this 'ere ain't the rummiest Square in London!"

CHAPTER XXIII.

"JUSTICE" SENDS A LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE "EVENING MOON."

CLOSER and closer did the little match girl cling to Becky, as she was carried through the dark passage and down the narrow stairs to the kitchen. Then, and then only, did Becky clearly perceive how thin and wan her humble little friend had grown. Fanny's dark eyes loomed out of their sunken sockets like dusky moons, her cheeks had fallen in, her lips were colourless; her clothes consisted of but two garments, a frock and a petticoat, in rags. Becky's eyes overflowed as she contemplated the piteous picture, and Fanny's eyes also became filled with tears—not in pity for herself, but in sympathy with Becky.

"O, Blanche, Blanche," she murmured, "I begun to be afeard I should never see you agin." [62]

Becky touched Fanny's clothes and cheek pityingly, and said,

"Has it been like this long, Fanny?"

Fanny replied in a grave tone, "Since ever you went away, Blanche. My luck turned then."

"It has turned again, my dear," said Becky, with great compassion, "and turned the right way. Make a wish."

"A thick slice of bread and butter!" said Fanny, eagerly.

"O, Fanny, are you hungry?"

"I ain't 'ad nothink to eat to-day excep' a damaged apple I picked up in Coving Garden."

Before she finished the sentence Becky placed before her a thick slice of bread and butter, and was busy cutting another. Fanny soon dispatched them, and did not say "No" to a third slice.

"Do you feel better, Fanny?" asked Becky.

"Ever so much," replied Fanny, looking wistfully around. The kitchen was warm, and the little beggar girl was thinking of the cold night outside. [63]

Becky noticed the look and knew what it meant.

"No, Fanny," she thought, "you shall not go out in the cold to-night. It is my belief you were sent to help me; it may be a lucky meeting for both of us."

"Fanny," she said aloud, "where's your mother?"

"She's got three months," said Fanny, "and the magistrate sed he'd 'ave give 'er six if he could."

"Where are you going to sleep to-night?"

"Blanche," said Fanny, with a quiver in her voice, "is there such a thing as a coal-cellar 'ere?"

"Why, Fanny?"

"I'd like to sleep in it, if you don't mind."

"I *do* mind, Fanny. Yon can't sleep in the coal-cellar."

Fanny sighed mournfully, and partly rose. "I can't stop 'ere, then, Blanche?" [64]

"You shall if you like, Fanny, and you shall sleep with me."

"O, Blanche!" cried Fanny, clasping her face with her dirty little hands. The tears forced themselves between the thin, bony fingers.

"Why, that looks as if you were sorry, Fanny!"

"I'm cryin' for joy, Blanche. I should 'ave taken my 'ook to-night if it 'adn't been for you. When I fell down in a faint outside your door, I thought I was goin' to die."

"You shall not die, Fanny," said Becky; "you shall live, and grow into a fine young woman. Listen to me, and don't forget a word I say to you. You are sharp and clever, and I want you now to be sharper and cleverer than ever you have been in your life before." Fanny nodded, and fixed her eyes upon Becky's face. "I am a servant in this house; my mistress's name is Mrs. Preedy; she is out gossiping, and I expect her back every minute. If she comes in while I am talking, I shall bundle you into bed, and you'll fall fast asleep. You understand?" [65]

"Yes."

"I am not a real servant, but nobody is to know that but you and me. Put your hand in mine, Fanny, and promise to be my friend, as I promise to be yours. That's an honest squeeze, Fanny, and I know what it means. It means that I can trust you thoroughly, and that you will do and say everything exactly as I wish."

"That's just what it *does* mean, Blanche."

"My name is not Blanche."

"No?" [66]

"No. It's Becky."

"I'm fly."

"And never was anything else. The reason why I am a servant here is because I have something very particular to do—and that also is a secret between me and you. When it is done, I shall be a lady, and perhaps I will take you as my little maid."

"O, Becky! Becky!" exclaimed Fanny, overjoyed at the prospect. [67]

"I knew you were sharp and quick," said Becky. "You are a little cousin of mine, if Mrs. Preedy asks you, and you have no mother or father. Give me those matches. I throw them into the fire, one after another. What a blaze they make! Your mother died last week, and you, knowing I was in service here, came to ask me to help you. You never sold matches, Fanny."

"Never! I'll take my oath of it!"

"That is all I shall say to-night, Fanny. I am tired, and I want to think. Go into that room—it is my bedroom; here is a light. You will see a nest of drawers in the room; open the top one, and take out a clean nightdress; it will be too long and too large for you, but that doesn't matter, does it? Give yourself a good wash, then pop into bed, and go to sleep. To-morrow morning, before you are up, I shall buy you some clothes. Poor little Fanny! Poor little Fanny!" The child had fallen on her knees, and had bowed her face on Becky's lap. Her body was shaken with sobs. "Now then, go, or Mrs. Preedy may come back before you are a-bed." [68]

Fanny jumped to her feet, and kissing Becky's hands, took the candle, and went into Becky's bedroom.

Becky's attention, diverted for a while by this adventure, returned to the subject which now almost solely occupied her mind. She had not yet looked at the copies of the last *Evening Moon* she had bought of the newsboy in the Square an hour ago. She opened one of the papers, and saw, in large type, the heading, "FREDERICK HOLDFAST," and beneath it the following letter, addressed to the editor of the *Evening Moon*:—

"SIR,—I have read the thrilling Romance in Real Life which your Special Reporter, in a style which does not speak highly for his culture or good taste, has so temptingly dished up for your numerous readers. It not only *reads* like a romance, but, with reference to one of the characters it introduces to a too curious public, it *is* a romance. The character I refer to is Frederick Holdfast, the son of the ill-fated gentleman who was murdered in Great Porter Square. That he is dead there appears to be no reason to doubt; and, therefore, all the more reason why I, who knew him well and was his friend, should step forward without hesitation to protest against the charges brought against him in your columns. I declare most earnestly that they are false. [69]

"Here, at once, I find myself in a difficulty. When I say that the colours in which Frederick Holdfast is painted are false colours, that the character given to him is a false character, and that the charges brought against him are false charges, it appears as if I myself were bringing an accusation against Mrs. Lydia Holdfast, a lady with whom I have not the pleasure of being acquainted. I prefer not to do this. I prefer to bring the accusation against your Reporter, who must have allowed his zeal and enthusiasm to play tricks with his judgment when he sat down to describe, in his captivating manner, certain statements made to him by a lady in distress. He was writing a romance—there was a villain in it (a necessity); necessary, therefore, that this villain should be painted in the blackest colours, to rival other villains in the Penny Awfuls which obtain so strong a hold over young people among our poorer classes. The parallel is not a fair one. The villains in the Penny Awfuls are imaginary creatures; they live only in the brains of the cheap novelist; to vilify them, to defame them, can hurt the feelings, can do injury, to no living being. But the villain your Reporter has depicted in his Romance of Real Life is a man who lived, who was honoured, and who had at least one firm and true friend in the person of him who is now tracing these lines. To defame and vilify the dead is an act of the grossest injustice, and of this injustice your Reporter is guilty. [70]

"I was at Oxford with Frederick Holdfast, and shared in his pleasures and his studies. We were cronies. We had few secrets from each other, and our close intimacy enabled me not only to gain an insight into Frederick's character, but to form a just estimate of it. And I solemnly declare that my dead friend was as guiltless of the charges brought against him by Mrs. Holdfast and your Reporter in his Oxford career as I believe him to be incapable of the baseness imputed to him in his father's house in London. Of the latter I can speak only from presumption. Of the former I can speak with certainty, but my conviction in the one case is as strong as it is in the other. [71]

"It is a monstrous falsehood to describe Frederick Holdfast's 'career of dissipation' as being 'capped by degraded association with degraded women.' His estimate of woman was high and lofty; he was almost quixotic in the opinion he entertained of her purity, and even when he felt himself compelled to condemn, there was invariably apparent in his condemnation a touch of beautiful pity it was an experience to meet with in this shrug-shoulder age, in which cynicism and light words upon noble themes have become the fashion. That he was free from faults I do not assert, but his errors had in them nothing of that low kind of vice which your Reporter has so glibly attached to his name. [72]

"I have already said I have not the pleasure of an acquaintance with Mrs. Lydia Holdfast; neither was I acquainted with her murdered husband, my dead friend's father. But I have heard Frederick speak of his father, and always with respect and love. I can go further than this. I have read letters which Mr. Holdfast in London wrote to his son in Oxford, and I cannot recall a sentence or a word which would imply that any difference existed between father and son. These facts go far to prove the accusation I bring against your Reporter of libelling the dead. He, in his turn, may find justification for the picture he has drawn in the statements made to him by Mrs. Lydia Holdfast. With this I have nothing to do; I leave them to settle the matter between them. My duty is to vindicate the honour of my friend, who cannot speak for himself. I ask you to insert

this letter, without abbreviation, in your columns, and I ask those papers at a distance which have quoted from your Romance in Real Life, to copy the letter, to prevent injustice to a dead man's memory. I enclose my card, as a guarantee of good faith; but I do not wish my name to be published. At the same time, should public occasion demand it, I shall be ready to come forward and personally substantiate the substance of this communication.

"I am, Sir, yours obediently,
"JUSTICE."

To this letter was appended an Editorial Note:

"We insert our correspondent's letter, as he desires, without abbreviation. His name, which at his request we withhold, is one which is already becoming honourably known, and we see no reason to doubt his honesty of intention, and his thorough belief in what he writes. In the performance of our duties as Editor of this newspaper, we are always ready to present our readers with both sides of a question which has excited public interest. With these differing views fairly and impartially placed before them, they can form their own judgment. Upon the matter between 'Justice,' Mrs. Holdfast, and our Special Reporter, we offer no opinion, but we cannot refrain from drawing attention to one feature in the case which has apparently escaped the notice of 'Justice.' By Mr. Holdfast's will his only son, Frederick, is disinherited, and the whole of the murdered man's property is left to his unhappy widow. This is a sufficient answer to 'Justice's' disbelief in the existence of any difference between Frederick Holdfast and his father. 'Respect and love' would never impel a father to leave his son a beggar.—EDITOR, 'EVENING MOON.'"

Becky's eyes were bright with pleasure as she read the letter. "Bravo, Justice," she thought; "you are worthy to be the friend of my Frederick. I will thank you one day for your noble defence."

Here Fanny, arrayed in Becky's nightdress, made her appearance from the little bedroom.

"Good night, Becky," she said.

"Good night, my dear," said Becky, kissing the child.

Fanny's face was clean, and her hair was nicely brushed; she did not look now like a child of the gutter.

"I feel all new, Becky—and so 'appy!" she said, with quivering lips.

"That's right, dear," said Becky; "now tumble into bed. I hear Mrs. Preedy opening the street door."

Fanny flew back to the bedroom, and scrambling into bed, fell asleep with a prayer in her mind that God would bless Becky for ever, and ever, and ever, and send her everything in the world she wanted.

Becky was prepared for her interview with Mrs. Preedy; her plan was already formed. She put the newspapers out of sight, and when Mrs. Preedy entered the kitchen she found Becky busy with her needle.

"Still up, Becky!" exclaimed Mrs. Preedy. "You ought to 'ave been a-bed."

"I didn't like to go," said Becky, "till you came home; I wanted to speak to you about something."

"What is it?" cried Mrs. Preedy, for ever ready to take alarm. "Nothink's 'appened in the 'ouse, I 'ope. Mrs. Bailey!"—

"Nothing has happened; it's about myself I want to speak."

"I suppose you're going to give notice," said Mrs. Preedy, glaring at Becky.

"O, no; I'm satisfied with the place, and I'm sure no servant ever had a kinder missis." Mrs. Preedy was mollified. "It's about my legacy and a little cousin of mine."

"O," said Mrs. Preedy, feeling no interest in the little cousin, but a great deal in the legacy. "You may sit down, Becky."

"Thank you, mum. I am to receive fifty pounds of my legacy to-morrow, and I want you to take care of some of it."

"I'll do it with pleasure, Becky." Mrs. Preedy was slightly bewildered by the circumstance of having a servant with so much money at command; it was an unprecedented experience. Of course she would take care of the girl's money.

"While you were out," said Becky, "there was a knock at the door, and when I opened it I saw a little cousin of mine who has lost her mother, and has no one in the world but me to look after her. She knew I was in service here and she came to ask me to help her. I hope you will not consider it a liberty, but I took her in, poor little thing, and perhaps you'll let her sleep with me to-night."

Mrs. Preedy stared at Becky. "Is she there?" she asked, pointing to the servant's bedroom.

"Yes, mum."

Mrs. Preedy took a candle, and went into the room. Fanny was asleep, and when Mrs. Preedy laid her hand on her, she moved, and murmured—

"Is that you, Becky?"

Becky called out, "Yes, Fanny. Go to sleep again."

"I thought," said Becky, upon Mrs. Preedy's return, "as my little cousin has no home now, and as there is plenty of room in the house, that you might let her remain here as a lodger."

"As a lodger!" said Mrs. Preedy, in a tone of surprise and satisfaction.

"Of course," continued Becky, "I couldn't ask you to let her stay here for nothing, and as I have plenty of money I can afford to pay for her. Then she can help me a bit now and then. She can live in the kitchen, and sleep with me. I'll look after her, and nobody need know anything about it

but ourselves. I wouldn't mind eight or ten shillings a week."

Mrs. Preedy, with more eagerness than she was in the habit of exhibiting, agreed to Becky's proposition, and said they would split the difference, and make it nine shillings a week for Fanny's board and lodging.

"And if you won't mind my mentioning it," said Becky, "if you are pressed for a few pounds I should be glad to let you have it till the lodgers come back to the house."

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This offer completed the conquest. Mrs. Preedy shook Becky by the hand, and vowed that, from the moment she had entered her service, she had looked upon her more as a daughter than as a domestic, and that she was sure she and Becky and Fanny would get along famously together. So gushing did she become that she offered Becky a glass of gin and water, which Becky declined. A double knock at the street door startled them both, and they went in company to answer it. A telegraph boy stood on the step.

"Does Becky live here?" he asked.

"Yes," answered the two women.

"A telegram," he said, holding out the buff-coloured envelope.

Becky took it, and opened it in the kitchen. It was from "Fred" to "Becky," and ran:—"I return to London by to-night's mail. Do not write again until you see or hear from me."

"Who is it from?" asked Mrs. Preedy unable to restrain her curiosity. "What does it say?"

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"It's from my lawyer," replied Becky, without a blush, "and says I am to receive a hundred pounds to-morrow instead of fifty."

"You're in luck's way, Becky," said Mrs. Preedy.

"That I am," said Becky. "Can I do anything more for you to-night?"

"Nothing more, thank you," said Mrs. Preedy, very politely. "Good night, Becky."

"Good night, mum."

Never in that house had such cordial relations as these existed between mistress and "slavey."

Becky slept but little. The strange revelations made in the columns of the *Evening Moon*, the vindication of Frederick Holdfast's character by an unknown friend, the appearance of Fanny, the expected return of her lover, were events too stirring to admit of calm slumber. Her dreams were as disturbed as her rest. She dreamt of her Frederick lying dead on the banks of a distant river, and the man who had killed him was bending over the body, rifling the pockets. The man raised his head; it was Richard Manx, sucking his acid drops. "Ah, charming Becky," said the man; "accept this ring—this bracelet—this dress. Your lover is dead. I take his place. I am, for ever, your devoted." She fled from him, and he followed her through her dreams, presenting himself in a hundred fantastic ways. "Come," he said, "I will show you something pretty." He seized her hand, and dragged her to a Court-house, in the witness-box of which stood Lydia Holdfast, giving deadly evidence against Frederick, who was also there, being tried for the murder of his father. "Let me go!" cried Becky. "I can save him from that woman!" But Richard Manx held her fast. "I am your lover, not he," he whispered; "you shall not save him. He must die." She could not move, nor could she raise her voice so that the people round about could hear her. The scene changed. She and Frederick were together, in prison. "There is but one hope for me," said Frederick; "even yet I may be saved. Track that woman," (and here Lydia Holdfast appeared, smiling in triumph), "follow her, do not allow her out of your sight. But be careful; she is as cunning as a fox, and will slip through your fingers when you least expect it." Then she and Lydia Holdfast alone played parts in the running commentary of her dreams. "What do you want to find out," said Lydia Holdfast; "about me? I am a simple creature—but you are much more simple. It is a battle between us, for the life of a man, for the honour of a man. I accept. If you were a thousand times cleverer than you are, you shall not save him." Becky found herself with this woman in the most extraordinary connections—on the stage of a theatre, where both were enacting characters in the drama of the murder—by a dark river, lighted up by lightning flashes—struggling in the midst of a closely-packed crowd—following each other over the roofs of houses—and Lydia Holdfast, in every fresh presentment, crying, "Well! Have you saved him yet?"

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Becky awoke from these dreams in tears, and was glad she had Fanny in bed with her. She rose early, and at eight o'clock went out to buy some clothes for the child. When Fanny appeared before Mrs. Preedy in the kitchen, she was a decent-looking, tidy little girl, with a world of happiness in her face. She had found her friend, her angel friend, who would never again desert her. She understood in some dim way that Becky would call upon her for help in the secret which had caused her to assume the disguise of a servant. "I 'ope it's somethink 'ard she wants me to do," thought Fanny. She would like to show Becky what love and gratitude could accomplish.

"You're a nice looking little thing," said Mrs. Preedy, pinching Fanny's cheek.

At about eleven o'clock, Becky asked and received permission to "go to the lawyer's" to receive her money. Before she left the house she said to Fanny,

"You don't forget what I said to you last night."

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"I couldn't if I tried," replied Fanny.

"Mrs. Preedy is to know nothing. You understand, Fanny?"

"Yes."

"I shall be out for nearly an hour. If you hear a knock at the street door run up and open it, and if a gentleman comes and asks for me, tell him I shall be back before twelve."

"I'll tell him, Becky."

No person called, however; and Becky, returning, gave Mrs. Preedy forty pounds to take care of. "That," she thought, "will enable me to keep in this house as long as I choose to remain."

All the day she waited for news of her lover. As the hours dragged on, her state of suspense became most painful. In the early part of the evening she received a note by the hands of a

messenger.

