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THE THIRD VOLUME

THE THIRD VOLUME

BY

FERGUS HUME

*Author of "The Lone Inn," "The Mystery of a Hansom Cab,"
"The Chinese Jar," Etc.*

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Oh, mothers, wisely sang ye,

When oft we went astray,
"Ye weave the ropes to hang ye,
 Ye forge the swords to slay."

The ropes we wove so gladly,
 Have robbed us of our breath,
The swords we forged so madly,
 Have smitten us to death.

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THE THIRD VOLUME.

CHAPTER I.

AN OLD FRIEND.

WHEN Spenser Tait took his seat at the breakfast table, he cast a look around, according to custom, to see that all was as orderly as he could wish. The neatest and most methodical of men, he was positively old maidish in his love of regularity and tidiness. His valet, Dormer,—with him for over fifteen years,—had been trained by such long service into the particular ways of his master, and was almost as exacting as Tait himself in the matter of domestic details. No woman was permitted to penetrate into those chambers in Earls Street, St. James'; but had one been able to do so, she could have found no fault with them, either on the score of taste or of cleanliness.

The shell of this hermit crab was eloquent of the idiosyncrasies of its tenant.

The main characteristic of the breakfast room was one of severe simplicity. The carpet of green drapped brown, the curtains to match, and the furniture of oak, polished and dark. On the white cloth of the table an appetizing breakfast was set out in silver and china, and a vase of flowers showed that the little gentleman was not unmindful of the requirements of an artistic temperament. Even the *Times*, carefully cut and warmed, was neatly folded by the silver ringed napkin, and Dormer, standing stiff and lean by his master's chair, was calmly satisfied that no fault could be found with his work. For the past fifteen years, save on occasions of foreign travel, the same etiquette had been observed, the same actions performed, for, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, the habits of Tait were fixed and determined.

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He was a pleasant creature of thirty-four years, small in stature, clean-shaven and brown-locked. His plump little body was clothed in a well-brushed smoking suit of maroon-colored cloth, his neat feet encased in slippers of red morocco, and he scanned the room through a gold-mounted pince nez. Neat and firm as he was, women did not care for him in the least, and he returned the compliment by heartily disliking the female sex. Yet with men he was a great favorite, and the members of his club liked to hear the sententious speeches of this little man, delivered with point and deliberation in the smoking room from eleven till midnight. When the clock struck twelve he invariably went to bed, and no persuasion or temptation could induce him to break this excellent rule.

Dormer, a tall, thin man of Kent, who adored his precise master, was equally as misogynistic as Tait, and silent on all occasions save when spoken to. Then he replied in dry monosyllables, and stood bolt upright during such replies, in a military fashion, which he had picked up many years before in the army. Tait humored his oddities on account of his fidelity, knowing that this ugly, rough-hewn specimen of humanity was as true as steel, and entirely devoted to his interests. Nowadays it is unusual to meet with such equal appreciation between master and servant.

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"I think, Dormer," said Tait, while the man ministered to his wants, "that you might call at Mudie's this morning and get me a copy of the new novel, 'A Whim of Fate,' by John Parver. I heard last night that it contained a description of Thorston."

"Very good, sir," replied Dormer, noting the name in his pocketbook.

"And take a seat for me at the Curtain Theater, in the fifth row of the stalls, not too near the side."

"Anything else, sir?"

"I think not," said his master, taking a morsel of toast. "I am going down to Richmond by the twelve o'clock train to luncheon with Mr. Freak. Lay out the serge suit."

Dormer saluted in a military fashion, and disappeared, leaving Tait to skim the paper and finish his breakfast. Methodical as ever, the little man first read the leading articles, thence passed to the city news, perused the general information, and wound up with a glance at the advertisements. In such order he ever proceeded, and never by any chance thought of beginning with the advertisements and working back to the leading article. Habit was everything with Spenser Tait.

As usual, his day's programme was carefully sketched out, and he knew what he was about to do with every moment of his time from noon till midnight. But his plans on this special day were upset at the outset, for scarcely had he lighted his morning pipe than the door was thrown open and a visitor was announced.

"Mr. Larcher," said Dormer stiffly, and ushered in a tall young man with a bright face and a breezy manner.

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"Hullo, little Tait!" cried the newcomer, hastily striding across the room; "here I am again. Come from wandering up and down the earth, sir, like a certain person whom I need not mention."