"My darling," it said, "I am in the deepest grief. A dreadful calamity has overtaken me, and I must consider well and reflect before I move a step. I think it best for me not to present myself in Great Porter Square. You want to see me, I know, as I want to see you, but before we meet it is necessary that you should read a Statement I am preparing for you, and which will be in your hands late tonight. There must be no more secrets between us. Believe me ever your devoted and unhappy lover."

At eleven o'clock Becky received the "Statement." It was a thick packet, on the outside of which was written: "For no other eyes but yours." When the messenger arrived—he was a middle-aged man, with a shrewd face and eye—Mrs. Preedy was out of the house, gossiping as usual with Mrs. Beale, and confiding to her the wonderful news that she had a servant who was very rich. Mrs. Beale gave Mrs. Preedy a bit of shrewd advice. "Offer to go into partnership with 'er, my dear," said Mrs. Beale, "and take a 'ouse on the other side of the Square." Mrs. Preedy confessed it was not half a bad idea.

"I am to give this packet," said the messenger, "into the hands of a young woman named Becky."

"I am Becky," said the anxious girl.

"The gentleman was very particular," continued the messenger, "and I am to ask you if you expected it."

"Yes, I expected it."

"Then I was to ask you for the first letter of the gentleman's Christian name."

"F."

"That is correct." And the man handed Becky the packet.

"Where is the gentleman staying?" asked Becky, offering the man a shilling.

"No, thank you. I am well paid for what I am doing, and I was told not to accept anything. 'Where is the gentleman staying?' I have no instructions to answer the question. There is nothing else, I think. Yes, there *is* something else. Are you well?"

"Quite well."

"I am to say that? 'Quite well.'"

"Yes, say 'Quite well, but very anxious.'"

"Ah! 'Quite well, but very anxious.' Good night, miss."

Then Becky went to her little bedroom, and lighting a candle, opened the packet. Fanny was asleep, and Becky read until late in the night.



CHAPTER XXIV.

FREDERICK HOLDFAST'S STATEMENT.

THE extraordinary story which has appeared in the columns of the *Evening Moon*, and the dreadful intelligence it conveys to me of the murder of my dear father, render it imperatively necessary that I should place upon permanent record certain particulars and incidents relating to my career which will incontestably prove that the Romance in Real Life which is now being inserted in every newspaper in the kingdom is an infamous fabrication. I am impelled to this course by two strong reasons. First,—Because I wish to clear myself in the eyes of the woman I love, from whom I have concealed my real name and position. Second,—Because life is so uncertain that I might not be able to do to-morrow what it is in my power to do to-day. I pledge myself, in the name of my dear mother, whose memory I revere, that I will set down here nothing but the truth—that I will not strive to win pity or grace by the faintest glossing of any particulars in which I may not appear to advantage—that I will not swerve by a hair's breadth from my honest intention to speak of the matters treated herein in a plain, unvarnished style. The dear one who will be the first to peruse these lines is as precious to me as ever woman was to man, but I will not retain her love by subterfuge or pretence, although it would break my heart to lose it. To her I am known as Frederick Maitland. To a number of persons I am—in connection with the murder of my father—known as Antony Cowlrick. My true name is Frederick Holdfast.

Between myself and my father existed—until shortly after he married a second wife—feelings of respect and affection. During my boyhood his love for me was exhibited in every tender form which occurs to the mind of an affectionate father, and I entertained for him a love as sincere as his own. The death of my mother affected him powerfully. Their married life had been a happy one, and they lived in harmony. My mother was a woman with no ambition but that of making those around her happy. She compassed her ambition, the entire depth and scope of which was bounded by the word Home. After her death my father, never a man of much animation and

conversation, became even quieter and more reserved in manner, but I am convinced his love for me was not lessened. He was a man of strong determination, and he had schooled himself to keep his passions and emotions in complete control. He was intense in his likes and dislikes—unobtrusively chivalrous and charitable—disposed to go to extremes in matters of feeling—thorough in friendship as in enmity—just in his dealings—and seldom, if ever, forgiving where his confidence was betrayed, or where he believed himself to be deceived. Such a man is apt to form wrong judgments—as my father did; to receive false impressions—as my father did; to be much deceived by cunning—as my father was. But if he was hasty to condemn, he was eager to make atonement when he discovered himself to be in the wrong. Then it was that the chivalry of his nature asserted itself.

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He was a successful merchant, and was proud of his successes, and proud also that his money was made by fair and honourable means. He said to me once, "I would rather see you compelled to gain a living by sweeping a road than that it should come to my knowledge that you have been guilty of a dishonourable action." I was his only child, and he had his views with respect to my future. He wished me to enter public life, and he gave me an education to fit me for it. While I was at Oxford he made me a handsome allowance, and once, when I found myself in debt there, he did not demur to settling them for me. Only once did this occur, and when my debts were discharged, he said, "I have increased your allowance, Frederick; it could not have been liberal enough, as you contracted debts you were unable to pay." He named the amount of my increased allowance, and asked me if it was sufficient. I replied that it was, and then he told me that he considered it a dishonourable act for a man to consciously contract an obligation he did not see his way to meet out of his own resources. "The scrape you got into with your creditors was an error," he said; "you did not sufficiently consider. You are wiser now, and what was an error in the past would be dishonourable in the future." I never had occasion to ask him to pay my debts again. I lived not only within my allowance, but I saved out of it—a fortunate circumstance, as I afterwards found. The result was obtained without my being penurious, or depriving myself of any of the pleasures of living indulged in by my friends and companions. I was not a purist; I was fond of pleasure, and I have no doubt I did many foolish things; but no sin lies at my door. I was never false to a friend, and I never betrayed a woman.

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Among my friends was a young man named Sydney Campbell. He is not living now, and nothing restrains me from speaking of him candidly and honestly. He was a man of brilliant parts, brilliant in scholarship, in debate, in social accomplishments. He affected to be a fop, and would assume an effeminacy which became him well—as everything became him which he assumed. He was as brave as a lion, and a master of fence; lavishly prodigal with his money, and ready, at any moment, for any extravagance, and especially for any extravagance which would serve to hide the real nobility of his nature. He would hob-a-nob with the lowest and vilest, saying, "Human nature is much of a muchness; why give ourselves airs? I am convinced I should have made an admirable pickpocket." But Sydney Campbell was never guilty of a meanness.

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He was the admiration of our set, and we made him the fashion. Though he affected to disdain popularity he was proud of the position we assigned to him, and he played us many extravagant tricks. He led us into no danger of which he did not court the lion's share, and he held out now and then an example of kindness to those in need of kindness which was productive of nothing but good. It would be to some men most difficult to reconcile with each other the amazing inconsistencies of his actions; now profound, now frivolous, now scholar-like and dignified, now boisterous and unrestrained; but I knew more of his inner nature than most of his acquaintances, and I learnt to love as well as admire him. He had large ideality, and a fund of animal spirits which he sometimes found it impossible to control; he had large veneration, and a sense of the ridiculous so strong that he would laugh with tears in his eyes and tenderness in his heart. I am particular in my description of him, because I want you to thoroughly understand him, and because it was he who brought me into acquaintanceship with the woman who has made me taste something worse than the bitterness of death.

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CHAPTER XXV.

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FREDERICK HOLDFAST'S STATEMENT (CONTINUED).

I DO not propose in this statement to refer to any incidents in Sydney Campbell's career which are not in some way connected with my own story. At a future time I will tell you more concerning him, and you will then be better able to do him justice. What I am about to narrate may tend to lower him in your eyes, and what follows may tend to lower me; but I am bound to speak the truth, without fear or favour. It is well, my dear, that to minds as pure as yours the veil is not removed from the lives even of the men to whom is given a full measure of respect and

love. They are scarcely ever worthy of the feelings they have inspired. They show you only the fairer part of themselves; the grosser is hidden. The excuse that can be offered for them is that they are surrounded by dangerous temptations, and are not strong enough to set down pleasure's cup untasted, though shame and dishonour are mixed in it.

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A great social event was to take place. A ball was to be given in aid of a charity inaugurated by a Princess, and the intention being to make this ball thoroughly exclusive and fashionable, a committee of ladies was appointed to attend to the distribution of tickets. Although the tickets were set at a high price, they were sent out in the form of invitations, and each ticket bore the name of the lady or gentleman who was considered worthy of admission. Extraordinary care was taken to prevent the introduction of any person upon whose reputation there was the slightest stain. Some few ladies and gentlemen of high standing applied for privilege tickets for friends, and obtained them upon the guarantee that they would only be used in favour of persons of irreproachable character. Among those who succeeded in obtaining a privilege ticket from the Committee was Sydney Campbell.

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I, with others of our set, was present at the ball. The Princess, assisted by a bevy of ladies of title, received the guests, who were presented with much ceremony. A royal Prince honoured the assembly, which was one of the most brilliant I have attended. In the midst of the gaiety Sydney Campbell, accompanied by a lady, made his appearance. They were presented to the Princess, and passed into the ball room. I was not near enough to hear the announcement of the names, and I was first made aware of Sydney's presence by the remarks of persons standing around me. The beauty of the lady who accompanied Sydney had already excited attention, and the men were speaking of her in terms of admiration.

"Who is she?" was asked.

"Miss Campbell," was the answer; "Sydney's sister."

The reply came upon me as a surprise. Sydney and I were confidential friends, and were in the habit of speaking freely to each other. Not only was I ignorant of his intention to attend the ball, but on the previous day he had informed me that his family were on their way to Nice. He had but one sister, whose portrait I had seen in his rooms. With some misgivings, I hastened after him to obtain a view of his companion. She was young, beautiful, and most exquisitely dressed, and although she had been in the ball room but a very few minutes, had already become a centre of attraction. She bore not the slightest resemblance to Sydney's sister.

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I was oppressed by a feeling of uneasiness. With Sydney's daring and erratic moods I was well acquainted, but I felt that if in this instance he was playing a trick, it would go hard with him should it be discovered. My desire was to speak to Sydney upon the subject, and if my suspicions were correct, to give him a word of friendly advice. But the matter was a delicate one, and Sydney was quick to take offence and to resent an affront. I determined, therefore, to wait awhile, and observe what was going on. I had upon my programme two or three engagements to dance, and so much interested was I in Sydney's proceedings that I did not add to them.

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Fully two hours elapsed before I obtained my opportunity to converse with Sydney. Our eyes had met in the course of a dance in which we were both engaged, and we had exchanged smiles. In the meantime matters had progressed. Sydney's fair companion was the rage. The men begged for an introduction, and surrounded her; on every side I heard them speaking of her beauty and fascinating ways, and one said, in my hearing:

"By gad! she is the most delightful creature I ever danced with."

It was not the words, but the tone in which they were spoken, which jarred upon my ears. It was such as the speaker would not have adopted to a lady. My observation led me to another unpleasant impression. Sydney's fair companion appeared to be an utter stranger to the ladies present at the ball. Not only did they seem not to know her, but they seemed to avoid her. After patient waiting, my opportunity came, and Sydney and I were side by side.

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"At last!" he exclaimed. "I have been waiting to speak to you all the evening."

"My case exactly," I rejoined. "Anything particular to communicate, Sydney?"

"I hardly know," he said. "O, yes—there is something. How is it you have not asked for an introduction to the most beautiful woman in the room?"

"To your sister?" I asked, in a meaning tone.

"Yes," he replied with a light laugh, "to my sister."

"She did not go to Nice, then," I said.

"Who said she did not?" he asked, and instantly corrected himself. "Ah, I am forgetful. I remember now I told you my people were going there. Yes—they are in Nice by this time, no doubt."

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His eyes met mine; they sparkled with mischief, but in their light I saw an expression of mingled tenderness and defiance which puzzled me.

"You have done a daring thing, Sydney," I said.

"Is that unlike me?"

"No; but in this case you may have overlooked certain considerations. Where is the young lady at the present moment?"

He pointed to the head of the room.

"There—dancing with the Prince. Come, old man, don't look so grave. She is as good as the best of them, and better than most. Do I not know them?—these smug matrons and affected damsels, who present themselves to you as though they had been brought up on virtue and water, and who are as free from taint of wickedness as Diana was when she popped upon Endymion unaware. Chaste Diana! What a parody! Pretty creatures, Fred, these modern ones—but sly, sir, devilish sly! Do I not know them, with their airs and affectations and false assumptions of superior virtue? That is it—assume it if you have it not—which I always thought

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dishonest, unmanly advice on Hamlet's part. But now and then—very rarely, old man!—comes a nineteenth century Diogenes, in white tie and swallow-tail, who holds a magic mirror to pretended modesty's face, and sees beneath. What is the use of living, if one has not the courage of his opinions? And I have mine, and will stand by them—to the death! So I tell you again, Fred, there is no lady in these rooms of whom she is not the equal. If you want to understand what life really is, old man, you must get behind the scenes."

"Can one man set the world right?" I asked.

"He can do a man's work towards it, and if he shirk it when it presents itself, let him rot in the gutter."

I drew him from the room, for he was excited, and was attracting attention. When we were alone, I said,

"Sydney, what impelled you to introduce a lady into this assembly under a false name?"

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"A woman's curiosity," he replied, "and a man's promise. It had to be done, the promise being given. Fred, I exact no pledge from you. We speak as man to man, and I know you are not likely to fall away from me. I hate the soft current in which fashion lolls, and simpers, and lies—it palls upon the taste, and I do not intend to become its slave. I choose the more dangerous haven—sweetly dangerous, Fred—in which honesty and innocence (allied, of course, with natural human desires and promptings) find some sort of resting-place. It is a rocky haven, you say, and timid feet are bleeding there; but the bold can tread the path with safety. If you could see what underlies the mask of mock modesty, as from a distance it views its higher nature, you would see a yearning to share in the danger and the pleasure which honest daring ensures."

It is not in my power to recall the exact words spoken by Sydney Campbell at this and subsequent conversations; all I can do is to endeavour to convey to you an idea of the kind of man he was, so that you may the better comprehend what kind of a woman she was who held him in her toils. Sydney continued:

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"She wished so much to be here to-night! She has no parents and no family; she is absolutely alone in the world—or would be, but for me. Wait, old man; you shall know more of her, and you will be satisfied. It happened in this way. I was gasconading, I suppose—talking in heroics—flinging my words to the winds, and making a fool of myself generally. Then came up the subject of the ball. You know that the whole city has been ringing with it for a month past, and that a thousand women are in despair because they could not obtain an introduction. I dilated upon it, scornfully perhaps. A Prince was to be here—a Princess too. 'And you are as good,' said I to her, 'as any Princess in the kingdom.' 'I hope I am,' she answered softly—she has a voice of music, Fred—'I hope I am, but I could not gain admission to the ball.' I fired up. 'Do you wish to go?' 'Do I wish to go?' she echoed. 'To dance with a Prince, perhaps! Am I a woman?' A field of adventure was opened up to me. 'You shall go,' I said. 'Is that a promise?' she asked eagerly. 'It is a promise,' I replied. After that there was but one thing left for me to do—to fulfil my promise, at any risk, at any hazard. I *have* fulfilled it, and I am content. It is like stolen fruit, old man—that is what she said to me. A very human creature, Fred, and a child at heart. And Grace is dancing with a Prince, and everybody is happy."

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"Child as she is," I remarked, "she must be possessed of great courage to venture thus into a den of lionesses."

"You mistake her," said Sydney. "It is I who sustain her. She told me as much a few minutes since, and whispered that if I were not here she would run away. A certain kind of courage she must possess, however; liken it to the courage of a modest and beautiful wild flower which dares to hold up its head in the midst of its bolder and more showy sisters."

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I saw that he was in love with her, and I hinted it to him. He replied frankly,

"If I do not love her, love itself is a delusion."

I asked him who she was, and he replied,

"A daughter of Eve, and therefore the equal of a queen."

This was the substance of our conversation, which lasted for about half an hour, and at the end of it we entered the ballroom. During our absence a change had taken place in the aspect of affairs. I was not the only person who had seen the portrait of Sydney's sister, and who failed to recognise its living presentment in the lady he had introduced. Grace was dancing, and certain dowagers were watching her with suspicious eyes. Sydney observed this, and laughingly ascribed it to jealousy.

"If Grace were an ugly woman," he said, "they would not be up in arms against her. Grace is no match for these experienced tacticians; I will soon change their frowns into smiles."

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It was no vain boast; the charm of his manner was very great, and few persons could resist it. Perhaps he recognised, with all his daring, the danger of an open scandal, and saw, further, that the lady whose champion he was would be made to suffer in the unequal contest. To avert such a catastrophe he brought to bear all his tact and all his grace of manner with the leaders of fashion. He flattered and fooled them; he parried their artful questions; he danced and flirted with their daughters; and the consequence was that at four o'clock in the morning he escorted his beautiful companion in triumph from the ball.

The following evening Sydney came uninvited to my rooms, and asked me to accompany him to Grace's house.

"She intends to be angry with you," he said, "because you did not ask her to dance last night."

"She was well supplied with partners," I replied; "she could have had three for every dance, it appeared to me."

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I was curious to ascertain the real position of affairs, and Sydney and I rode to a pretty little cottage in the suburbs, which Grace occupied, with a duenna in the place of a mother.

Now let me describe, as well as I can, in what relation Grace and my friend, Sydney Campbell,

stood to each other. And before doing so it is necessary, for the proper understanding of what will be presently narrated, that I should inform you that, as I knew this woman by no other name than Grace, she knew me by no other name than Frederick.

I never understood exactly how their acquaintanceship commenced. Grace, Sydney told me, was companion to a lady in moderate circumstances, who treated the girl more like an animal than a human being. Some quixotic adventure took Sydney to the house of this lady, and shortly afterwards Grace left her situation, and found herself, friendless, upon the world. Sydney stepped in, and out of the chivalry of his nature proposed that he should take a house for her in the suburbs, where, with an elderly lady for a companion, she could live in comfort. She accepted his offer, and at the time of the ball they had known each other for between three and four months. In the eyes of the world, therefore, Grace was living under Sydney Campbell's protection. But, as surely as I am now writing plain truths in plain words, so surely am I convinced that the intimacy between the two was perfectly innocent, and that Sydney treated and regarded Grace with such love and respect as he would have bestowed on a beloved sister. It was not as a sister he loved her, but there was no guilt in their association. To believe this of most men would have been difficult—to believe it of Sydney Campbell was easy enough to one who knew him as I knew him. None the less, however, would the verdict of the world have been condemnatory of them. I pointed this out to Sydney.