"Dear me," said Tait, welcoming his guest with prim kindness, "it is Claude Larcher. I am very glad to see you, my dear fellow, and rather surprised; for I assure you I thought you were at the Antipodes."

"I have just returned from that quarter of the globe. Yes! Landed at the docks yesterday from one of the Shaw-Saville line. Had a capital passage from New Zealand. Sea like a mill-pond from Wellington Heads to the Lizard."

"Have you had breakfast, Larcher?" asked Tait, touching the bell.

"A trifle! A trifle! I could eat another. What have you? Bacon and eggs, watercress, coffee, and the best of bread and butter. Egad, Spenser, you had the same victuals two years ago when I last called here!"

"I am a creature of habit, Claude," replied Tait sententiously; and when Dormer made his appearance gave grave directions for fresh coffee and another dish of eggs and bacon.

Larcher drew in his chair, and with his elbows on the table eyed the little man with friendly eyes. They were old schoolfellows and fast friends, though a greater contrast than that which existed between them can scarcely be imagined. Tait, a prim, chilly misogynist; Larcher, a hot-blooded, impetuous lover of women. The one a stay-at-home, and a slave to habit; the other a roaming engineer, careless and impulsive. Yet by some vein of sympathy the pair, so unlike in looks and temperament, were exceedingly friendly, and always glad to meet when circumstance threw them together. Such friendship, based on no logical grounds, was a standing contradiction to the rule that like draws to like.

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It was scarcely to be expected that a well-favored mortal like Larcher should share his friend's distaste for the female sex. Far from disliking them, he sought them on all possible occasions, oftentimes to his own disadvantage; and was generally involved in some scrape connected with a petticoat. Tait, who was the older of the two by five years, vainly exhorted and warned his friend against such follies, but as yet his arguments had come to naught. At the age of thirty, Larcher was still as inflammable, and answered all Tait's expostulations with a laugh of scorn.

It was easy to dower this hero with all the perfections, physical or mental, which lie within the scope of imagination, but the truth must be told at whatever cost. Claude was no Greek god, no prodigy of learning, neither an Apollo for looks, nor an Admirable Crichton for knowledge; he was simply a well-looking young man, clean-limbed, clear-skinned, healthy, athletic, and dauntless, such as can be found by the dozen in England. Thews and sinews he had, but was no Samson or Hercules, yet his strong frame and easy grace won the heart of many a woman, while with his own sex he passed for a true comrade, and a friend worth having.

He was an engineer, and built bridges and railways in divers quarters of the globe, pioneering civilization, as it were, in the most barbarous regions.

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For the past ten years he had roamed all over the world, and his adventures, begotten by a daring and reckless spirit, were already sufficient to fill a volume. Master of at least half a dozen tongues, he could find his way from the tropics to the pole, and was equally at home on the prairie as in Piccadilly. Indeed, he preferred the former, for civilization was little to his taste, and he was infinitely more at ease in Pekin than London. North and South America, Africa, China, India, he knew them all, and on this occasion had returned from a prolonged sojourn in the Antipodes, where he had been building bridges across rapid New Zealand rivers.

"Well, my friend," said he, addressing himself to a second meal with a hearty appetite, "I need not ask how you are. The same prim, finnickin' little mortal as ever, I see. Five years have made no difference in you, Spenser. You've not married, I suppose?"

"Not I," returned Tait, with stormy disgust. "You know my views on the subject of matrimony. You might go away for one hundred years and would return to find me still a bachelor. But you, Claude——"

"Oh, I'm still in the market. I wasn't rich enough for the New Zealand belles."

"Eh! You have five hundred a year, independent of your earnings as an engineer."

"What is the use of setting up house on a thousand a year all told," retorted Claude coolly; "but the fact is, despite my inflammability, which you are pleased to reproach, I have not yet seen the woman I care to make Mrs. Larcher."

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"Perhaps it is just as well for the woman," answered Tait dryly. "I don't think you are cut out for a domestic life."

"I have had no experience of it, so I can't say," said Larcher, a shade passing over his face. "You must not forget that I was left an orphan at five years of age, Tait. If it had not been for old Hilliston, the lawyer, who looked after me and my small fortune, I don't know what would have become of me. All things considering, I think I have turned out fairly decent. I have worked hard at my profession, I have not spent my substance in riotous living, and have seen much more of life than most young men. All of which is self-praise, and that we know being no recommendation, give me another cup of coffee."

Tait laughed and obeyed. "What are you going to do now?" he demanded, after a pause; "stay in town, or make another dash for the wilds?"

"I'll be here for a few months, till something turns up," said Larcher carelessly. "I did very well out of that Maori land business, and bought some land there with the proceeds. I suppose I'll go and look up Mr. Hilliston, see all the theaters, worry you, and hunt for a wife."

"I shan't assist you in the last," retorted Tait, testily. "However, as you are here you must stay with me for the day. What are your immediate plans?"

"Oh, I wish to call at the club and see if there are any letters! Then I am at your disposal, unless you have a prior engagement."

"I have a luncheon at Richmond, but I'll put that off. It is not very important, and a wire will arrange matters. Finish your breakfast while I dress."

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"Go, you effete dandy of an exhausted civilization. I saw you looking at my rig-out, and I dare say it is very bad. It has been packed away for the last five years. However, you can take me to your tailor and I'll get a fresh outfit. You won't walk down Bond Street with me unless I assume a tall hat, patent leathers, and a frock coat."

"Oh, by the way, would you like to go to the Curtain Theater to-night?" asked Tait, vouchsafing no reply to this speech. "They are playing a good piece, and I sent for a seat for myself."

"You selfish little man; just send for two while you're about it."

"With pleasure," replied Tait, who permitted Larcher more freedom of speech than he did any other of his friends. "I won't be more than ten minutes dressing."

"Very good! I'll smoke a pipe during your absence, and see with what further frubbles you have adorned your rooms. Then we'll go to the club, and afterward to the tailor's. I don't suppose my letters will detain me long."

In this Larcher was wrong, for his letters detained him longer than he expected. This opened the way to a new course of life, of which at that moment he knew nothing. Laughing and jesting in his friend's rooms, heart-whole and untrammled, he little knew what Fortune had in store for him on that fateful morning. It is just as well that the future is hidden from men, else they would hardly go forward with so light a step to face juries. Hitherto Larcher's life had been all sunshine, but now darkneses were rising above the horizon, and these letters, to which he so lightly alluded, were the first warnings of the coming storm.

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CHAPTER II.

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A MYSTERIOUS COMMUNICATION.

THE ATHENIAN CLUB was the most up-to-date thing of its kind in London. Although it had been established over eight years it was as new as on the day of its creation, and not only kept abreast of the times, but in many instances went ahead of them. The Athenians of old time were always crying out for something new; and their prototypes of London, following in their footsteps, formed a body of men who were ever on the look-out for novelty. Hence the name of this club, which adopted for its motto the classic cry, "Give us something new," and acted well up to the saying. The Athenian Club was the pioneer of everything.

It would take a long time to recount the vagaries for which this coterie had been responsible. If one more daring spirit than the rest invented a new thing or reinstated an old one, his fellows followed like a flock of intelligent sheep and wore the subject threadbare, till some more startling theory initiated a new movement. The opinion of the club took its color from the prevailing "fad" of the hour, and indeed many of the aforesaid "fads" were invented in its smoke room. It should have been called "The Ephemeral Club," from the rapidity with which its fanciers rose to popularity and vanished into obscurity.

After all, such incessant novelty is rather fatiguing. London is the most exhausting city in the world in which to live. From all quarters of the globe news is pouring in, every street is crowded

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with life and movement; the latest ideas of civilization here ripen to completion. It is impossible to escape from the contagion of novelty; it is in the air. Information salutes one at every turn; it pours from the mouths of men; it thrusts itself before the eye in countless daily and weekly newspapers; it clicks from every telegraph wire, until the brain is wearied with the flood of ephemeral knowledge. All this plethora of intellectual life was concentrated in the narrow confines of the Athenian Club House. No wonder its members complained of news.

"What is the prevailing passion with the Athenian at present?" asked Larcher as he stepped briskly along Piccadilly beside Tait.

"The New Literature!"

"What is that?"

"Upon my word, I can hardly tell you," replied Tait, after some cogitation. "It is a kind of impressionist school, I fancy. Those who profess to lead it insist upon works having no plot, and no action, or no dramatic situations. Their idea of a work is for a man and woman—both vaguely denominated 'he' and 'she'—to talk to one another through a few hundred pages. Good Lord, how they do talk, and all about their own feelings, their own woes, their own troubles, their own infernal egotisms! The motto of 'The New Literature' should be 'Talk! talk! talk!' for it consists of nothing else."

"Why not adopt Hamlet's recitation," suggested Larcher laughingly, "'Words! words! words!'"