"It matters little," he said. "I can be sufficiently happy under the ban of those whose opinions I despise."

"But it affects the lady," I said, "more deeply than it affects you."

"Ignorance is bliss," he replied. "She is not likely to hear the calumny. If any man or woman insults her, I shall know how to act."

"You have thought of the future, Sydney," I said.

"Scarcely," he said; "sufficient for the day is the good thereof. I love her—she loves me—that is happiness enough for the present. One day we shall marry—that is certain. But there are obstacles in the way."

"On whose side?" I asked.

"On both. My obstacle is this: I could not marry, without a certainty of being able to maintain her as a lady. I am dependent upon my father, and he has his crotchets. I shall overcome them, but it will take time. I do not believe in love in a cottage for a man with tastes and habits such as mine; and if my father were to turn his back upon me, I should be in a perplexing position. However, I have little doubt as to my being able to guide our boat into safe waters. But there is an obstacle on Grace's side. I am about to impart a secret to you. Her life has been most unfortunate; she has been most cruelly served, and most cruelly betrayed. Would you believe that when she was sixteen years of age, she was entrapped into a marriage with a scoundrel—entrapped by her own father, who is now dead? This husband, whom she hated, deserted her, and having fled to India, in consequence of serious involvements in this country, died there. News of his death, placing it almost beyond a doubt, reached her, but she did not take the trouble to verify it, having resolved never again to marry and to entrust her life and future into another man's keeping. No wonder, poor child! But now that I have won her love, and that in all honour only one course is open to us, it has resolved itself into a necessity that an official certificate of his death should be in our hands before we can link our lives together. I have but one more remark to make, and then, having confided in you as I have confided in no other man, we need never touch upon these topics again. It is that, having given this girl my love, and having won hers, no slander that human being can utter can touch her to her hurt in my mind or in my heart. You know me too well to suppose that I can be made to swerve where I have placed my faith, and love, and trust—and these are in her keeping."

He was right. I knew him, as he said, too well to believe, or to be made to believe, that human agency outside himself could shake his faith in her. Only the evidence of his own senses (and even of that he would make himself sure in all its collateral bearings) could ever turn him against the woman to whom he gave all that was noblest and brightest in a bright and noble nature. But soon after I became acquainted with her I distrusted her. That which was hidden from him was plain to me. I saw clearly she was playing upon him, and loved him no more than we love a tool that is useful to us. The knowledge made my position as his friend, almost as his brother (for I loved him with a brother's love) very difficult to sustain. A painful and delicate duty was before me, and I resolved to perform it with as much wisdom as I could bring to my aid. I had a cunning and clever mind to work against in the mind of this woman, and I played a cunning part. It was in the cause of friendship, as sacred to me as love. When the troubles which surround your life and mine, my dear, are at an end—when light is thrown upon the terrible mystery which surrounds my father's death—when I can present myself once more to the world in the name which is rightly mine—when my father's murderer is brought to justice, and I am clear from suspicion—I shall prove to you that I am not only your lover, and, as I hope to be, your husband, but that I am your friend. Friendship and love combined are as much as we can hope for in this world or in the next.

When Grace first occupied the cottage—I call it so, although really it was a roomy house, surrounded by a beautiful garden—which Sydney took for her, she professed to be contented with the occasional visits of her benefactor and lover. In speaking of her now I speak of her as I know her, not as I suspected her to be during our early acquaintanceship. She was ignorant of the character of the man who had stepped forward to help her in her distress, and time was required to gauge him and to develop what plans she desired to work out. Therefore, for the first two months all went along smoothly. Then came the ball, and the excitement attending it. After a storm comes a calm, but Grace was not the kind of woman to be contented to pass her days without adventure. She had, as she believed, probed her lover's nature to its uttermost depth,

and with winning cards in her hands she commenced to play her game. She said she was dull and wanted company.

"What kind of company?" said Sydney.

"Any kind you please," she replied. "I know nobody. Your own friends will be welcome to me."

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I was the first he introduced, and in a short time a dozen or so of our set made her cottage a common place of resort. Men must have something to amuse themselves with, and she supplied it in the shape of cards. Night after night we assembled in her cottage, and drank, and smoked, and gambled. She was a charming hostess, and some paid her court in a light way. No harm came of it; she knew, or believed she knew, how far she could go with such a man as Sydney, and none of his friends received encouragement of a nature which was likely to disturb him. Others beside myself did not give their hostess credit for more virtue than she possessed, but it was no business of theirs, and they did not interfere between Sydney and his lady. So he was allowed to live for a time in his fool's paradise. He was an inveterate gambler, and he could not resist cards, or dice, or any game of chance. Playing almost always with the odds against him, you will understand how it was that he lost, nine times out of ten.

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Among the frequenters of the cottage was a young man, a mere lad, who really was infatuated with his hostess, and was not sufficiently experienced to cut the strings of the net she threw around him. I will call the young man Adolph; he lives, and I hope has grown wiser. The tragedy of which he was a witness should have produced upon him an impression sufficiently strong to banish folly from his life, even though he lived to a hundred years. Sydney rather encouraged the passion of this lad for Grace. I knew that she told Sydney that he was like a brother who had died young, and that her statement was sufficient to make him believe that her liking for the lad sprang from this cause. Therefore Adolph was privileged, and treated with the familiarity of a brother, and became the envied of those who, if they dared, would have entered the lists with Sydney for the favour of their charming hostess.

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In our gambling tournaments we did not stop at cards and dice; roulette was introduced, and very soon became the favourite game. One night, Adolph asked to be allowed to introduce a friend, a cousin, who happened to be in the neighbourhood, and found time hang heavily on his hands.

"A dozen if you like," said Sydney, heartily, tapping the lad's cheek—"if you can gain permission from our Queen."

It was a habit with Sydney, when he referred to Grace in our company, to speak of her as "Our Queen," and we often addressed her as "Your Majesty."

"I am not sure," said Grace, "whether we shall allow strangers to be introduced."

She looked at Adolph; he coloured and stammered.

"This gentleman is not a stranger; he is my cousin."

"Do you vouch for him?" asked Grace, playfully.

"Of course I do," replied the lad.

"Can he afford to pay. If he loses, will you pay his losses, if he cannot?" asked the most experienced gambler in our set—a man who generally won.

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This time Adolph looked at Grace; she returned his look with a smile, which seemed to say, "Well? Do you not know your lesson?" But only by me was this smile properly understood.

"I am answerable for him," cried Adolph.

"Enough said!" exclaimed Sydney. "Tell your cousin to bring plenty of money with him. I have lost a fortune, and must get it back from some one. Who will take the bank at roulette? I have a system which will win me at least a thou. to-night."

But Sydney's system failed somehow, and instead of winning a thousand, he lost two.

The next night Adolph's cousin was introduced. His name was Pelham. I cannot say what impression he produced upon others; I can only speak of the impression he produced upon me. I looked at him and said mentally, "This man is no gentleman;" and then again, "Of all the men I have ever met, this man is the one I would be the least disposed to trust." But he was cordially welcomed, because he was Adolph's friend and cousin. Our hostess paid him but slight attention, and this increased my suspicion of him.

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The following incidents occurred on this night. We were assembled round the roulette table. Mr. Pelham was the only one among us who was not backing a colour, or a number, or *paire* or *impaire*, or *manque* or *passee*.

"Do you not play?" I asked. I was sitting next to him.

"I am trying to understand the game," he replied.

"Have you never been in Monaco?" I enquired.

"Never," he said.

I explained the points in the game to him, but he did not appear to take any interest in it.

"What game do you play?" I asked.

"Cribbage," he replied, "or *ecartè*, or all fours, or *euchre*, or poker. I have been in America."

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I proposed *ecartè* to him, and we sat down to a modest game. I offered to play for high stakes; he declined; and at the end of an hour I had won some fifteen pounds of him. Then we rose from our table, and watched the roulette players; but I was more employed in watching him than the turning of the wheel. He threw an occasional sovereign down, almost chancing where it fell, and he lost with a good grace. Others were staking their tens and fifties. Fifty was the limit; but he never exceeded his sovereign.

"It is enough to lose at a time," he said.

In the course of the night I calculated that he had lost about fifty pounds. He was one of the first to leave, and he scarcely touched 'our Queen's' hand as he bade her good night, and asked

permission to come again. A permission graciously given.

Now, the suspicion I had entertained towards him lessened when I considered how he had conducted himself, and but for a chance remark made by Sydney, and the incidents that followed, I should have accused myself of injustice. [122]

"We approve of Mr. Pelham," said Sydney to Adolph; "have you any more cousins?"

The lad with a doubtful expression in his face looked at Grace, and as it seemed to me, taking his cue from her, replied,

"No more."

"Put a little spirit in him," cried Sydney, clapping Adolph on the shoulder. "Tell him we can fill his pockets, or empty them. Faint heart never won fair lady yet."

I call this, Incident Number One.

Again:

We had all bidden our hostess good night. Sydney and I stood at the street door, lighting fresh cigars. Adolph had lingered behind.

"One moment, Sydney," I said; "I must go and fetch that boy."

I re-entered the house, softly and suddenly. Adolph and Grace were standing at the end of the passage, in the dark.

"Did I do my lesson well?" I heard Adolph ask in a low tone. [123]

"Perfectly," said Grace, "and I owe you anything you ask for."

"A kiss, then!" cried the lad, eagerly.

The reward was given.

"Adolph!" I cried; "we are waiting for you."

Adolph came towards me, and Grace, darting into a room, appeared with a light in her hand. Adolph's face was scarlet; his eyes were moist and bright.

"The foolish lad," said Grace to me, with perfect self-possession; "I gave him a kiss, and he blushes like a girl. Do you hear, Sydney?"

"I hear," said Sydney with a gay laugh. "I am not jealous of Adolph. Good night, dear."

I call this, Incident Number Two.

Again:

On our way home I asked Sydney if Grace had obtained the certificate of the death of her first husband. He replied that she had not. There was no doubt that he was dead, but Circumlocution and Red-tapeism stopped the way. [124]

"We shall get it presently," he said, "and then our course will be clear."

He spoke in an anxious tone. I suspected the cause. He was thinking of his losses at the gaming table, which by this time amounted to over ten thousand pounds. Every man among us held his I O U's.

"Luck must turn, Fred," he said.

"I hope it will!" I replied, "with all my heart."

"And if it does not," he murmured, "I shall have Grace!"

I pitied him, with all my heart; but I dared not deceive him.



CHAPTER XXVI.

 [125]

FREDERICK HOLDFAST'S STATEMENT (CONTINUED).

AT this time Sydney began to feel the effects of his temerity in introducing Grace to the ball. Certain rumours and whispers affecting Grace's character and Sydney's connection with her, caused the lady patronesses of the ball to institute inquiries, and the consequence was that Sydney was quietly but firmly banished from society. Houses which he was in the habit of visiting were closed against him; mothers who had held out a welcome hand to him now frigidly returned his bow or openly cut him; fathers—bound to an outward show of morality—turned their backs upon him or affected not to see him; marriageable young ladies, with whom, as an unengaged man, he had hitherto been an adorable being, looked any way but in his direction when they met in the thoroughfares. When Sydney became aware of this alteration in his social standing, he tested it to its fullest extent, and having quite convinced himself, proclaimed open defiance. [126]

"War to the knife," he said.

He carried the war into the enemy's quarters. He appeared with Grace upon every public occasion that presented itself. In the theatre he engaged the best and most conspicuous seats, and sat by the side of Grace with Society's eyes full upon him. It did not help his cause that Grace was invariably the most beautifully-dressed lady in the assembly, and that her brightness and

animation attracted general admiration.

Adolph espoused Grace's cause with complete disregard of consequences; his cousin, Mr. Pelham, however, held aloof, and simply bowed to her in public.

"Adolph is very fond of Grace," I said to Sydney.

"She is fond of him, too," responded Sydney. "What of that? He is but a boy!"

It struck me as strange that, out of Grace's house, Adolph and Mr. Pelham scarcely ever spoke to each other; as cousins they should have been more intimate. But this circumstance helped to strengthen my suspicions, and to render me more keenly watchful of the course of events. Before long Mr. Pelham became an adept at roulette; the first night he spent at Grace's house was the only night on which he lost. Good luck ranged itself on his side, and he generally departed with a comfortable sum in his possession. True, it was represented principally by I. O. U.'s., but with the exception of Sydney there was not one of us who could not afford immediately to pay his losses. For my own part I did not lose; I even won a little; I played for small stakes, and Mr. Pelham, winning so largely from others, did not grudge paying me, without commenting on my caution or timidity. He now always acted as banker at roulette; taking his seat at the head of the table with the accustomed air of a professional; never making a mistake in paying or receiving. His aptitude was wonderful. Sydney's losses grew larger and larger, and the more he lost the more recklessly he betted. Mr. Pelham was soon his principal creditor, and held the largest portion of his paper.

One day, when I was out riding, my horse cast a shoe. The accident happened within a couple of hundred yards of Grace's cottage. There was a blacksmith near, and it occurred to me to leave my horse with the blacksmith, and drop in upon Grace for a bit of lunch.

Upon my summons at the door being answered, I was informed that Grace was not at home. Having a little time to spare, I strolled about the country lanes, and came suddenly upon a lady and gentleman conversing together. Their backs were towards me, but I recognised them instantly. The lady was Grace, and the gentleman Mr. Pelham. They were conversing earnestly, and I should have retired immediately had it not been for the first few words which reached my ears. They were spoken by Mr. Pelham, who said:

"It is time to gather in the harvest. We must get your fool of a lover to stump up. Here is a list of his I O U's—in all, more than fourteen thousand pounds. We shall be able to cut a dash, my girl. We'll go to Monaco again, and this time we'll break the bank."

"I'm agreeable," replied Grace; "I am tired of this life, and I don't think I could keep up my part much longer. Sydney is all very well, but he is too lackadaisical."

"I should think he is, for such as you, Grace," said Mr. Pelham; "too goody-goody, eh, my girl? You want a man with a spice of the devil in him. But he has suited our turn, and you have played your part well. Give me some praise. Haven't I been magnanimous in trusting you with him—haven't I been confiding? You wouldn't get many lovers like me—trusting you out of their sight, without ever a shadow of suspicion. Then there's our young pigeon, Adolph—"

"A child!" cried Grace.

"Quite old enough," retorted Mr. Pelham, "for me to twist his neck for him if I had any doubts of you. But I haven't, my girl. It is not only love, but interest, that binds us together."

They passed on out of my sight without having perceived me. I was astounded, not by the discovery, but by the coarse, brutal nature of the plot in which Sydney's honour was sacrificed. This woman, Grace, was a worthless schemer and a deliberate cheat. The man, Mr. Pelham, was a blackleg and a ruffian. O, that such a nature as my friend Sydney's should have been so played upon! That such a noble heart as his should have been so basely betrayed! Here was my difficulty. It was the very nobility and generosity of his nature that would cause him openly to break with me if I attempted to open his eyes to the treachery, backed only by the imperfect testimony I could bring forward. His first step would be to rush to Grace, and inform her of my accusation, and once upon their guard, this man and this woman would weave their net about him too cunningly and cleverly to allow him an opportunity to break through its meshes. Whom could I enlist to aid me? I had an intimate friend whose assistance I would have asked, and he would freely have given it, but he was absent from Oxford. I could think of but one ally, a dangerous friend to enlist because of his inexperience and of his feelings towards Grace. But I determined to risk it. I spoke to Adolph.

"Adolph," I said, "can we two speak together in perfect confidence, as man to man?"

"Yes," replied the lad, colouring, "in perfect confidence. I hope you are not going to lecture me about Grace."

"Why should I lecture you about her?" I asked, glad at this clearing of the ground. "You are fond of her, I know, but that is a matter of the heart. You would do nothing dishonourable, nor would you be a party to dishonour."

"No, indeed," he cried, and went no further.

His face was scarlet; I knew in what way his conscience was pricked.

"We all make mistakes," I said, half gaily; I did not wish to frighten him by an over-display of seriousness; "the best as well as the worst of us; the oldest as well as the youngest of us. We have a good many dreams in life, Adolph, to which we cling in earnestness and true faith, and when we awake from them and our suffering is over, we smile at ourselves for our credulity. You are dreaming such a dream now, and if I rouse you from it I do so for a good purpose, and out of consideration for another as well as for yourself. Tell me—why did you introduce Mr. Pelham into Grace's house as your cousin? You are silent. Shall I answer for you? It was because Grace herself asked you to do so."

"Yes," said Adolph, "she asked me, and I did it."

"Are you satisfied with yourself for having done so?" I asked.

"No," he replied.

"I will tell you why," I said. "You never saw Mr. Pelham until he made his appearance on that unfortunate evening, and you have discovered, as we have all discovered, that he is not a gentleman."

"He is Grace's friend," said Adolph.

"Does that speak in her favour, or in his? Think over certain events, Adolph. Mr. Pelham, a stranger to all of us, is the friend of this lady. But if you will remember, upon his first visits, she and he scarcely spoke to each other, and when they meet in public the recognition that passes between them is so slight as to be remarkable. There is something suspicious in this, which even you, infatuated as you are, will recognise. Whom would you choose for your friend, Mr. Pelham or Sydney Campbell? In whose company would you rather be seen—whose hand would you rather shake—to whose honour would you rather trust your honour?"

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"To Sydney Campbell," said Adolph. "There is no choice between them. Sydney is a gentleman. Mr. Pelham is a —"

He did not complete the sentence; I supplied the omission. "Mr. Pelham is a blackleg. You start! Before you are many days older I will prove it to you; if I do not, I will submit to any penalty you may inflict upon me."

He puckered his brows. "You are not the only one," he said, biting his lips, "who has spoken against him."

"There are others, then, whose suspicions have been aroused?"

"Yes, Mr. —" (mentioning the most accomplished card-player in our set) "says that he palms the cards or has the devil's luck."