"Oh, 'The New Literature' wants nothing from the past! Not even a quotation," said Tait tartly. "Woman—the new woman—is greatly to the fore in this latest fancy. She writes about neurotic members of her own sex, and calls men bad names every other page. The subjects mostly discussed in the modern novel by the modern woman, are the regeneration of the world by woman, the failure of the male to bridle his appetites, and the beginning of the millennium which will come when women get their own way."

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"Haven't they got their own way now?"

"I should think so. I don't know what further freedom they want. We live in a world of petticoats nowadays. Women pervade everything like microbes. And they are such worrying creatures," pursued Tait plaintively, "they don't take things calmly like men do, but talk and rage and go into hysterics every other minute. If this sort of thing goes on I shall retire with Dormer to an uninhabited island."

"It is easily seen that you are not a friend to the new movement," said Larcher, with a smile, "but here we are. Wait in the smoke room, like a good fellow, while I see after my correspondence."

"You will find me in the writing room," replied Tait. "I have lost my morning pipe, and do not intend to smoke any more till after luncheon."

"I don't believe you're a man, Tait, but a clockwork figure wound up to act in the same manner at the same moment. And you are such a horribly vulgar piece of mechanism."

Tait laughed, gratified by this tribute to his methodical habits, so, leaving Larcher to see after his letters, he vanished into the writing room. Here he wrote an apologetic telegram to his friend Freak, and sent it off so that it might reach that gentleman before he started for Richmond. Then he scribbled a few notes on various trifling matters of business which called for immediate attention, and having thus disposed of his cares, ensconced himself in a comfortable armchair to wait for Claude.

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In a few minutes Larcher made his appearance with a puzzled expression on his face, and two open letters in his hand. Taking a seat close to that of Tait, he at once began to explain that the news contained in the letters was the cause of the expression aforesaid.

"My other letters are nothing to speak of," said he, when seated, "but these two fairly puzzle me. Number one is from Mr. Hilliston, asking me to call; the other is from a Margaret Bezel, with a similar request. Now I know Mr. Hilliston as guardian, lawyer, and banker, but who is Margaret Bezel?"

Tait shook his wise little head. Well-informed as he was in several matters, he had never heard of Margaret Bezel.

"She lives at Hampstead, I see," continued Claude, referring to the letter. "Clarence Cottage, Hunt Lane. That is somewhere in the vicinity of Jack Straw's Castle. I wonder who she is, and

why she wants to see me."

"You have never heard of her?" asked Tait dubiously. He was never quite satisfied with Larcher's connections with the weaker sex.

"Certainly not," replied the other, with some heat. "If I had I would assuredly remember so odd a name. Bezel! Bezel! Something to do with a ring, isn't it?"

"It might have something to do with a wedding ring," said Tait, with a grim smile. "The lady may have matrimonial designs on you."

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"Bah! She may be a washerwoman for all you know, or a wife, or a widow, or Heaven only knows what. But that is not the queerest part of the affair, for Mr. Hilliston—But here, read the lady's letter first, the gentleman's next, and tell me what you think of them. Upon my word, I can make neither top nor tail of the business!"

(The First Letter.)

"April 18, 1892.

"DEAR SIR: Will you be so kind as to call and see me at Clarence Cottage, Hunt Lane, Hampstead, as I have an important communication to make to you regarding your parents.

"Yours truly,

"MARGARET BEZEL."

(The Second Letter.)

"LINCOLN'S INN FIELDS, June 10, 1892.

"DEAR CLAUDE: Call and see me here as soon as you arrive in town, and should you receive a communication from one Margaret Bezel, bring it with you. On no account see the lady before you have an interview with me. This matter is more important than you know of, and will be duly explained by me when you call.

"Yours sincerely,

"FRANCIS HILLISTON."

Tait read these two letters carefully, pinched his chin reflectively, and looked at Claude in a rather anxious manner.

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"Well, sir," said the latter impatiently, "what is your opinion?"

Tait's opinion was given in one word, and that not of the nicest meaning.

"Blackmail."

"Blackmail!" repeated Larcher, taken aback, as well he might be. "What do you mean?"

"I may be wrong," said Tait apologetically, "but this is the only conclusion to which I can come. I read the matter this way: Margaret Bezel knows something about your parents, and wishes to reveal it to you, possibly on condition that you pay her a sum of money. Hilliston evidently knows that such is her intention, and wishes to put you on your guard. Hence he asks you to see him before you accept the invitation of the lady."

"H'm! This is feasible enough. But what possible communication can this woman be likely to make to me which would involve blackmail. My parents both died when I was four years of age. She can't have any evil to say of them after twenty-five years."

"You must question Hilliston as to that," replied Tait, shrugging his shoulders. "I think you ought to see him this afternoon. He knows you are in town. I suppose?"

"I wrote from Wellington to tell him that I was returning in the *Kailargatin*," said Claude, glancing at the letter. "He must have been informed by the paper of her arrival yesterday, for this note is dated the same day. To-day is the eleventh."

"He might be certain that I would do so within the week, at all events," answered Larcher reflectively. "That is what makes his letter the more puzzling. The matter must be very urgent when he demands an immediate interview."

"I am certain he wishes to forestall this lady," said Tait, picking up the letter of Margaret Bezel. "She, at all events, knows nothing of your movements, for the note is dated the 10th of April, when you were in New Zealand."

"Humph! It is very odd, Tait."

"It is extremely odd, and too important to be neglected. Call on Mr. Hilliston this afternoon, and send him a wire now to make an appointment."

"I hope I am not going to have a bad quarter of an hour," observed Claude, as he wrote out the telegram. The mystery of the matter ruffled his usual serenity.

"I sincerely trust you are not," replied the other, touching the bell for the waiter; "but I must say I do not like the look of those two epistles."

The telegram was duly dispatched, and after a few more conjectures as to the motive of the communications, Larcher went upstairs to luncheon with his friend. Halfway through the meal he was struck with an idea.

"Margaret Bezel must be old, Tait."

"How do you know?"

"If she knows anything of my parents she must have been their friend or servant, and as they died twenty-five years ago she can be no chicken."

"True enough! But don't go out and meet your troubles halfway, Claude. It will be time enough to worry should Hilliston give you bad news. By the way, I suppose you'll stay with him to-night?"

"No doubt. He has bought a new house in Kensington Gore, and wishes me to have a look at it. I shall be glad to see his wife again. Dear old lady, she has been a second mother to me, and he like a father."

"And I like a brother," interposed Tait, laughing. "As a lonely orphan you have to depend upon public charity for your relatives. But talking about new houses, you must see mine."

"What! Are you a householder?"

"A householder, not a landed proprietor," said Tait, with pride. "I have purchased an old Manor House and a few acres at Thorston, about eight miles from Eastbourne. You must come down and see it. I have just had it furnished and put in order. A week or so there will do you good, and give me much pleasure."

"I shall be delighted to come," said Larcher hastily, "that is, if there is no troublesome business to detain me in London."

"Well, you will know shortly. After all, Hilliston may give you good news, instead of bad."

"Bah! You don't believe that, Tait."

"I don't indeed! But I am trying to comfort you."

"After the fashion of Job's friends," retorted Claude promptly. "Well, you may be right, for I do not like the look of things myself. However, I must take bad fortune along with good. Hitherto all has gone well with me, and I sincerely trust this letter from Margaret Bezel is not a forerunner of trouble."

"Should it be so, you will always have at least one friend to stand by you."

"Thank you, Tait," replied Larcher, grasping the outstretched hand. "Should the time come for testing your friendship, I shall have no hesitation in putting it to the proof. And the time is coming," added he, tapping the pocket which held the letter, "of that I am certain."

"What about our theater to-night?" demanded Tait dubiously.

"It all depends on my interview with Hilliston."

Tait said nothing at the moment, and shortly afterward they parted, Larcher to seek his guardian in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Tait to return to his chambers.

"Humph!" said the latter thoughtfully, "there will be no theater for us to-night. I don't like the look of things at all. The deuce take Margaret Bezel!"

CHAPTER III.

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THE REVELATION OF FRANCIS HILLISTON.

ONCE upon a time popular imagination pictured a lawyer as a cadaverous creature, arrayed in rusty black, with bulging blue-bag, and dry forensic lore on his tongue. So was the child of Themis represented in endless Adelpia farces; and his moral nature, as conceived by the ingenious playwright, was even less inviting than his exterior. He was a scamp, a rogue, a compiler of interminable bills, an exactor of the last shilling, a legal *Shylock*, hard-fisted and avaricious. To a great extent this type is a thing of the past, for your latter-day lawyer is an alert, well-dressed personage, social and amiable. Still he is looked on with awe as a dispenser of justice,—very often of injustice,—and not all the fine raiment in the world can rob him of his ancient reputation: when he was a dread being to the dwellers of Grub Street, who mostly had the task of limning his portrait, and so impartial revenge pictured him as above.