"The proof of either in any man would be sufficient to make him unfit company for gentlemen, for honourable men who play fair. Adolph, remember, you are responsible for him." The lad winced. "There is but one manly course before you—to clear the character of this man, or to expose him. If we are doing him an injustice in our estimate of him, there can be no exposure; he will come out of the fire unscathed. If we succeed in proving our suspicions unfounded, you will be clear. And even then I should advise you to make a clean breast of it. Subterfuge and deceit, my dear lad, are not gentlemen's weapons. When we strike a man, we strike him in the face—we do not stab in the back."

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"What will Grace say?" murmured Adolph.

"What *can* she say? In the case of an exposure, it is you who have been wronged, not she. She knew the character of the man whom she induced you to introduce as your cousin—to you he was utterly unknown. You had never set eyes on him before that evening. As you are answerable to us, so is she answerable to you. And if she reproach you unreasonably, ask her—prepare for a shock, Adolph; I am going to give you one straight from the shoulder—ask her whether less than three lovers at a time will not content her."

"Mr. Holdfast," cried Adolph, drawing himself up, "I request an explanation of your words."

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"You shall have it, Adolph. First and foremost, is not Sydney Campbell, your friend and mine, is he not Grace's accepted lover? You shrink; why? Because you also, in some sense, are her accepted lover. Men have eyes, Adolph, and you cannot be so simple as to suppose you have escaped observation. I ask you for no confession, but many of us have seen and remarked upon your infatuation. Now, say that Grace has encouraged you. Is that honest on her part towards Sydney? Say that you have made love to her secretly, led on by the force of your passion, and perhaps a little by her—is that honest on *your* part towards Sydney? It strikes me, if the case be as I have represented it, that Sydney is much wronged by the young lad in whom he places full confidence, and by the lady to whom he has given his love. Come, Adolph, if I have cut deep, it is out of friendship. It is an ugly business, my lad, and I can find no justification for it. But the worst part of the unhappy story remains to be disclosed. Sydney Campbell is this lady's lover, and she encourages him; you are this lady's lover, and she encourages you; Mr. Pelham is this lady's lover, and she is his. You may well turn pale. She brings this blackleg lover of hers into the house—into Sydney's house—under false colours. On my oath, Adolph, I am speaking the truth when I speak of Grace as Mr. Pelham's lover. She plays *you* into his hands—but you are subsidiary in the affair, my lad. The big stake lies with our friend Sydney. She plays *him* into this blackleg's hands, and sullies the reputation and breaks the heart of as high-minded a gentleman as you and I can hope to meet again in life!"

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I had spoken earnestly, and I saw that I had produced the impression I desired. Then I related to Adolph all that I knew, and having driven conviction home to him, we made a solemn compact to do our best to open Sydney's eyes to the infamous scheme of which he was the victim. Adolph was to act implicitly under my instructions; I remember how troubled he was when he left me, and I judged it well that he should be left to himself in his suffering. Poor lad! It was his first experience in human treachery, and he suffered the more that his heart was confiding and tender.

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On this evening it was that Sydney, in my company, lashed himself into a furious state of indignation at a slight that had been put upon Grace in his hearing. It occurred in a club, and Sydney, with a violent display of temper, defended Grace, and attacked the character of the gentleman who had uttered a simple word or two to Grace's disparagement. Sydney was not content with attacking the character of the gentleman; he attacked the lady members of the gentleman's family, with whom he had once been intimate, and called them a parcel of scheming, jealous jades, who could not believe in purity because they did not themselves possess it. He exceeded the bounds of moderation, it must be confessed, and a scene ensued that was not soon forgotten.

"The injustice of the world," cried Sydney to me, "is enough to drive an earnest man mad—as I have no doubt it has driven many. That gentleman and his mother and sisters would lower their

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false faces to the ground before Lady this and Lady that”—he mentioned the names of the ladies, but it is unnecessary to set them down here—“who are wealthy and highly connected, but who are not fit to tie the shoe-strings of my poor persecuted Grace, nor the shoe-strings of any girl who has a spark of virtue in her. You have seen Grace times enough now, Fred, to be able to appreciate her purity, her modesty, her innocence, at their proper worth. There lives not on earth a woman more worthy the love and esteem of man!”

Then he broke out into a rhapsody of extravagant adoration which would have amazed me had I not been acquainted with the intense chivalry of his nature. The more Grace was vilified, the more stoutly would he stand by her; the stronger the detraction, the stronger his love. It was not while he was in such a humour as this that I could commence to play the part of an honest Iago. [140]

“By heavens!” he cried, flourishing a letter; “here is my father also coming forward to strike a feeble woman, whose only armour is her virtue. In this letter he expresses his sorrow at the intelligence which has reached him that I am getting myself talked about in connection with a woman of disgraceful character. The honour of his name is in my keeping, he says, and he looks to me to do nothing to tarnish it. Nor will I. To stand up, as I am standing up, against the world, in defence of virtue, purity, and innocence, can but reflect honour on the highest, and so I have told him. Look you, Fred; I know what I am staking in this matter. I am staking my life, and my heart, and all that is precious to my better nature; and the prize is worth it.”

We adjourned to Grace’s house, where Sydney paid Grace the most delicate attention; it was as though he felt that he owed her reparation for the ill opinion of the world. It was an eventful night; Sydney proposed to take the bank at roulette, and it appeared as if his luck had really turned. He won back all the I O U’s he had given us, and his only creditor was Mr. Pelham, who had won or lost but a small sum. Sydney twitted him for the smallness of his stakes, and Mr. Pelham, seemingly stung by the sarcasm, plunged heavily. By mutual consent the limit was increased, and the battle between the two became so exciting that the other players round the table staked but trifling amounts, their attention being engrossed by the dangerous duel. Fortune being in the balance, now Sydney won, now Mr. Pelham; but presently Mr. Pelham, with the air of a man who intended to win all or lose all, threw a hundred pounds I O U upon a number. Sydney looked grave for a moment, and then, with a careless toss of the head, turned the wheel. The number did not turn up, and Sydney won the hundred; all felt relieved, for if the number Mr. Pelham backed had come up, it would have cost Sydney thirty-five hundred pounds in one coup. [141]

“Again?” asked Mr. Pelham, tauntingly.

“Again,” assented Sydney, with a scornful laugh.

Mr. Pelham threw down upon a number another of Sydney’s I O U for a hundred, and again Sydney won. This occurred five or six times in succession until Sydney cried,

“Double it, if you wish!”

Mr. Pelham accepted the challenge; but now he appeared to play with greater deliberation. He placed two hundred pounds each on numbers 5 and 24, exactly opposite zero. I looked at Grace; she was leaning over the table, watching the duel with eager eyes, and I could see that her whole soul was in the game. Round and round went the wheel, and we all followed the progress of the marble with the most intense interest. The ball fell into 28, and Sydney won.

“I shall stick to my numbers,” said Mr. Pelham, staking similar amounts upon the same two numbers. This time zero appeared, and Sydney swept the board. Again the two numbers were backed for the high stakes, and now the marble rolled into number 24. [143]

“There’s nothing like constancy,” cried Mr. Pelham.

Sydney, with a steady hand, wrote out an I O U for seven thousand pounds, and threw it over to Mr. Pelham.

Once more the same numbers were backed, and the devil sent the marble rolling back for the second time into number 24.

“Always back the last number and the last colour,” cried Mr. Pelham.

“For a novice, Pelham,” remarked one of our party, “you play exceedingly well.”

The slight sneer which accompanied the remark was not lost upon us, but Mr. Pelham did not appear to notice it. I believe at that moment there was not a man in the room who would not have been made happy by the opportunity of picking a quarrel with him.

“There is nothing difficult to learn in it,” said Mr. Pelham; “even such a poor player as myself may happen to be favoured by fortune.” [144]

Sydney, meanwhile, had written another I O U for seven thousand pounds; he handed it to Mr. Pelham, saying,

“You will give me my revenge?”

“Most certainly,” replied Mr. Pelham. “Now?”

“No,” said Sydney, “to-morrow night. You hold a great deal of my paper?”

Mr. Pelham produced his pocket-book, and added up some figures.

“Something under twenty thousand,” said Mr. Pelham.

Sydney nodded gravely, and not rising from his seat, twirled the wheel carelessly, and apparently in deep thought. Roulette, however, was over for the night, and the men broke up into small parties, some playing hazard, some unlimited loo. I alone remained with Sydney by the wheel. As carelessly as himself, I threw the marble in as he turned the wheel. He gave me an intelligent glance, and we continued our idle game for a couple of dozen turns of the wheel. Numbers 5 or 24 came up on average about once in every six turns. Sydney rose from the table, and in such a manner as not to attract attention I examined the wheel. It did not occupy me long to discover that it had been tampered with. The spaces between the two numbers Mr. Pelham had backed were wider than those which divided the other numbers, and the circumstance of numbers 5 and 24 being opposite Zero gave the backer an immense advantage. The chances in [145]

his favour were increased by another discovery I made. Where these two lucky numbers were situated there was a deeper bevel than in any other part of the circle. I ascertained this both by sight and touch. There was no further doubt in my mind as to the character of Mr. Pelham, nor, indeed, as to the character of Grace. The wheel could not have been tampered with had they not been in collusion.

Before we broke up, a little private conversation took place between the two men.

Mr. Pelham put a question to Sydney, and Sydney replied,

"Certainly. Give yourself no anxiety."

Then he drew me aside, and asked me if I could let him have a hundred pounds.

"It is for Grace," he said, "she is short of money; and so am I," he added with a laugh.

I gave him the money, and we broke up for the night.

Sydney and I walked home in company, excusing ourselves from the others. It was a fine night, and we lit our cigars, and walked on for a while in silence, which Sydney was the first to break.

"I wanted your company badly," he said; "my mind is troubled."

"I am your friend, Sydney," I said.

He returned the pressure of my hand. "Thank you, Fred. My mind is troubled about Mr. Pelham. There is no reason why he should not win from me as easily as, with luck on my side, I might win from him. But I am not satisfied. It appears to me that the numbers he backed and won upon were the numbers he intended to back and win upon. If so, it denotes design. How does it strike you?"

"With you as banker, I will back numbers 5 and 24," I replied, "and will undertake to win a fortune of you in an hour or two. Always supposing that the wheel is the same as it was to-night."

"It struck me as strange," he said thoughtfully; "until to-night my suspicions have not been excited. Had any of you won my money, I should have thought less of it. You were trying the wheel as I turned it, after play was over. Confirm or destroy the impression on my mind."

"I must confirm it. The numbers Mr. Pelham backed have been tampered with."

"Are you certain?"

"Most certain."

He lit a fresh cigar, and threw away the old one.

"These things are not done without human agency, Fred."

"Indeed not. Very skilful hands have been at work upon that wheel. Were it not that I desire not to risk your friendship, Sydney, which I value highly, I should impart something to you concerning Mr. Pelham which has come to my knowledge."

He did not reply for a few moments, and then he said, "We tremble on the brink sometimes, but it is only cowards who fly. How beautiful the night is, Fred! The world is very lovely—the stars to me are living things. Even now, when I seem to feel that Fate has something horrible in store for me, they whisper peace into my soul. Ah, friend of mine! that a man's hope, and heart, and holiest wish should be at the mercy of a rickster! It is sad and laughable. This flower in my coat was given to me by Grace; it is dead." He made a motion as if he would fling it from him, but he restrained himself, and crushing it in his hand, put it into his breast pocket. As I looked at him with loving pity, he put his handkerchief to his mouth, and drew it away, stained with blood.

"Sydney!" I cried, in alarm.

"It is nothing," he said; "I have been spitting blood for a long time past. Now tell me what has come to your knowledge respecting Mr. Pelham. Do not fear—you will not risk my friendship, upon which you place far too high a value."

I said simply, "He is not Adolph's cousin."

"How do you know that?"

"From Adolph himself; he and I have been speaking to each other in confidence."

"What was the lad's motive in introducing Mr. Pelham to us with a falsehood?"

"He did so by desire of Grace."

"Then Grace must have been acquainted with Mr. Pelham."

"It naturally follows, to the mind of one who does not wilfully blind himself to inexorable fact. Sydney, let us walk back in the direction of Grace's house. It is a whim of mine, and will do no harm."

"It can do no good."

"Sydney," I said impressively, "as surely as we are now walking side by side conversing on a theme which is bringing torture to your heart, so surely do I know what I dare not impart to you. Come, humour me."

I turned him gently towards Grace's house, and we walked to the well-known spot. It was an hour since we parted from her, but there was no sign of repose in the house. The windows of the sitting-room were lit up from within, and I drew Sydney close enough to them to hear the sound of laughter—the laughter of a man and a woman.

"For God's sake," said Sydney, "let us get away from this place!"

He ran so swiftly from me towards the town that it was long before I came up to him, and then I found him with a deathly-white face, and a heart palpitating wildly from mental and physical exhaustion. I assisted him home, and we parted without exchanging another word on the subject. All that he said was,

"To-morrow night I am to have my revenge. You will come to the cottage?"

It was tacitly understood that the night was to be devoted to a gambling duel between Sydney and Mr. Pelham, and expectation was on every face. Grace looked bewitching, and exhibited more than usual tenderness towards Sydney, and he, on his part, was never more attentive and devoted in his conduct towards her than he was on this evening. He was a singularly handsome

man, and the contrast between him and his opponent was very marked. Mr. Pelham, who was the last to arrive, was cool and collected enough, but he was inferior to Sydney in polish and gentlemanly bearing. The first hour was passed in badinage and lively conversation, and then roulette was proposed. Sydney laughingly shook his head.

"Roulette will be too slow for Mr. Pelham and myself," he said. "We must have a more direct trial of skill. I propose, Mr. Pelham, a duel with the dice."

"Dice be it," said Mr. Pelham, and the two men sat down to Hazard. They played low at first, but this was only to whet the appetite, and within an hour the stakes became higher than had ever been played for in that house. In the course of the play, Sydney said to his opponent, [152]

"I have promised to settle up with you in a few days, Mr. Pelham, should you rise a winner, and you may depend upon my keeping my word. Mr. Pelham, gentlemen, is called abroad, and I must not remain his debtor. Men of honour know what is due to each other; if I win from Mr. Pelham to-night I shall expect him to pay me. It seems as if good fortune were on my side."

It really appeared to be so, and we all rejoiced. During a couple of hours' play Sydney had won from Mr. Pelham between six and seven thousand pounds. Both men were playing with coolness and judgment, but even when Mr. Pelham was the setter, good luck remained with Sydney. For a great part of these two hours Grace remained by the side of the players, and when she moved away Sydney called her back, saying that she gave him luck. By midnight Sydney had won back over fifteen thousand pounds, and then an adjournment for supper was called. All but Sydney and Mr. Pelham responded to the invitation; they were too deeply interested in their duel to rise from their table, and thus it happened that they were left for a time with no witness but Adolph, who said he could not eat. When we returned from the supper table they had changed their game. They were playing now with three dice, the highest throw for varying sums, from a hundred to a thousand pounds. Sydney's good luck appeared to have deserted him; he was now losing heavily. He cried out to us not to crowd round the table. [153]

"Do you think we are playing for life and death?" he exclaimed, with a wild laugh. "Come, Mr. Pelham, two thousand on this throw!"

With glittering eyes and teeth firmly set, Mr. Pelham assented, and won.

"Five thousand!" cried Sydney, and threw fourteen. "Ten to one in hundreds you do not beat it."

"Done!" said Mr. Pelham, and threw sixteen. [154]

"You must be most unfortunate in your love affairs, Mr. Pelham," said Sydney. "How do we stand now?"

Mr. Pelham passed over to his opponent a sheet of paper with figures on it.

"Twenty-four thousand," cried Sydney. "Enough to set up a house in Belgravia. I am weary of this work. One throw for the last—double or quits. Your last chance, and mine. Done?"

"Done!" said Mr. Pelham, with white lips.

Every man in the room suspended his game, and rose to witness this mad play.

"I protest!" said Sydney, turning almost savagely upon his friends. "Go to your tables, and concern yourself with your own counters. We can settle our affair without witnesses. Grace, a glass of champagne."

He drank three glasses in succession, and said to Mr. Pelham, with only myself and Adolph standing by the small table, [155]

"This is a moment to remember. Fortune! be kind! I throw first. Fifteen! I am a free man. Now, Mr. Pelham."

"Sixteen!" said Mr. Pelham, raising his box.

The word had no sooner passed his lips than his wrist was seized with a grasp of iron by Sydney, and taking up this unrehearsed cue, I pinned the cheat to his chair. He uttered a cry of rage, but he could neither rise nor release his wrist from Sydney's hold. This incident brought all the players to their feet.

"Gentlemen," said Sydney, calmly, "this man and I have been playing for something more than money, but it is simply a question of honour in which money is involved that I ask you to decide. Here are my dice, and here my throw. There are Mr. Pelham's dice, and there his throw. I call upon you to constitute yourselves a committee of honour, and examine the dice we each used in the last throw."

They removed the dice, and discovered those used by Mr. Pelham to be loaded. It would have gone hard with him if Sydney had not interfered. [156]

"Hold!" he cried. "Fair play for rogue and gentleman! Release him, Fred." I released the blackleg, and he sat helpless in his chair, and glared at us. But he saw that his fate was in our hands, and he submitted. Sydney continued: "Mr. Pelham, these dice I have thrown with are fair dice, such as are used by gentlemen. My throw is fifteen. Take them, and throw against it. On my honour, if you beat my cast, I will endeavour to pay you what I owe you, despite the fact that the I O U's you hold of mine have been unfairly won."

The blackleg took the box, and rattled the dice in it, gazing upon us with a ghastly smile, and then deliberately replaced the box on the table, mouth upwards.

"What guarantee have I," he asked, "that in the event of my throwing higher than fifteen, these gentlemen friends of yours will not set upon me, and murder me?"

"I answer for them," replied Sydney; "it is my honour that is concerned, not theirs, and they are, in some measure, guests in my house. You will be allowed to depart unmolested, and tomorrow I will receive you in my rooms, and endeavour to come to a settlement with you." [157]

"I take your word," said the blackleg, and he raised the box from the table, and rattled the dice again.



CHAPTER XXVII.

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FREDERICK HOLDFAST'S STATEMENT (CONTINUED).

DURING the interval that elapsed between the acts of raising the box from the table and throwing out the dice, my observation was drawn to Grace. She stood at a little distance from the men, bending forward, her eyes fixed upon the box, her lips parted, her hands clasped, and a bright colour in her cheeks. She held her breath suspended, as it were, as though her fate hung upon the issue of the throw.

The dice rolled out of the box, and three single black dots lay exposed. Mr. Pelham had lost. He had thrown three aces.

He flung the box from him with a shocking oath. It struck a man in the face, and he stepped towards Mr. Pelham, with the evident intention of striking him in return, when Sydney interposed.

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"It was an accident," he said. "It is for me alone to settle this affair."

Grace did not move, but her eyes were now fixed upon Sydney.

"I owe you nothing in the shape of money," said Sydney to Mr. Pelham. "I will trouble you for my bits of paper."

Mr. Pelham, with trembling fingers, opened his pocket-book. His agitation was very great, but I have never been able to decide whether it was by accident or design that he pulled out, with Sydney's I O U's, a number of letters and papers, and with them a photograph. It was a photograph of Grace. We all saw it, and I was not the only one who waited apprehensively for Sydney's next move.

He took up the picture; there was writing on the back, which he read. There was breathless silence in the room. For a moment Sydney's eyes rested upon Grace. She smiled wistfully, as a child might smile who had been detected in a trifling fault. Sydney did not respond to her smile. He handed the picture back to Mr. Pelham without a word.

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Receiving his I O U's he burnt them, one by one, in the flame of a candle, calling out the sums, which two or three of the men pencilled down.

"Is that all?" he demanded of Mr. Pelham, as the discomfited gambler paused.

"That is all," replied Mr. Pelham.

"Your sight or your memory is short," said Sydney. "I am not accounted an expert at figures, but you will find an I O U for three thousand, which you have overlooked. Ah! I was right, I see. You are but a clumsy scoundrel after all."

"You shall answer to me for this," said Mr. Pelham, with an attempt at bravado.

"I will consider," said Sydney, "whether it is necessary to chastise you. But not to-night, nor in this house. We must not forget that a lady is present."

He bowed with exquisite politeness to Grace, and then addressed his friends.

"I requested you," he said, "to constitute yourselves a committee of honour, to examine the dice this person used against me. I ask you now to examine the roulette wheel, and to say whether there is any indication that the numbers 5 and 24 have been tampered with."

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The wheel was examined, and my suspicions were confirmed. Upon the verdict being given, Sydney said,

"The person to whom I lost fourteen thousand pounds last night upon number 24 must be accomplished in many ways; for it is only by breaking into the house when its inmates were asleep that he could so skilfully have dealt with the wheel for his own purpose. I cannot congratulate you upon your cousin, Adolph."

The lad, with burning blushes, turned his face away, and Sydney, advancing courteously to Grace, offered her his hand. Wondering, and with a look of mingled apprehension and admiration, she placed her hand in his. He led her to Mr. Pelham's side.

"I made a bitter mistake," he said to the blackleg. "I believed myself to be the possessor of a jewel to which I had no claim. I resign her; although I believe at this moment"—and here he looked her direct in the face—"that she would follow me, and prove false to you, if I invited her by a word. I withstand the temptation; I will not rob you of her."

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"Sydney!" cried Grace, holding out her hands to him.

"Did I not tell you?" he asked of Mr. Pelham; and then, turning to Grace, he said, "Rest content. You have broken my heart. Either I was not worthy of you, or you were not worthy of me. It matters not, now that our eyes are opened. Mr. Pelham, I was guilty of an error to-night when I said you were unfortunate in your love affairs. Many men would envy you. Come, gentlemen, enough of this. The play is over; drop the curtain! Adolph, my lad, I am sorry for you, but it is the way of life."

What followed was so bewildering and unexpected that I cannot clearly recall it. There was a sudden movement, some passionately tender words from Grace, some furious ones from Mr. Pelham. I cannot say whether there was a struggle; my only clear remembrance is that, after a lapse of a few moments, during which we were all in a state of inexplicable excitement and confusion, I saw Grace's arms round Sydney's neck, that Sydney, struggling to release himself, uttered a cry and slipped to the ground, with blood rushing from his mouth. He had broken a blood-vessel, and before a doctor arrived he was dead. He died in the presence of the woman who had betrayed him, and almost his last look was one of mingled horror and anguish as she leant over him in affright. Thus ended the life of my chivalrous, rash, and noble-hearted friend.

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Such an affair as this could not be hushed up. There were an inquiry and an inquest, but there was no room for suspicion of foul play. The medical evidence proved that Sydney died from the bursting of a blood vessel; but in my mind there was no shadow of a doubt that Grace was the indirect cause of his death. In my eyes she was a murderess.

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She disappeared from the place, and Mr. Pelham with her. I visited the cottage a fortnight after Sydney was buried. All the furniture had been removed, and the cottage was empty.

The tragic termination of this ill-fated connection produced a great impression upon many of our set. For myself I can say that it made me more permanently serious in my thoughts; from that time I have never played for money.

Before the occurrence of the events I have described my mother had died. Up to this time, and for a little while afterwards, my father and I had corresponded regularly, but I did not make him acquainted with the details of the story of Sydney's career. Incidentally, at the time of Sydney's death, I mentioned that I had lost a dear friend, and that was all my father knew of the affair.

A break occurred in our correspondence—not on my part; on my father's. For three weeks or a month I did not hear from him, until I wrote and asked him if he was well. He replied in a very few words; he was quite well, he said, but he was engaged in affairs so momentous and engrossing that he could not find time to write at length. I surmised that he was speculating largely, and I wrote to him telling him not to harass himself by writing me long letters; all I wanted was to know that he was in good health. For three or four months I heard from him but rarely; then, one day came a letter with the astonishing intelligence that he had married again.

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"You will be surprised at the news," wrote my father, "but I feel you will rejoice when you know that this step, which I have taken almost in secret, will contribute to my happiness. Your second mother is a most charming young lady, and I am sure you will have a great affection for her. I shall presently ask you to come to London to make her acquaintance, when we can discuss another matter more important to yourself. It is time you commenced a career. Be assured of this—that my marriage will make no difference in your prospects."

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I had no just cause for anger or uneasiness in the circumstance of my father marrying again, but I was hurt at the secrecy of the proceeding. He spoke of his wife as "a charming young lady," and it was clear from the tone of his letter that his heart was engaged. My father possessed sterling qualities, but I could not help confessing to myself that he was scarcely the kind of man to win the love of a charming young lady. Who was she, and why had I not been informed of the engagement or invited to the wedding? My father stood in no fear of me; he was a man who stepped onward in his own path, and who had been all his life in the habit of judging and deciding for himself. Thinking of him alone I could find absolutely no reason why he should not have confided in me, but when my thoughts turned in the direction of the young lady an explanation presented itself. That it was not complimentary to her made me all the more anxious for my father. But upon deliberation I withheld my final judgment until I had seen my mother-in-law. The invitation to London arrived, and I waited first upon my father in his city office. He received me with abundant love; I had written him a letter, wishing him every happiness, and it had given him great gratification. He confessed to me that it was not in accordance with his desire that I had not been informed of the engagement. "It was a young lady's whim," he said, "and I was bound in gallantry to yield."

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"You are happy?" I asked, evading the point. The situation as between father and son was particularly awkward to him, and my wish was to set him as much as possible at his ease.

"I am very happy," he replied. "Let me anticipate your questions, and give you some information about her. The young lady is poor and an orphan. Her name was Lydia Wilson. She was without family, without friends, and without money. I made her acquaintance accidentally a few months ago in the course of business, and was attracted to her. She was in a dependent and cruel position, and I made her an offer of marriage which she accepted. There is no need for us to go into further particulars. I thought much of you, and your manner of receiving the news of this unexpected step has delighted me. All that remains for you to do is to make the acquaintance of a lady who I feel is too young to be my wife, but who has done me infinite honour by assuming my name—who is too young to be a second mother to you, but whom you will find a charming and true friend. Numbers of persons will say that it is an imprudent step for a man of my age to marry a mere child; I must confess it is likely I should pass that judgment upon another man in my position; but I was unable to resist her, and I am happy in the assurance that, despite the disparity in our ages, she loves me. You will find in her, Frederick, a singular mixture of simplicity, shrewdness, and innocence. And now, my dear boy, we will go home to her; she is anxiously awaiting us."

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My father's wife was not visible when we reached home, and my father told me she was dressing, and would not come down till dinner was on the table.

"I did not know," he said, "that friends were to dine with us to-night. I should have liked the three of us to spend the evening together, but there will be plenty of opportunities."

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We both retired to dress for dinner, and upon my re-entering the room the guests were arriving—fifteen or sixteen of them. They were all strangers to me, and as I was introduced to them by

my father an uncomfortable impression forced itself upon me that they were not persons who moved in the first class. There were two foreign noblemen among them whose titles I doubted, and an American upon whose shirt-front was stamped Shoddy. Scarcely a moment before dinner was announced, my father's wife entered.

"Frederick," said my father, "this is my wife. My dear, this is my son, of whom I have spoken so much."

Then dinner was announced, and my father said:

"Frederick, you will take in Mrs. Holdfast."

What with the ceremonious bow with which my father's wife received me, and the bustle occasioned by the announcement of dinner, I had not time to look into the lady's face until her hand was on my arm. When I did look at her I uttered a smothered cry, for the woman I was escorting to dinner was no other than Grace, through whose abominable treachery my friend Sydney Campbell had met his death.

The shock of the discovery was so overwhelming that I lost my self-possession. I felt as if the scene on that dreadful night were being enacted over again, and as we moved onwards to the dining-room I repeated the words uttered by Sydney to Grace, which had rang in my ears again and again, "Rest content. You have broken my heart. Either I was not worthy of you, or you were not worthy of me. The play is over; drop the curtain!"

The voice of my father's wife recalled me to myself.

"What strange words you are muttering!" she exclaimed, in a sweet voice. "Are they from a book you are writing? Mr. Holdfast tells me you are very clever, Frederick."

"They are words spoken by a dear friend," I said, "at a tragic period in his life—a few moments, indeed, before he died."

"How shocking," she said, "to think of them now when you and I meet for the first time! A dear friend of yours? You shall tell me all about it, Frederick. You do not mind my calling you Frederick, do you? I have been thinking for days, and days, and days, what I should call you. Not Mr. Holdfast—that is my husband; nor Master Frederick." She laughed heartily at this notion. "No, it shall be Frederick. And you musn't call me mother; that would be too ridiculous. Nor madam; that would be too distant. You must call me Lydia."

"It is a pretty name," I said, summoning all my fortitude and composure; "is it your only one?"

"Of course it is," she replied. "Is not one enough for such a little creature as me? I hope," she whispered, "you are not angry with me for marrying your father. I could not help it, indeed, indeed I could not! He loved me so much—better even than he loves you, I believe, and his nature is so great and noble that I would not for the world give him the slightest pain. He feels so deeply! I have found that out already, and he is ready to make any sacrifice for me. We are both very, very happy!"

She had succeeded in making me more clearly understand the extraordinary difficulty of my position. Whether she did this designedly or not was not so clear, for every word she spoke might have been spoken by a simple innocent woman, or by a woman who was playing a double part. I could not discover whether she recognised me. She exhibited no sign of it. During the dinner she was in the highest spirits, and my father's eyes followed her in admiration. Knowing his character, and seeing how deeply he was enamoured of this false and fascinating woman, I trembled perhaps more than she did at the consequences of an exposure.

But was it possible, after all, that I could be mistaken? Were there two women so marvellously alike in their features, in manner, in the colour of their hair and eyes, and could it have been my fate to meet them in positions so strange and close to me?

I observed her with the closest attention. Not a word, not a tone, not a gesture, escaped me; and she, every now and then, apparently unconscious of what was in my mind, addressed me and drew me into conversation in the most artless manner. She demanded attention from me with the usual licence of beauty, and later on in the evening my father, linking his arm in mine, said,

"My mind is relieved of a great anxiety. I am glad you like Lydia; she is delighted with you, and says she cannot look upon you with a mother's eyes. She will be your sister, she says, and the best friend you have in the world. Our home will once more be happy, as in your mother's days."

I slept but little during the night, and the following day and for days afterwards devoted myself to the task of confirming or destroying the horrible suspicion which haunted me. I saw enough to convince me, but I would make assurance doubly sure, and I laid a trap for her. I had in my possession a photograph of Sydney, admirably executed and handsomely framed, and I determined to bring it before her notice suddenly, and when she supposed herself to be alone. Winter was drawing near, and the weather was chilly. There were fires in every room. We were to go to the theatre, she, my father, and I. Dressing quickly I went into our ordinary sitting-room, where a large fire was burning. I turned the gas low, placed the photograph on the table so that it was likely to attract observation, and threw myself into an arm chair in a corner of the room which was in deep shadow. I heard the woman's step upon the stairs, and presently she entered the room, and stood by the table, fastening a glove. While thus employed, her eyes fell upon the photograph. I could not see the expression on her face, but I saw her take the picture in her hand and look at it for a moment; then she stepped swiftly to the fireplace, and kneeling down, gazed intently at the photograph. For quite two minutes did she so kneel and gaze upon the picture, without stirring. I rose from my chair, and turned up the gas. She started to her feet, and confronted me; her face was white, her eyes were wild.

"You are interested in that picture," I said; "you recognise it."

The colour returned to her cheeks—it was as though she willed it—her eyes became calm.

"How should I recognise it?" she asked, in a measured tone. "It is the face of a gentleman I have never seen."

"It is the face of my friend, my dear friend, Sydney Campbell," I replied, sternly, "who was slain by a heartless, wicked woman. I have not told you his story yet, but perhaps you would scarcely care to hear it."

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Her quick ears had caught the sound of my father's footsteps. She went to the door, and drew him in with a caressing motion which brought a look of tenderness into his eyes. There was something of triumph in her voice—triumph intended only for my understanding—as she said to her husband,

"Here is a picture of Frederick's dearest friend, who met with—O! such a dreadful death, through the heartlessness of a wicked woman! What did you say his name was, Frederick?"

Forced to reply, I said, "Sydney Campbell."

I saw that I had to do with a cunning and clever woman, and that all the powers of my mind would be needed to save my father from shame and dishonour. But I had no idea of the scheme my father's wife had devised for my discomfiture, and no suspicion of it crossed my mind even when my father said to me, in the course of the night,

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"Lydia is charmed with you, Frederick. She says no one in the world has ever been more attentive to her. She loves you with a sister's love. So all things have turned out happily."

In this miserable way three weeks passed, without anything further being said, either by her or myself, upon what was uppermost in our minds. Convinced that she was thoroughly on her guard against me, and convinced also of the necessity of my obtaining some kind of evidence before I could broach the subject to my father, I employed a private detective, who, at the end of these three weeks had something to report. The woman, it appears, went out shopping, and as nearly as I can remember I will write the detective's words:

"The lady did not go in her carriage. She took a hansom, and drove from one shop to another, first to Regent Street, then to Bayswater, then to the Elephant and Castle. A round-about drive, but I did not lose sight of her. At the Elephant and Castle she went into Tarn's, paying the cabman, who drove off. I have his number and the number of every cab the lady engaged. When she came out of Tarn's, she looked about her, and went into a confectioner's shop near at hand, where there were tables for ladies to sit at. There was nothing in that—she must have been pretty tired by that time. Lemonade and cakes were brought to her, and she made short work of them. There was nothing in that—the lady has a sweet tooth; most ladies have; but I fancied that she looked up at the clock once or twice, a little impatiently. She finished her cakes, and called for more, and before she had time to get through the second plateful, a man entered the shop, and in a careless way took his seat at the same table. As I walked up and down past the window—for it wouldn't have done for me to have stood still staring through it all the time—I saw them talking together, friendly like. There was nothing out-of-the-way in their manner; they were talking quietly, as friends talk. After about a quarter-of-an-hour of this, the man shook hands with her, and came out of the shop. Then, a minute or two afterwards, the lady came out of the shop. She walked about a hundred yards, called a cab, drove to a jeweller's shop in Piccadilly, discharged the cab, came out of the jeweller's shop, took another cab, and drove home. Perhaps you can make something out of it. I can't."

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"Is there nothing strange," I asked, "in a lady going into a confectioner's shop at such a distance from home, and there meeting a gentleman, with whom she remains conversing for a quarter of an hour?"

"There's nothing strange in it to me," replied the detective. "You don't know the goings-on of women, sir, nor the artfulness of them. Many a lady will do more than that, just for the purpose of a harmless bit of flirtation; and they like it all the better because of the secrecy and the spice of danger. No, sir, I don't see anything in it."

"Describe the man to me," I said.

He did so, and in the description he gave I recognised the scoundrel, Mr. Pelham. Even now this shameful woman, married to my father, was carrying on an intrigue with her infamous lover. There was no time to lose. I must strike at once.

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My first business was with the woman. If I could prevail upon her to take the initiative, and leave my father quietly without an open scandal—if I could induce her to set a price upon her absence from the country, I had no doubt that I could secure to her a sufficient sum to enable her to live in comfort, even in affluence, out of England. Then I would trust to time to heal my father's wounds. It was a cruel blow for a son to inflict upon his father, but it was not to be borne that the matter should be allowed to continue in its present shape. Not only shame and dishonour, but other evils might spring from it.

Within a few hours I struck the first blow. I asked her for an interview. She called me into her boudoir. I should have preferred a more open room, but she sent word by a maid as treacherous as herself, whom she doubtless paid well, that if I wished to speak to her on that day it must be where she wished. I presented myself, and closed the door behind me.

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"Really!" she said, with her sweetest smile. "This is to be a very, very private conversation! Hand me my smelling bottle, Frederick. Not that one; the diamond and the turquoise one your father gave me yesterday. There are no bounds to my husband's generosity."

"It is a pity," I said, "that such a nature as his should be trifled with."