All of which preamble leads up to the fact that Francis Hilliston was a lawyer of the new school, despite his sixty and more years. In appearance he was not unlike a farmer, and indeed owned a few arable acres in Kent, where he played the rôle of a modern Cincinnatus. There he affected rough clothing and an interest in agricultural subjects, but in town in his Lincoln's Inn Fields' office he was solemnly arrayed in a frock coat with other garments to match, and conveyed into his twinkling eyes an expression of dignified learning. He was a different man in London to what he was in Kent, and was a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde for moral transformations. On this special occasion frock-coated legality was uppermost.

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Yet he unbent for a moment or so when receiving Claude Larcher, for childless himself, the young man was to him a very Absalom; and he loved him with an affection truly paternal. No one can have the conduct of a child up to the age of twenty—at which period Claude made his *début* in the engineering world, without feeling a tugging at the heart strings. Had Larcher been indeed his son, and he a father in place of a guardian, he could have scarcely received the young man more warmly, or have welcomed him with more heartfelt affection.

But the first outburst over, and Claude duly greeted and seated in a convenient chair, Mr. Hilliston recurred to his legal stiffness, and, with no smile on his lips, sat eyeing his visitor. He had an awkward conversation before him, and was mentally wondering as to the best way of breaking the ice. Claude spared him the trouble by at once plunging headlong into the subject of Margaret Bezel and her mysterious letter.

"Here you are, sir," said he, handing it to his guardian. "I have brought the letter of this woman with me as you wished, and I have also abstained from seeing her in accordance with your desire."

"Humph!" muttered Hilliston, skimming the letter with a legal eye, "I thought she would write."

"Do you know her, sir?"

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"Oh, yes!" said the other dryly. "I know her. But," he added after a thoughtful pause, "I have not set eyes on her for at least five-and-twenty years."

"Twenty-five years," repeated Claude, thoughtful in his turn. "It was about that time I came into your house."

Hilliston looked up sharply, as though conceiving that the remark was made with intention, but satisfied that it was not from the absent expression in Larcher's face, he resumed his perusal

of the letter and commented thereon.

"What do you think of this communication, Claude?"

"I don't know what to think," replied the young man promptly. "I confess I am curious to know why this woman wishes to see me. Who is she?"

"A widow lady with a small income."

"Does she know anything of my family?"

"Why do you ask that?" demanded Hilliston sharply, and, as it seemed to Claude, a trifle uneasily.

"Well, as I am a stranger to her, she cannot wish to see me on any personal matter, sir. And as you mention that you have not seen her for five-and-twenty years, about which time my parents died, I naturally thought——"

"That I had some object in asking you not to see her?"

"Well, yes."

"You are a man of experience now, Claude," said Hilliston, with apparent irrelevance, "and have been all over the world. Consequently you know that life is full of—trouble."

"I believe so; but hitherto no trouble has come my way."

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"You might expect that it would come sooner or later, Claude. It has come now."

"Indeed!" said Larcher, in a joking tone. "Am I about to lose my small income of five hundred a year?"

"No, that is safe enough!" answered Hilliston abruptly, rising to his feet. "The trouble of which I speak will not affect your material welfare. Indeed, if you are a hardened man of the world, as you might be, it need affect you very little in any case. You are not responsible for the sins of a former generation, and as you hardly remember your parents, cannot have any sympathy with their worries."

"I certainly remember very little of my parents, sir," said Larcher, moved by the significance of this speech. "Yet I have a faint memory of two faces. One a dark, handsome face, with kind eyes, the other a beautiful, fair countenance."

"Your father and mother, Claude."

"Yes. So much I remember of them. But what have they to do with Margaret Bezel—or Mrs. Bezel, as I suppose she is called? Why does she want to see me?"

"To tell you a story which I prefer to relate myself."

"About whom?"

"About your parents."

"But they are dead!"

"Yes," said Hilliston, "they are dead."

He walked about the room, opened a box, and took out a roll of papers, yellow with age. These were neatly tied up with red tape and inscribed "The Larcher Affair." Placing them on the table before him, Hilliston resumed his seat, and looked steadfastly at his ward. Claude, vaguely aware that some unpleasant communication was about to be made to him, sat silently waiting the words of ill omen, and his naturally fresh color faded to a dull white with apprehension.