"It would be a thousand pities!" she replied. "Who would be so unkind! Not you, I am sure; your heart is too tender; you are too fond of your father. As for me, he knows my feelings for him. He is husband, friend, and father, all in one, to me. His exact words, I assure you. Trifle with such a man! No, indeed; it would be too cruel! Come and sit here, by my side, Frederick. If you refuse, I declare I will ring for my maid, and will not speak to you—no, not another word! Now you are good; but you look too serious. I hate serious people. I love pleasure and excitement. That is because I am young and not bad looking. What do you think? You can't say I am ugly. But

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perhaps you have no eyes for me; your heart is elsewhere—in that locket on your chain. I must positively see the picture it contains. No? I must, indeed!—and then I will be quiet, and you shall talk. You have no idea what an obstinate little creature I am when I get an idea into my head, and if you don't let me see the inside of that locket, I shall ring for my maid. Thank you. Now you *are* good! It is empty, I declare. It is a pretty locket. You have good taste."

There was no picture in the locket; it was worn on my chain from harmless vanity. I had disengaged it from the chain, and she held it in her hand. Suddenly she turned her face close to mine, and said, in the same languid tone, but with a certain meaning in it,

"Well?"

"Grace," I said, "shall I relate to you the story of Sydney Campbell?"

The directness of my attack frightened her. Her hands, her lips, her whole body trembled; tears filled her eyes, and she looked at me so piteously that for a moment I doubted whether I was not sitting by the side of a helpless child instead of a heartless, cruel, wicked woman. [183]

"For shame, to take advantage of a defenceless girl! You don't know the true story—you don't, you don't! What have you seen me do that you come here, because I happen to have married your father, to threaten and frighten me? What can you say against me? That I have been unfortunate. O, Frederick, you don't know how unfortunate! You don't know how I have been treated, and how I have suffered! Have you no pity? Even if I have committed an error through ignorance, should I not be allowed an opportunity to reform? Am I to be utterly abandoned—utterly lost? And are you going to crush me, and send me wandering through the world again, with no one to love or sympathise with me? That portrait of mine which was in Mr. Pelham's pocket-book, and which Sydney saw, was stolen from me, and what was written on the back was forged writing. If a man loves me, can I help it? It is nothing to do with me whether he is a gentleman or a blackguard. Pelham loved me, and he was a cheat. Was that my fault? Have pity, have pity, and do not expose me!" [184]

She had fallen on her knees, and had grasped my hands, which I could not release from her grasp, and as she poured out her piteous appeal I declare I could not then tell whether it was genuine or false. I knew that, if this woman were acting, there is no actress on our stage who could excel her. What a danger was here! Acting thus before me, who was armed against her, how would she act in the presence of my father, who had given her his heart? But soon after she had ceased to speak, my calmer sense returned to me, and I seized the point it was necessary to drive home.

"You ask me," I said, "what I can say against you? I can say this. Two days before Sydney died in your house, I was witness to a secret meeting between you and your lover, Mr. Pelham. I can repeat, word for word, certain remarks made by you and by him which leave no doubt as to the tie which bound you together. You liked a man with a spice of the devil in him—my poor friend Sydney was too tame a lover for you. Do you not remember those words?" [185]

"You listened," she exclaimed, scornfully, "and you call yourself a gentleman!"

"I do not seek to save myself from your reproaches. The knowledge was forced upon me, and I could neither advance nor retire without discovering myself, and so affording a scoundrel an opportunity of escape. At that time Sydney was indebted to Mr. Pelham a large sum of money, whether fairly won or not."

"You did not tell Sydney?" she asked, almost in a whisper.

"I did. More than that. The night before his death he and I, after leaving you, returned to your cottage and saw the lights, and heard Mr. Pelham's laugh and yours. Do you know why I tell you these things? It is to convince you that you cannot hope to destroy the evidence it is in my power to bring against you. I should have been content never to have met you again after the death of my friend; I hoped that we had seen the last of each other. But you have forced yourself into this house—you have ensnared my father—and if you remain you will bring upon him a more terrible shock than now awaits him in the discharge of my duty." [186]

"You are a clever enemy," she said; "so strong and relentless, and determined! How can I hope to contend with you? Yet I believe I could do so successfully, if you have told me all you know against me. You overheard a conversation between me and Pelham—what of that? You have no witnesses. But will you not give me a chance? If, when you first met me, I was led into error by a scoundrel, who was exposed and disgraced in your presence, shall I be allowed no loophole through which I can creep into a better kind of life? It is the way men treat women, but I might expect something better from you. You cannot unmake me your father's wife. I am that, in spite of you or a thousand sons. Why not let things remain as they are—why should not you and I be friends, only outwardly, if you like, to save your father from pain? Let it be a bargain between us—for his sake?" [187]

She held out her hand to me; I did not touch it.

"Pain my father must bear," I said; "but I will endeavour to save him from a deep disgrace."

"I am not disgracing him now!" she cried. "Indeed, indeed I am not!"

I tried to what depths the nature of this woman would descend.

"When did you see Mr. Pelham last?" I asked.

"I have not seen him for months—for many, many months! He has left the country, never to return. I hope he is dead—with all my heart I hope he is dead! He is the cause of all my misery. I told him so, and refused ever to see him again. He was in despair, and he left me for ever. I prayed with thankfulness—on my knees I prayed—when he said good-bye! He is thousands of miles away." [188]

I gazed at her steadily. "It is not true," I said; "you met him by appointment this very morning."



CHAPTER XXVIII.

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FREDERICK HOLDFAST'S STATEMENT (CONTINUED).

ALL the colour died out of her face, and I saw that I had frightened her.

"How do you know?" she asked, in a faint tone.

"That is my secret," I replied. "It should be sufficient for you that I do know, and that I have evidence at hand for a full exposure of your proceedings."

"Your own evidence will not be strong enough," she said. "Hating me as you do, you can invent any wicked story you please—it does not require a very clever man to do things of that kind. It has been done over and over again, and the question then is, whose word has the greatest influence? My husband will take my word against yours; I promise you that."

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"I am aware of the power you have over him, and I am prepared."

"In what way are you prepared?"

"Shall I tell you how many cabs you took this morning, and their numbers?"

"You cannot do it."

"I can; and I can tell you, moreover, where you engaged and where you discharged them; and what shops you went to and how long you were in each. When I relate your wretched story to my father I shall be able to verify every detail of the accusation I shall bring against you."

"You have had me watched!" she cried.

"It was necessary. You are a clever woman." (Even in this terrible crisis of her fate, the vanity of this creature, unparalleled in wickedness, asserted itself, and an expression of gratification passed into her face as I called her a clever woman.) "My father's nature in some respects resembles Sydney's, and especially in its loyalty to love and friendship. Upon Sydney no impression could be made against any person in whom he had confidence, unless the most distinct proof could be produced—the evidence of his own senses or of witnesses upon whom he could implicitly rely. So would it be with my father. On my honour, you can no longer live in this house. I cannot permit you for another day to impose upon a gentleman whom I love and honour."

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She gazed at me in admiration. "How beautifully you speak! Your words are like knives—they cut into my heart. You have brought my guilt home to me, O, how clearly! Yes, I *am* guilty! I confess it! I yield; I cannot struggle with such a skilful enemy as you. O, if you knew what relief you have given me! I was so weary! I am glad you were not weak—I am glad you had no pity upon me. I am sick of the deception I have been compelled—yes, compelled!—to practice against a good man. And he is not the only one—there have been others, miserable woman that I am. O, what an unhappy weary life mine has been! I have been driven and driven by a villain who has preyed upon me since I was a child. Ah, if you knew the whole truth, if I could lay bare my heart, you would not utterly condemn me! You would say, 'Poor child! she has been more sinned against than sinning!' Are not those the words used to persons who have been innocently led into error? And they are true of me! If I have sinned I have been driven to it, and I have been sinned against—indeed, indeed I have! But I don't want to turn you in my favour. You must do your duty, and I must meet my punishment, now that everything is discovered. It might have been different with me if it had been my happiness to meet a man like you when I was young. I am young still—I look it, don't I? and it makes me feel all the more wicked. But I feel a hundred years old—quite a hundred—and O, so tired and worn out! I could have looked up to you, I could have respected you, and you would have taught me what was right and what was wrong. But it was not to be—and it is too late now, is it not? Yes, I see in your face that it is too late. What are you going to do with me? You will not be too, too cruel? I am wicked, I feel—you have made me feel it, and I am so thankful to you! but unless I make away with myself (and I am afraid to do that; I should be afraid to die)—unless I did that, which I should never have the courage to do, I shall live a good many years yet. My fate is in your hands. What are you going to do with me?"

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I did not attempt to interrupt her, nor to stem her singularly-worded appeal. "Your fate," I said, "is in your own hands, not in mine. I can show you how you can avoid an open exposure, and secure for yourself an income sufficiently large to live in comfort all your life."

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"Can you?" she exclaimed, clasping her hands. "O, how good you are!"

"The line of action," I said, "I advise you to adopt is the best for all parties implicated in this miserable business, and is the most merciful both to you and my father."

She interrupted me with, "Never, never, shall I be able to repay you. It is almost as if you were a lawyer looking after my interests, and as if I were one of your favourite clients. You cannot hate me, after all, or you would never advise me as you are doing. What line of action—how beautifully you express yourself; such language only comes to the good and clever—what line of action do you advise me to adopt?"

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"First, I must ask you, as between ourselves, to enlighten me as to Mr. Pelham. I know that you

are still keeping up an intimacy with your infamous lover, but I must have it from your own lips."

"So that you may not have cause to reproach yourself afterwards, if you should happen to find out that I am not so bad as you believe me to be! Yes, I will confess; I will not attempt to deceive you. He still holds his power over me, but you are not entirely right in the way you put it. You *are* in calling him infamous, but you are wrong when you call him my lover. I am not so bad as that; but I cannot escape from him. Why," she said, and her voice sank to a whisper, "do you know that I have to supply him with money, that he lives upon me, and that he has so entangled and deceived me that I should laugh if I were to see him lying dead at my feet!"

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"What I require of you is this," I said, not attempting to follow her into the currents to which her strange utterances would lead me. "You will write down a full confession of all matters relating to yourself which affect the honour of my father. The confession must be full and complete, and you will place it in my hands, and leave the house, and within a week afterwards you will leave the country. You will pledge yourself never to set foot again in England, and never to attempt to see or speak with my father. In return I will secure to you an income which shall be paid to you regularly, so long as you do not break the conditions of the contract."

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"How hard!" she said, plaintively. "I am so fond of England! There is no other country in the world worth living in. And I have grown so attached to this house! I am so happy here, so very, very happy! I must think a little—you will not mind, will you? And you will forgive me if I say anything wrong! Even if there was what you call an open exposure, and your father were to believe every word you speak against me, I am still his wife, and he would be compelled to make me an allowance. Then I could live where I please. These things come to my mind, I suppose, because I have not a soul in the world to help me—not a soul, not a friend! Do you not see that I am speaking reasonably?"

"I am not so sure," I said. "Were the affair made public, my father would adopt his own course. He can be stern as well as tender, and were his name dragged into the mud because of his connection with you, it is most likely he would institute an inquiry which might bring to light circumstances which you would rather should be hidden both from his knowledge and from the knowledge of the world. You know best about that; I am not so shallow-witted as to suppose that I am acquainted with all the particulars of your career; but I am on the track, and the task of discovery would not be difficult."

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"You are pitiless!" she cried. "Sydney Campbell would never have spoken to me as you are speaking."

"His nature was different from mine, but he was jealous of his honour, too. I wish to make the position very clear to you. Even were nothing worse than what is already known to be discovered against you, and my father consented to make you an allowance—of which I am not at all sure—it would not be as large as that I am prepared to secure to you. That aspect of the matter is worth your consideration."

"How much a year do you propose?" she asked, after a slight pause.

"Not less than a thousand a year. I will undertake that my father shall make you that, or even a larger allowance, upon the conditions I have stated."

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"In my confession am I to relate *all* that passed between Sydney Campbell and myself? You think I did not love him. You are mistaken. I loved him deeply, and had he lived he would soon have been at my feet again."

"You are to omit nothing," I said; "my father must know all."

She looked at me so piteously that for a moment a doubt intruded itself whether there might not be circumstances in her history with which I was unacquainted which, instead of more strongly condemning her, might entitle her to compassion; but too stern a duty was before me to allow the doubt to remain.

"You will give me a few hours to decide," she implored. "The shock is so sudden! I am at your mercy. Grant me a few hours' respite! You will not, you cannot refuse!"

I had no intention of refusing, but as if overcome by her feelings, she seized my hands and pressed them to her lips and her eyes, which were wet with tears. I was endeavouring to release myself when the door opened, and her maid appeared.

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"What do you want—what do you want?" cried my father's wife, as she flung herself from me. "How dare you come in without knocking!"

"I knocked, madam," replied the maid, "but you could not have heard. I thought you rang."

"I did not ring. Leave the room."

The maid retired, and we were once more alone.

"I will give you to till to-morrow," I said, "and then there must be an end to this deception."

"There shall be—there shall be!" she exclaimed. "Oh, how I thank you! But I will not wait till to-morrow. No—the sooner the blow is struck, the sooner my sufferings will be over. Your father is engaged out this evening. He will not be home till eleven or twelve. At ten I will tell you how I have decided—perhaps by that time I may have commenced my confession. It is just—I see how just it is—that your father shall not remain another night in ignorance."

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"As you please," I said; "at ten to-night. Where shall I see you?"

"Here," she replied. "I shall not be able to come down stairs. My strength is quite, quite gone."

So it was decided, and I left her. I did not see my father during the day, and at ten o'clock I presented myself at her door, and knocked. There was no answer, and observing that the door was partly open I gently pushed it, and entered the room. My father's wife was sitting with her back to me, reading. As she did not appear to be aware of my presence, I called to her. She started to her feet, and turned to me. Then I saw, to my surprise, that her hair was hanging down, that her slippered feet were bare, and that she wore a loose dressing gown.

"My God!" she screamed. "Why do you come to my room at such an hour in this unexpected

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manner?" And as she spoke she pulled the bell violently.

Failing to understand the meaning of her words, I stammered something about an appointment, at which she laughed, then burst into tears, crying,

"Spare me, oh spare me, and your father from the shame! Confess that you have spoken under the influence of a horrible dream!"

What other words she uttered I do not clearly remember; they referred vaguely to the proposition I had made to her, and in the midst of a passionate speech her maid entered the room. She ran to the maid, exclaiming,

"Thank God you have come!" And then to me, "Leave the room instantly, and never let me look upon your face again! From my lips, this very night, shall your father hear an account of all that has passed between you and me!"

The maid stood between me and her mistress, and I deemed it prudent to take my departure. I passed a sleepless night, thinking of the inexplicable conduct of this woman and of the shock the discovery of her infamy would be to my father. I longed to be with him to console him and comfort him, and I waited impatiently for daylight. At eight o'clock in the morning I jumped from bed, glad that the weary night was over, and as I began to dress, I heard a tap at the door. I asked who was there, and was answered by a servant, who said that my father desired me to go to him in his study the moment I awoke. I sent word that I would come immediately, and dressing hastily I went to his room.

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He was standing, with a sterner look upon his face than I had ever seen. He was pale and haggard, and it was evident that his night had been as sleepless as mine. I was advancing to him with a feeling of pity and sympathy, when he said,

"Stand where you are. Do not move another step towards me."

We stood, gazing upon each other in silence for a minute or two. Then I said,

"You have not slept, sir."

"I have not slept. When I left Mrs. Holdfast last night, I came to my study, and have been here all the night, waiting for daylight—and you."

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"You have heard bad news, sir," I said.

"I have heard what I would have given my fortune and my life had never been spoken. It is incredible that one whom I loved should bring dishonour upon my name and shame into my house!"

Here I must pause for a moment or two. When I commenced this statement I had no idea that it would stretch out to its present length, and so anxious am I that it should reach you as early as possible that I will shorten the description of what remains to be told. Prepare to be shocked and amazed—as I myself was shocked and amazed at the revelation made to me that morning in my father's study, on that last morning I ever spent in his house. You think you know the character of this woman who plays with men's lives and honour as though they were toys to amuse an idle hour. You do not yet comprehend the depths of infamy to which such a nature as hers can descend. Nor did I until I left my father's house, never to return.

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She had, as she declared she would, made a confession to my father during the night; it was not a confession of her own shameful life, but an invention so horrible as almost, at the time I heard it, to deprive me of the power of speech. She accused me of playing the lover to her; she described me as a profligate of the vilest kind. She made my father believe that from the moment I saw her I filled her ears with protestations and proposals which I should be ashamed to repeat to one as pure and innocent as yourself. Day after day, hour after hour, she had followed out the plan she had devised to shut me from my father's heart and deprive me of his love, and so skilfully and artfully were all the details guided by her wicked mind that, presented as they were to my father with tears, and sobs, and tremblings, he could scarcely avoid believing in their truth. Twice on the previous day—so her story ran—had I forced myself into her private room; once in the morning when my father was in his city office, and again in the night when she was about to retire to rest, and when I knew that my father was not in the house. Unfortunately, as she said, for she would have preferred that a scandal so shameful should have no chance of becoming public, her maid entered the room on both occasions, and witnessed portions of the scenes. In the morning, when her maid intruded herself, she had dismissed her, and thereafter implored me to leave her in peace. In the evening I was so violent that she had to seek protection from her maid. She called the maid, who corroborated her in every particular; and she produced other evidence against me in the shape of the locket I had worn on my chain. When she handed this locket to my father it contained a portrait of myself—a small head carefully cut from a photograph—and she declared that I had forced the likeness upon her, and had insisted upon her wearing it. She said that she had endeavoured by every means in her power to wean me from my guilty passion; that a dozen times she had been on the point of exposing me to her husband, but had always been prevented by a feeling of tenderness for him and by a hope, which grew fainter and fainter every day, that I might awake from my folly; that no woman had ever been subjected to such cruel persecution and had ever suffered so much as she had; and that, at length, unable to keep the horrible secret to herself, she had resolved to impart it to her husband, and throw herself upon his protection.

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Nor was this all. I had threatened, if she would not receive me as her lover, that I would bring the most shameful charges against her, and by the aid of bribed assistants, whom I should call as witnesses, blast her reputation and ruin her happiness. The very words I had used to her in our interview on the previous day were repeated to me by my father, so artfully twisted as to render them powerless against herself and conclusive against me.

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From this brief description you will be able to form some idea of the position in which I was placed during this interview with my father. I was allowed no opportunity of defence. My father's

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wife had contrived to rouse to its utmost pitch the chivalry of his nature in her behalf. I doubt whether my father at that time would have received any evidence, however conclusive, against her, and whether, in the peculiar frame of mind into which she had worked him he would not have accepted every proof of her guilt as proof of her virtue.

His recital of his wife's wrongs being at an end, he addressed himself to me in terms so violent, so unfatherly, so unjust, that I lost my self-command. Such a scene as followed is rare, I hope, between father and son. He discarded me; he swore he would never look upon me as a son; would never think of me; would never receive me. He forbade me ever to address or refer to him; he banished me from his house and his heart; he flung money at me, as he would have done at a beggar; he was in every way so insulting that my feelings as a man overcame my duty as a son; and we used such words to each other as men can scarcely ever forget or forgive. To such extremes and opposites can a false woman drive men ordinarily just, and kind, and temperate.

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The scene ended thus. I repudiated my father as he repudiated me; I trampled his money under my feet; I told him that he would one day awake from his dream; and I swore that never, until he asked my forgiveness, would I use or acknowledge the name of Holdfast, which he, and not I, was dishonouring. He held me to my oath; in a fit of fury he produced a Bible, and bade me repeat it. I did so solemnly, and I kissed the sacred Book. He threw the door open wide, and pointed sternly.

"Go," he said. "I turn you from my house. You and I have done with each other for ever."

I went in silence, and as the sound of the shutting of the street door fell upon my ears, I felt as if I had cut myself from myself. I walked into the streets a forlorn and lonely man, with no name, no past, no friend. I did not meet any person who knew me; I called a cab, and drove to a remote part of London, where I hired a room in a common lodging-house. But I had not been there an hour before I discovered myself to be a mark for observation. My clothes, perhaps my manner, betrayed me. I left the house, and strolled into a railway station. I could not feel myself safe until I was in a place where I was utterly unknown and entirely free. Standing before a railway time-bill, the first name that attracted me was Exeter. The train was to start in half-an-hour, and I bought my ticket. Thus it was that, by a mere accident, I journeyed to the town in which I was to meet and love you. On my way I decided upon the name I would assume. Frederick was common enough, and I retained it; I added to it the name of Maitland. On my way, also, I reviewed my circumstances, and decided upon my plan of action. I had in money, saved from my father's liberal allowance while I was at Oxford, nearly four hundred pounds. Business I did not understand, and was not fit for. I was competent to undertake the duties of a tutor. I determined to look out for such a situation, either in England or abroad, but on no account in any family likely to reside in London or Oxford. In Exeter I employed myself, for a few weeks, in writing for the press. I obtained introduction to a gentleman who occupied the position of editor of a small local newspaper, and him I assisted. I did not ask for pay, nor did I receive any. I was glad of any occupation to distract my thoughts. Through this friend I heard of a situation likely to suit me. A gentleman wanted a tutor for his son, whose ill-health compelled him to be much at home. I applied for the situation, and obtained it. In that family you were also employed, as music teacher, and thus you and I became acquainted.

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With the gentleman who employed me, or with his family, I could not become familiar; there was nothing in common between us. With you it was different; I was interested in you, and soon learned that you lived with a sick mother, of whom you were the sole support, and that you were a lady. There is no need for me to dwell upon the commencement and continuation of a friendship, which began in respect and mutual esteem, and ended in love. You were poor; I was comparatively rich; and I am afraid my dear, that during the first few weeks I led you to believe that my circumstances were better than they really were. That is the usual effect produced by an extravagant nature. I paid court to you, and we engaged ourselves to each other. Then I began to take a more serious view of life. I had a dear one to work for; there was no prospect open to me in England; and the mystery in which I was compelled to shroud myself, coupled with the fact that London and other places in my native country were closed to me, caused me to turn my thoughts to America. In that new land I could make a home for you; in that new land, with but moderate good fortune, we might settle and live a happy life. Your mother and yourself were contented with the plan, and encouraged me in it. So I threw up my situation, bade you good-bye, and left for the wonderful country which one day is to rule the world. Before my departure I wrote to my father. Except upon the envelope I did not address him by his name. I simply told him that I was quitting England, that I had kept and would keep my oath, and that if he desired to write to me at any time he could send his letter to the New York Post Office.

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You are acquainted with the worldly result of my visit to America; you know that I was not successful. Unable to obtain profitable employment in New York, I went to Philadelphia, Baltimore, Washington, and some smaller towns and cities. It was my misfortune that I could not quickly assimilate myself with the new ways and modes of American life, and my ill-luck sprang more from myself than from the land in which I wished to establish myself. I was absent from New York for nearly five months. In despair I returned to it, and my first visit was paid to the General Post Office. Your letters were sent to me from time to time in accordance with the directions I gave you when I wrote to you, and were sent to the name of Frederick Maitland. It was almost with an air of guilt that I inquired at the New York Post Office whether there were any letters for Frederick Holdfast. I had no expectation of receiving any, and I was therefore astonished when three were handed to me. They were in the handwriting of my father. I did not tell you at the time, but it is a fact that I was in a desperate condition. My clothes were shabby, my pockets were empty. My joy and agitation at the receipt of these three letters were very great. I had never ceased to love my father, and tears rushed to my eyes at the sight of his handwriting. I knew, which he did not at the time we parted, that we were both the victims of a clever, scheming, beautiful woman. Would these letters lead to a reconciliation? I tore them

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open. They bore one address, an hotel in New York. Then my father was in America! The last letter, however, was dated two months back. Quickly I made myself acquainted with the contents.

They were all written in the same strain. My father had come to America to see me. The refrain was as follows: "I am distressed and unhappy. Come to me at once." What had happened? Had he discovered the treachery of the woman who had parted us, and was anxious for a reconciliation with me? Yes, surely the latter; I could not mistake the tone of his communications, although they commenced with "My son," instead of "My dear Son." Explanations between us were necessary, and then all would be right. Eagerly I sought the hotel from which the letters were addressed, and easily found it. I inquired for Mr. Holdfast; he was not in the hotel; his name was known, and the books were consulted. He had left the hotel six weeks before. "Has he gone to another hotel?" I asked. The manager replied that Mr. Holdfast had informed him that while he was in New York he should stop at no other hotel. "He seemed," said the manager, "to be anxiously expecting a friend who never came, for he was very particular in obtaining a description of every gentleman who called during his absence. He is not in New York at present, you may be sure of that." I asked if it were likely I could obtain information of him at any other place in the city, but the hotel manager could not give me an address at which I could make an inquiry. Disheartened I turned away, and wandered disconsolately through the city. I sauntered through Broadway, in the direction of the City Hall and Wall Street, and paused before the *Herald* Office, outside of which a copy of the paper was posted. I ran my eye down the columns, and lingered over the "Personals," in the vague hope that I should see my name there. I did not see my name, but a mist came into my eyes, and my heart beat violently as I saw an advertisement to which the initials F. H. were attached. F. H.—Frederick Holdfast. My own name! The advertisement was for me, and read thus: "F. H.—Follow me immediately to Chicago. Inquire at the Brigg's House." From that advertisement I inferred that my father was in Chicago, and that, if I could start for that city at once, I should meet him. But my pockets, as I have said, were empty. Between twenty and thirty dollars were required to carry me to Chicago, which I could reach in thirty-six hours. I had no money, but I had a souvenir of Sydney's, a ring which he gave me in our happy days, and which I had inwardly vowed never to part with. However, there was no help for it now; it must go. I should be able to redeem it by-and-bye; so I pawned it for thirty dollars, and took the night train to Chicago. How happy I was! Not only the coming reconciliation with my father, but, after that, the certainty of being able to provide a home for you, cheered my heart. Then I could assume my own name; my father would speak the words which would remove from my conscience the obligation of the sacred oath I had sworn. I scarcely slept or ate on the weary journey, my impatience was so great. But long before we reached the end of our journey we were appalled by news of a dreadful nature. Chicago was in flames. At every stage the intelligence became more alarming. The flames were spreading, not from house to house, but from street to street; the entire city was on fire. And the Brigg's House and my father? God forgive me! So selfish are we in our troubles and in our joys, that I thought of no other house but the Brigg's House, of no other human being but my father. The news travelled so fast towards us, as we travelled towards the conflagration, that I soon learned that the street in which Brigg's House was situated had caught, and that every building in it was burnt to the ground. "Any lives lost?" "Thousands!" An exaggeration, as we afterwards found, but we did not stop to doubt; instead of lessening the extent of the calamity, our fears exaggerated it. O, how I prayed and prayed! It was a dreadful time, and it was almost a relief when the evidence of our own senses was enlisted in confirmation of the news. The skies in the distance were lurid red, and imagination added to the terror of the knowledge that families were being ruined, hopes destroyed, ambitions blasted, and hearts tortured in the flames reflected in the clouds. Our train stopped, and miles of fire lay within our sight.



CHAPTER XXIX.

FREDERICK HOLDFAST'S STATEMENT (CONCLUDED).

UNDER these circumstances the obstacles before me became almost insurmountable. The residents of the burning city were in a state of the wildest confusion, and my anxious inquiries for my father were fruitless; I could obtain no news of him; not a person to whom I spoke, not even those connected with the hotel, could inform me whether a gentleman named Holdfast, or one answering to my description of him, had stopped at the Briggs' House.

I was perplexed how to act, but an idea that it would be well for me to remain upon the spot, on the chance that I might yet learn something of my father, caused me to resolve not to leave Chicago for awhile. To this resolution I was pledged by my necessities. I was penniless, and to return immediately to New York was a matter of impossibility.

I had no difficulty in obtaining sufficient to live upon from day to day. Assistance and food poured into the city from all parts of the States, and already upon the burning ruins men were beginning to rebuild their stores and houses. Every pair of hands was valuable, and I worked with the rest, never for a moment losing sight of the vital mission upon which I was engaged. For a month I remained in Chicago, and having by that time earned enough money to carry me to New York, and being also satisfied that I had exhausted every channel open to me through which I might hear of or from my father, I took the train back, and in thirty-six hours reached the hotel in New York from which my father had addressed his letters to me. It appeared as if I had taken the right step, for on the very day of my arrival I saw among the "Personals" in the *New York Herald* the following advertisement:

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"F.H.—The day before you leave America for England advertise in the *Herald's* Personal column the name of the ship in which you have taken your passage. It is of the utmost importance. Implicit silence until we meet."

Mysterious as was this communication, it afforded me satisfaction. My father, doubtless, had his own good reasons for the course he was pursuing, but it hurt me that he had not, by a few words which I alone could have understood, removed from me the obligation entailed upon me by my solemn oath to pass myself off under a false name. Until he asked my forgiveness, or acknowledged his error, I could not resume my own.

I entered the hotel, and there another surprise awaited me. My father had, during my absence in Chicago, lived at the hotel for nearly a fortnight. In an interview with the manager, I was informed that the description my father had received of my personal appearance had much excited him. "I could not give him your name," said the manager, "as you did not leave any. He made inquiries for you everywhere, and employed detectives to discover you, but they were not successful. He appeared as anxious to see you as you were to see him."

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"He has been to Chicago, has he not?" I asked. "He was there at the time of the fire, and stopped at the Briggs' House?"

"Not to my knowledge," replied the manager. "He has not spoken of it; and it is one of the things a man *would* speak of. Such a scene as that!—and the Briggs' House burnt to the ground, too! No, I don't think Mr. Holdfast went to Chicago."

I made no comment upon this; doubtless my father did not wish his movements to be too widely known.

"Where is Mr. Holdfast now?" I inquired.

"Very near Liverpool," was the reply. "He left in the Germanic this day week. There is a letter in the office for you which I was to deliver into your hands in case you called. No one else could do so, as you see no name is on the envelope, and as no other person but myself could identify you."

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The letter informed me that my father was returning to England, and I was desired to follow him immediately. To enable me to do this he enclosed Bank of England notes for £200, and in addition a draft for £500 payable at sight to bearer at a bank in London. The concluding words of the letter were "Upon your arrival in Liverpool go to the Post-office there, where a letter will await you, instructing you how to proceed."

Made happy by this communication, but still more than ever impressed by the consciousness that a mystery existed which rendered it necessary to be cautious, I thanked the manager of the hotel, and hastened to a shipping office in Broadway, where I paid my passage in a steamer which was to leave in a couple of days. Then I went to the *Herald* office, and paid for an advertisement in the Personal column, giving the name of the ship in which I had taken passage, and the date of its departure. Before the expiration of two weeks I landed in Liverpool, and applied at the Post Office for a letter. One was handed to me in the handwriting of my father. Imagine my astonishment at its contents. So as to make this statement in a certain measure complete, I will endeavour to recall what it contained.

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"Frederick, and whatever other name you choose to call yourself by. In sending you to Chicago, and causing you to follow me back to England, I have had but one motive—to impress upon you that you cannot escape the consequences of your slander upon the noblest woman breathing. In whatever part of the world you may be, my hate and curse shall follow you. Now, present yourself before me and beg upon your knees for mercy and forgiveness; it will be another proof of your curish spirit! I shall know how to receive you, Slanderer!"

I could scarcely believe the evidence of my senses. I trembled with amazement and indignation. That such a trick should have been played upon me was altogether so astonishing and incomprehensible that I looked about me in bewilderment for a faithful heart upon whose sympathy I could throw myself for consolation. I thought of you, and determined to come to you, and ask for counsel and comfort. But before I started for Exeter there was something to do which, to leave undone, would have brought a life-long shame upon me. I took from the money remaining of the £200 I received in New York as much as would carry me to your side; the rest I enclosed in an envelope, with the sight draft for £500, and sent it to my father's address in London, with these words: "May God pardon you for the wrong you have done me! I will never seek you, nor, if you seek me, will I ever come to you. The money I have spent of the £200 I will endeavour to repay you; but what else, besides money, we owe to each other can never be repaid in this world."

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I posted this letter, and journeyed on to Exeter, and there another grief awaited me. You had left the town; your mother was dead, had been dead for weeks, and you had not informed me of it

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in your letters. I will be frank with you. So overwhelmed was I by what had taken place, so much was my spirit bruised, that it seemed as if faith in human kind had entirely deserted me. For a moment, my dear, I doubted even you; but then the better and truer hope dawned upon me that, knowing from my letters how unfortunate and unhappy I had been, you had withheld from me the news of your own deep trouble so that it might not add to mine.

What now was I to do? All that I could learn of you was that you had gone to London; there, then, was my duty. To London I must go, and endeavour to find you, and endeavour at the same time to hide myself from my father who had so shamefully abused me. But I had no money—not a shilling. I could raise a little, however. Before I left New York I had provided myself with good clothes, and these were on me now. I went to a vile shop in one of the worst parts of Exeter, and there I bartered the clothes I stood upright in for a sum of money barely sufficient to take me to London and to enable me to live there on dry bread for a few days. Included in this bargain, to my necessity and advantage, was a ragged suit of clothes in which I dressed, after divesting myself of my better habiliments, and thus, clothed like a beggar, and with a despairing heart beating in my bosom, I made my way to London. At the end of a week I had not a penny left, and I was so hungry that I had to beg for bread of a girl standing at the wooden gate of a poor-looking house.

The girl's heart was touched—God bless her for it!—and she ran into the house, and brought out a few pieces of stale bread and cheese, wrapped in a bit of newspaper. I stood by a lamp-post, munching the hard bread, and looking at the bit of newspaper the while. What I read related to a mysterious, fearful murder which had been committed in Great Porter Square. Nothing was known of the murdered man, and his murderer had not been discovered. The names of both were shrouded in mystery. "So might it be with me," I thought; "if I were murdered this night, there is about me or upon me absolutely no mark or sign by which I could be identified."

Ah, my dear, London's mysteries are many and terrible! Imagination cannot compass or excel them.

It was a dark night, and I wandered aimlessly through the streets, saving some of the bread for my supper later on. The hopelessness of the task before me, that of discovering you, filled me with a deeper despair. It was as though I were shut out from all sympathy with my kind. By what I now believe to be a kind of fate, I wandered, without knowing the direction I was taking, towards Great Porter Square. I came to the Square itself, and looked up at the name in the endeavour to read it. "Are you looking for Great Porter Square?" asked a woman who was passing by. "That's it—where the murder was committed." Well, it in no way concerned me. A man was murdered there. What of it? He was out of his misery. That was the substance of my reflections. He was out of his misery, as I wished I was out of mine. For the minutes were hours, every one of which deepened my despair. I worked myself into a condition so morbid and utterly wretched that I gave up all hope of finding you. I had no place to lie in that night, and on the previous night I had slept in the open. The morning light would shine upon me, penniless, starving, and so woe-begone as to be a mark for men. I began to think I had had enough of life. And all the while these gloomy thoughts were driving me to the lowest depths I continued to walk round and about the thoroughfares of the Square in which the murder had been committed. After a time, the consciousness of this forced itself upon me, and the idea entered my mind that I would go into the Square itself, and look at the house. I followed out my idea, and walked slowly round the Square until I came to No. 119. I lingered before it for a moment or two, and then walked the entire circuit; and as I did so another suggestion presented itself. From the appearance of the house I judged it to be deserted. If I could gain admittance I should have, at least, a shelter from the night for a few hours; if there were a bed in it I should have a bed; the circumstance of the murder having been committed there had no real terrors for me. I had arrived at this mental stage when I found myself once more before the house; I was munching some bread at the time. I ascended the steps and tried the street door, and as I laid my hand upon the handle a policeman came up to me and endeavoured to seize me. A sudden terror fell upon me, and I shook him off roughly, and flew as though I were flying for my life; and, as I have already described to you, as I flew, the fancy crept upon me that my presence in the Square, my trying the door, and now my flight, had brought me into deadly peril in connection with the murder. I heard the policeman running after me. He sprang his rattle; the air seemed filled with pursuing enemies hunting me down, and I flew the faster, but only to fall at last, quite exhausted, into the arms of men, in whose remarks I heard a confirmation of my fears. Then I became cooler, and was marched to a police station, mocking myself as it were in a temper of devilish taunting despair, to be accused of a crime of which no man living was more innocent. When I was asked for my name by the inspector I did not immediately answer. My own name I dared not give; nor could I give the name by which you knew me. I would endeavour to keep my disgrace from your knowledge; so I gave a false name, the first that occurred to me, Antony Cowlrick, and gave it in such a way that the police knew it to be false. After that, I was thrown into a cell, where in solitude I might repent of my crimes and misdeeds. So bitter was my mood that I resolved to keep my tongue silent and say no word about myself. I knew that I was an innocent man, and I looked forward somewhat curiously to learn by what villainous and skilful means my accusers could bring the crime of murder home to me.