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"I have always loved you like a son, Claude," said Hilliston solemnly, "ever since you came to my house, a tiny boy of five. It has been my aim to educate you well, to advance your interests, to make you happy, and above all," added the lawyer, lowering his voice, "to keep the contents of these papers secret from you."

Claude said nothing, though Hilliston paused to enable him to speak, but sat waiting further explanation.

"I thought the past was dead and buried," resumed his guardian, in a low voice. "So far as I can see it is foolish to rake up old scandals—old crimes."

"Crimes!" said Claude, rising involuntarily to his feet.

"Crimes," repeated Hilliston sadly. "The time has come when you must know the truth about your parents. The woman who wrote this letter has been silent for five-and-twenty years. Now, for some reason with which I am unacquainted, she is determined to see you and reveal all. A few months ago she called here to tell me so. I implored her to keep silent, pointing out that no good could come of acquainting you with bygone evils; but she refused to listen to me, and left this office with the full intention of finding you out, and making her revelation."

"But I have been in New Zealand."

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"She did not know that, nor did I tell her," said Hilliston grimly; "in fact, I refused to give her your address, but she is not the woman to be easily beaten, as I well know. I guessed she would find out the name of your club and write to you there, therefore I sent that letter to you so as to counter-plot the creature. I expected that you would find a letter from her at your club on your arrival. I was right. Here is the letter. She has succeeded so far, but I have managed to checkmate her by obtaining the first interview with you. Should you call on her,—and after reading these papers I have little doubt but that you will do so,—she will be able to tell you nothing new. I cannot crush the viper, but at least I can draw its fangs."

"You speak hardly of this woman, sir."

"I have reason to," said Hilliston quietly. "But for this woman your father would still be alive."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your father, George Larcher, was murdered!"

"Murdered!"

"Yes! Murdered at Horrison, in Kent, in the year 1866."

Stunned by this information, which he was far from expecting, Claude sank down in his chair with a look of horror on his face, while Hilliston spoke rapidly.

"I have kept this secret all these years because I did not want your young life to be shadowed by the knowledge of your father's fate. But now Mrs. Bezel intends to tell you the truth, and will give you a garbled version of the same, making herself out a martyr. I must be beforehand with her, and I wish you to take those papers, and read the account of the case which ended in the acquittal of your mother."

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"My mother! Acquitted! Do you mean——"

"I mean that Mrs. Larcher was accused of the murder of her husband, and was tried and acquitted."

"Great Heavens! But she is now dead?"

"I say no more," said Hilliston, evading a direct reply. "You will know the truth when you read these papers."

Larcher mechanically took the packet held out to him, and placed it in his pocket. Then he rose to go. A thousand questions were on the tip of his tongue, but he dare not ask one. It would be better, he thought, to learn the truth from the papers, in place of hearing it from the lips of Francis Hilliston, who might, for all he knew, give as garbled a version of the affair as Mrs. Bezel. Hilliston guessed his thoughts, and approved of the unspoken decision.

"I think you are right," he said, with deliberation; "it is best that you should learn the truth in that way. When you have read those papers come and see me about them."

"One moment, sir! Who killed my father?"

"I cannot say! Your mother was suspected and proved innocent. A friend of your father was

also suspected and—"

"And proved innocent?"

"No! He was never arrested—he was never tried. He vanished on the night of the murder and has not been heard of since. Now, I can tell you no more. Go and read the papers, Claude."

Larcher took up his hat and hurried toward the door in a mechanical manner. There he paused. [pg 26]

"Does Mrs. Bezel know the truth?"

Hilliston, arranging the papers on the table, looked up with a face which had unexpectedly grown gray and old.

"Yes!" he said quickly. "I think Mrs. Bezel knows the 'truth.'"

CHAPTER IV.

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WHAT OCCURRED AT HORRISTON.

AFTER that fatal interview Claude went neither to the house at Kensington Gore nor to the chambers of his friend Tait. With the papers given to him by Hilliston in his pocket, he repaired to a quiet hotel in Jermyn Street, where he was well-known, and there secured a bedroom for the night. A wire speedily brought his luggage from the railway station, and thus being settled for the moment, he proceeded to acquaint himself with the tragedy of his parents' lives.

It was some time before he could make up his mind to read the papers, and, dreading the disagreeable relation, he put off the perusal till such time as he retired to bed. A note dispatched to the Club intimated to Tait that the second seat at the Curtain Theater would be unoccupied, and then Claude tried to rid himself of distracting thoughts by a rapid walk in the Park. So do men dally with the inevitable, and vainly attempt to stay the march of Fate.