I pass over the dismal weeks of my farce of a trial, and I come to our meeting in Leicester Square.

It was my first gleam of sunshine for many a week, but another was to warm me during the day. With you by my side my strength of mind, my hope returned. The only money I had was the sovereign lent to me by the Special Reporter of the "Evening Moon;" you were poorer than I, and had, when we so happily met, exhausted your resources. The very engagement ring I gave you had been pawned to enable you to live. Money was necessary. How could I obtain it? Could I not apply to one of my former friends? I ran over in my mind the list of those whose people lived in

London, and I paused at the name of Adolph, who had played so memorable a part in the Sydney Campbell tragedy. His parents lived in London, and were wealthy. If Adolph were home I would appeal to him, and solicit help from him. We drove to his father's house, stopping on the way at a barber's, by whose aid I made myself more presentable. Adolph was in London, and luckily at home. I sent up my name, and he came to me, and wished me to enter the house, and be introduced to his people; but I pointed to my clothes and refused. He accompanied me from his house, and when we were in a secluded spot I told him my story under a pledge of secrecy. He has a good heart, and he expressed himself as owing me a debt of gratitude which he should never be able to repay. I pointed out to him how he could repay me, and the generous-hearted lad gave me not only a hundred pounds, but a bill, long-dated, which a money-lender discounted for me, and which placed me in possession of a comparatively large sum of money. I hope to be able to pay this debt. I think I shall be, in the course of time.

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But Adolph served me in more ways than one, and in a way neither he nor I could have dreamt of. The money-lender he recommended me to go to lived in the City, and to reach his office I had to pass my father's place of business. I drove there in a four-wheeled cab, and to avoid notice I kept the windows up. But as I passed my father's City house I could not help looking towards it, and I was surprised to find it closed. My own name did not appear upon the bill, and the money-lender and I were strangers to each other. I did not hesitate, therefore, when our business was concluded, to inquire if he knew Mr. Holdfast, and he replied that the name was well-known in the City. I then inquired why his place of business was closed, and received, in answer, the unexpected information that my father was in America, and had been there for many months. Upon this, I said in a careless tone, as though it were a matter in which I was but slightly interested, that I had heard that Mr. Holdfast had returned from America two or three months ago.

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"Oh, no," was the reply; "Mr. Holdfast had not yet come back."

This set me thinking, and added another link to the mystery and sorrow of my life. I determined to assure myself whether my father was really in London, and on the following day I sent to his house, by a confidential messenger, an envelope. It was simply a test of the money-lender's statement. The messenger returned to me with the envelope unopened, and with the information that my father was in America. "I inquired of the workpeople," said my messenger, "and was told that Mr. Holdfast had not been seen in the neighbourhood for quite half a year."

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What conclusion was I to draw from this startling disclosure? My father, returning to England in the *Germanic*, had never been heard of either at his house of business or at his home? What, then, had become of him? What motive had he for mysterious concealment? Arguing, as I believed to be the case when I received the first letter from him in New York, that he had discovered the infamous character of the woman he had made his wife, there *was* perhaps a motive for his not living in the house to which he had brought her; but it was surely reasonable to expect that his return would be known at his place of business. I reflected upon the nature and character of my father's wife, and upon the character of her scheming lover, Mr. Pelham; I subjected them to a mental analysis of the most searching kind, and I could arrive at but one conclusion—Foul Play! Judging from what had occurred between them and my poor friend, Sydney Campbell, there was no plot too treacherous for them to engage in, no scheme too wicked for them to devise and carry out. Foul Play rose before me in a thousand hideous shapes, until in its many-sided mental guise it became a conviction so strong that I did not pause to doubt it. Then arose another phase of the affair. If there had been Foul Play with my father, was it not reasonable to suppose that I, also, had been made the victim of clever tricksters? This, too, in a vague inexplicable way, became a conviction. A number of conflicting circumstances at once occurred to me in confirmation. The advertisement in the *New York Herald* desiring me to proceed to Chicago attached itself to the statement of the manager of the hotel at which my father stopped that Mr. Holdfast had not been in Chicago. The second advertisement in the "Personal" column of the *Herald* desiring me to advertise the name of the ship I took passage in from New York to Liverpool, attached itself to the circumstance that my father's letter, handed to me by the hotel manager, contained no wish to know what ship I sailed in. And upon this came the thought that at the time this last "Personal," which I supposed was inserted by my father, appeared in the columns of the *Herald*, my father was on the Atlantic. Fool that I was to act without deliberation, to believe without questioning. Last of all, the conflicting tone of the two letters I received from my father, the one in New York, which was undoubtedly genuine, and the one from the Liverpool post office, which may have been forged!—This completed it. Conviction seemed added to conviction, confirmation to confirmation, doubt to doubt—although every point in the evidence was circumstantial, and, nothing as yet could be distinctly proved. How I regretted that I had not kept the letters! When I received the last in Liverpool, I tore up, in a fury of indignation, every letter my father had written to me, and had therefore no writing of his in my possession by which I could compare and judge. I find now, that it is too late, that there is no wisdom in haste.

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It weighed heavily upon me, as a duty not to be avoided, to endeavour to ascertain whether my father arrived in the *Germanic*, and after that what had become of him. And with the consciousness of this unmistakable duty arose the memory of so many acts of tenderness and kindness from my father to myself, that I began to accuse myself of injustice towards him, and to believe that it was not he who had wronged me, but I who had wronged him. With this grievous thought in my mind, I left you, and proceeded to Liverpool.

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My first visit was paid to the office of the White Star Line. There I learned that my father had taken passage in New York on the date I gave, that the *Germanic* arrived in Liverpool after a rapid passage of little more than eight days, that no casualty occurred on the voyage, and that there was no doubt that my father landed with the other passengers. This point was settled by

the books of the Adelphi Hotel in Liverpool. My father had stopped there for six days, and his name was duly recorded. Another point, quite as important, was established by reference to the hotel books and by inquiring of persons employed in the hotel. When my father left Liverpool, he took train to London. I had arrived at this stage of my inquiries, and was debating on the next step to take, when my attention was attracted by the cries of the newspaper street boys, calling out at the top of their voices, fresh discoveries in the *Evening Moon* respecting the murder in Great Porter Square. With no suspicion of the awful disclosure which awaited me, but naturally interested in any new phase of the mysterious incident, I purchased the paper and looked at the headings of the Supplement, and, casually at the matter. Seeing my own name—the name of Holdfast—repeated over and over again in the paper, I hurried from the street to the solitude of my room, and there read the most wicked, monstrous, and lying romance that human minds ever invented. And in addition to the horrible calumnies which that “Romance of Real Life” contains in its references to me, I learned, to my unutterable grief, that the man who was so foully murdered in Great Porter Square was my own father.

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My dear, for many minutes the terrible disclosure—the knowledge that my dear father had met his death in a manner so awful and mysterious, took such complete possession of my mind that I had no thought of myself. My father was dead! The last time we met we parted in anger, using words to each other such as bitter enemies would use. I swore in his presence that he was dishonouring the name of Holdfast, and that I would never use it until he asked my forgiveness for the cruel injustice he had done me; and he drove me from his heart and from his house. My forgiveness he could never ask for now; he was dead! And the wrong we each did to the other in that hot encounter, in which love was poisoned by a treacherous wanton’s scheming, could never be repaired until we met in another world. I wept bitter tears, and falling on my knees—my mind enlightened by the strange utterances of a worthless woman, as reported in the *Evening Moon*—I asked my father’s forgiveness, as I had warned him to ask mine. And yet, my dear, neither of us was wrong; he was right and I was right; and if the question between us were put to a high and worthy test, it would be found that we both were animated by impulses which, under other circumstances, would have been an honour to our manhood.

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But these kindly feelings passed away in the indignation which a sense of monstrous injustice inspired. To see my name so blackened, so defamed, my character so outraged and malformed, inflamed me for a time to a pitch of fury which threatened to cloud my judgment and my reason. What brought me to my senses? My love for you. I should have been reckless had I only myself to protect, to provide for; but a dearer self than myself depended upon me, and my honour was engaged to you. It was due to you that I should clear myself of these charges. Herein, my dear, came home to me, in the most forcible manner in which it could have been presented, the value of responsibilities. They tend to check our selfish impulses, and to indicate to us our line of action—straight on.

At this time I had written to you my half-disapproval of the step you had taken in disguising yourself as a maid-of-all-work, and obtaining a situation next to that in Great Porter Square in which the murder had been committed—Great God! I cannot write it with calmness—the murder of my father. But after I had read the Romance in Real Life in the *Evening Moon* and had somewhat calmed myself, I seemed to see in your action a kind of Providence. Before these insanely-wicked inventions of my father’s widow were made public, before it was known that the man who was murdered in Great Porter Square was my father, it was comparatively unimportant that I should be cleared of a charge of which I was innocent; it was then, so to speak, a side issue; now it is a vital issue. And the murderer must be discovered. I say it solemnly—*must* be discovered! He will be. Not by the Government, nor by the police, nor by any judicial agency, but by one whose honour, whose future, whose faith and love, are dragged into this dread crisis. And I see that it will be so—I see that you have been guided by a higher than a human impulse in your love-directed and seemingly mad inspiration to transform and degrade yourself, for the purpose of clearing me from a wicked and cruel accusation. At one time I doubted whether truth and justice were more than words; I doubt no longer; reflecting over certain incidents and accidents—accidents as I believed them to be—I see that something more than chance directed them, and that of our own destinies we ourselves are not the sole arbiters.

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In the extraordinary narration presented to the readers of the *Evening Moon* I read that I am dead. Well, be it so. How the falsehood was invented, and led up to, and strengthened by newspaper evidence, scarcely interests me in the light of the more momentous issue which affects my future and yours. Involved in it, undoubtedly, were wonderful inventive powers, much painstaking, and immense industry—the result of which was a newspaper paragraph of a few lines, every word of which is false. That the woman who *was* my father’s wife, that the man who *is* her lover, believe that I am dead, appears to be beyond doubt. Let them continue in their belief until their guilt is brought home to them. To all intents and purposes, to all useful ends at present in the service of truth and justice, it will be best that it should be believed that I *am* dead. So let it be, then, until the proper time comes. It will come, I believe and hope.

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To one end I am pledged. I will avenge my father’s murder, if it is in my power. I will bring his murderer to justice, if it is in my power. Help me if you can, and if after you peruse this strange narrative, every word of which is as faithful and true as though an angel, instead of an erring mortal, wrote it, you can still believe in me, still have faith in me, I shall bless you all my life, as I shall love you all my life, whether you remain faithful to me or not.

To my own heart, buoyed as I am with hope, stricken down as I am with despair, it seems treason to me to doubt; but all belief and faith, human and divine, would fall into a dark and hopeless abyss if it did not have some image, human or divine, to cling to; and I cling to you! You are my hope and my anchor!

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I will not attempt to describe, as dimly I comprehend it now, the character of the woman who

has brought all this misery upon me. She is fair and beautiful to look upon; innocence appears to dwell in her face; her eyes meet yours frankly and smilingly; her manners are the manners of a child; her voice is as sweet as the voice of a child. Were she and I to appear before a human tribunal, accused of a crime of which she was guilty and I innocent, she would be acquitted and I condemned.

I am in your hands. Judge me quickly. If you delay, and say, "My faith is not shaken," I am afraid I should not be satisfied, because of your delay. In hope, as in despair,

I am, for ever yours,

FREDERICK.

CHAPTER XXX.

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BECKY'S REPLY TO HER LOVER'S STATEMENT.

MY DEAREST,—It is now very near morning, within an hour of the time I am expected to rise. I have been up all night, and having read the story of your life from beginning to end, have re-read some portions again and again, so that they shall be fixed permanently in my mind. How I love and pity you! To say, as you desire me to say, that my faith is not shaken, is but a poor expression of my feelings towards you. My faith is strengthened, my love is strengthened, my hope is strengthened. Sitting in my little cupboard of a bedroom, with Fanny sleeping peacefully in my bed—yes, my dear, my poor little friend is with me again; I found her, the night before last, fainting for food at the street door of No. 119—sitting here, in the presence of that poor human waif, with my candle nearly burnt out, and the dim light of morning just beginning to dawn, it seems to me as if a star is shining upon me, instilling into my heart a wonderful faith and courage.

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I am not tired, but that may be because of my excitement and exaltation. I intend to be careful and prudent. When the housework is done, I shall take some rest. I might have a little now, but that I can turn my thoughts to nothing until I write to you what is in my mind. My faith is not shaken; I repeat it; and I add, let not your faith be shaken. Whatever occurs, do not for a moment doubt me, do not for a moment lose faith in me. You say that I must have been guided by a higher than a human impulse when I took the strange step of transforming myself into a servant-of-all-work, and seeking service with Mrs. Preedy, in the house next to that in which your dear father was murdered. Do you remember my telling you in my first letter that an inspiration had fallen upon me when I conceived the idea? And if at that time, before it was known who it was who had been so mysteriously murdered, I believed my idea to be an inspiration, how much more reason have I to believe it now that the awful crime is brought so close to us and is woven into your life? You declare that you will bring your father's murderer to justice, and you ask me to help you. What answer can I make you? This. That all that a woman's power, all that a woman's devotion, all that a woman's self-sacrifice, can do to the end to which you have pledged yourself, shall be done by me. I can do much, more than you can imagine possible, if certain thoughts, created by what you have written, touch even the border-land of truth. They do, I believe, and they will lead me to the fulfilment of what we both wish with all our hearts desire.

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But you must be guided by me. For once in the way, let a woman take the command, and let her prove herself capable. Not that you could not accomplish what is necessary for our happiness, and in the cause of truth and justice, a great deal better than I. But your hands are not free; you cannot move without the risk of being watched, and persecuted, and hampered—while I am free to act, without the slightest chance of being suspected. I am comparatively unknown, and can work without fear; besides, I am a woman, and can do what you would scorn to do. No man can be a match for such a creature as Lydia Holdfast—let us call her by that name. It must be a case of Greek meeting Greek, and in me this woman will find more than her match. So for the present do not move openly; do not run the risk of being discovered. Do nothing that will put our enemies on their guard; above all, do not write to the newspaper which published Lydia Holdfast's infamous story; a friend has already stepped forward in vindication of your character, and that should be a comfort to you, as it is to me. You are right in saying that it will be best it should be believed that you are dead; therefore, do nothing rashly, but leave all to me.

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See, now—I am writing with so much confidence and assurance that anyone who did not know me would suppose I had a very wise head on my shoulders. Well, it may not be very wise, but it is clever and cunning, and that is just what is wanted—cunning to meet cunning. What is it Shakespeare says about wearing your heart upon your sleeve? Not for me; I will keep my heart hidden, where only you can find it, and will wear in its place something that will make me smile, or pout, or cry—whichever will best serve my turn.

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You see, my dear, I am on the spot, and in a position which gives me such immense advantages. Your father has been cruelly murdered—the discovery of the murderer will lead to all the rest. There is in this house a man who is in some way interested in the mystery, who is living under an assumed name, who paints and wears a wig, and who endeavours to pass himself off as a foreigner. I must find out who this Richard Manx really is, and what is his motive in taking a room at the very top of the house, and in presenting himself here under a disguise. It is to him I have traced the report that our house and the next are haunted. He has a purpose in spreading the report. Perhaps it is because he does not wish the house to be let until he has found what he

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is searching for in the room in which your poor father was killed. He might take it himself you say. But would not this be to attract to himself an amount of attention which would not be agreeable to him? As to his being as poor as he professes to be, I do not believe a word of it. He has taken up his quarters here in such a manner as to cause him to be but little noticed, and it has been done with deliberate intention.

I could say a hundred other things, my mind is so crowded, but I have no time. I shall not send this letter through the post. Asleep in my bed is a trusty little friend, who will faithfully carry out what I give her to do. She will come to you, and you can say whatever you please to her—give her what message you like—and do not attempt to employ her in any other way than in bringing to me whatever you wish me to receive. I myself have a very delicate piece of work for her to do.

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I long to see you, to embrace you, to comfort you; but for a little while we must remain apart. I cannot come to you, nor can you come to me. We have too much at stake to run the slightest risk. I propose to write to you every night, and to send Fanny to you every morning with my letters. You can give her your letters to me. Do not send any more strange men to the house. Richard Manx might see them, and his suspicions might be aroused. Perhaps the hardest duty before us is the duty of patience, but unless we submit we shall fail in our purpose. So let us be brave and patient, working not for the present, but for the future. My love, my heart, are yours for ever, and I thank God that I have such a man as you to love. If I write in a more serious vein than I am accustomed to do, it is because I recognise the seriousness of the task upon which we are engaged; it is not that I am altered; I could not write lightly if I tried, and in your eyes I would not be false.

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I cannot say good-night. It is morning. Well, to us sunrise is better than sunset. Keep a stout heart, and do not despond—for your own sake and mine. Farewell, dear love, for a few hours.

END OF VOLUME II.

Transcriber's note

Punctuation errors have been corrected silently. Also the following corrections have been made, on page

49 "a a" changed to "a" (You're a good girl)

56 "approaching" changed to "approaching" (She was approaching the tragedy.)

82 "riv r" changed to "river" (by a dark river, lighted up by lightning)

104 "works" changed to "words" (the exact words spoken by)

125 "marriagable" changed to "marriageable" (marriageable young ladies)

134 "gentlemen" changed to "gentleman" (Sydney is a gentleman.)

139 "Their" changed to "There" (There lives not on earth)

197 "that" changed to "than" (less than a thousand a year)

218 "comfirmation" changed to "confirmation" (enlisted in confirmation of the news.).

Otherwise the original has been preserved, including inconsistent spelling and hyphenation, and possible errors in accentuation.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK GREAT PORTER SQUARE: A MYSTERY. V. 2

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