Dinner was a mere farce with the young man, for he could neither eat nor drink, and afterward he dawdled about the smoke room, putting off the reading of the papers as long as he could. A superstitious feeling of coming evil withheld him from immediately learning the truth; and it was not until the clock struck ten that he summoned up sufficient courage to repair to his bedroom. [pg 28]

With the papers spread out on a small table, he sat down at half-past ten, reading by the light of a single candle. A second and a third were needed before he arose from his chair, and the gray dawn was glimmering through the window blinds as he laid down the last sheet. Then his face was as gray as the light spreading over street and house, for he knew that his dead father had been foully murdered, and that his dead mother had been morally, if not legally, guilty of the crime. The tragedy—a strange mixture of the sordid and the romantic—took place at Horrison, in Kent, in the year 1866, and the following are the main facts, as exhibited by the provincial press:

In the year 1860 George Larcher and his wife came to settle at Horrison, attracted thereto by the romantic beauty of the scenery and the cheerful society of that rising watering-place. Since that time Horrison, after a feeble struggle for supremacy, has succumbed to powerful rivals, and is once more a sleepy little provincial town, unknown to invalid or doctor. But when Mr. and Mrs. Larcher settled there it was a popular resort for visitors from all quarters of the three kingdoms, and the young couple were extremely liked by the gay society which filled the town. For five years they lived there, but during the sixth occurred the tragedy which slew the husband, and placed the wife in the dock.

The antecedents of the pair were irreproachable in every respect. He was a fairly rich man of thirty-five, who, holding a commission in the army, had met with his wife—then Miss Barker—at Cheltenham. She was a beautiful girl, fond of dress and gayety, the belle of her native town, and the greatest flirt of the country side. Handsome George Larcher, in all the bravery of martial trappings, came like the young prince of the fairy tale, and carried off the beauty from all rivals. She, knowing him to be rich, seeing him to be handsome, and aware that he was well-connected, accepted his hand, and so they were married, to the great discomfiture of many sighing swains. There was love on his side at least, but whether Julia Barker returned that passion in any great degree it is hard to say. The provincial reporter hinted that a prior attachment had engaged her [pg 29]

heart, and though she married Larcher for his money, and looks, and position, yet she only truly loved one man—one Mark Jeringham, who afterward figured in the tragedy at Horriston.

To all outward appearance Captain and Mrs. Larcher were a pattern couple, and popular with military and civil society. Then, in obedience to the wish of his wife, George Larcher sold out, and within a few months of their marriage they came to live at Horriston. Here they took a house known as The Laurels, which was perched on a cliff of moderate height, overlooking the river Sarway; and proceeded to entertain the gay society of the neighborhood. One son was born to them a year after they took up their abode at The Laurels, and he was five years of age when the tragedy took place which caused the death of his parent. Claude had no difficulty in recognizing himself as the orphan so pathetically alluded to by the flowery provincial reporter.

The household of George Larcher consisted of six servants, among whom two were particularly interesting. The one was the captain's valet, Denis Bantry, an Irish soldier in the same regiment as his master, who had been bought out by Larcher when he took leave of military glory. Attached to the captain by many acts of kindness, Denis was absolutely devoted to him, and was no unimportant personage in the new home. The other servant was Mona Bantry, the sister of Denis, a handsome, bright-eyed lass from County Kerry, who acted as maid to Mrs. Larcher. The remaining servants call for no special mention, but this Irish couple must be particularly noted as having been mixed up with the tragedy.

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For some months all went well at The Laurels, and it seemed as though the Larchers were devoted to one another. But this was only outwardly, for the character of Julia developed rapidly after marriage into that of a vain, frivolous woman, eager of admiration, extravagant as regards dress, and neglectful of the infant son. Larcher, a thoroughly domesticated man, greatly resented the attitude taken up by his wife, and the resentment led to frequent quarrels. He was annoyed by her frivolity and continuous absence from home; while she began to dislike her grave husband, who would have made her—as she expressed it—a mere domestic drudge. But the pair managed to hoodwink the world as to their real feelings to one another, and it was only when the trial of Mrs. Larcher came on that the truth was revealed. In all Kent there was no more unhappy home than that at The Laurels.

To make matters worse, Mark Jeringham paid a visit to Horriston, and having known Mrs. Larcher from childhood, naturally enough became a frequent visitor. He was everywhere at the heels of the former belle of Cheltenham, who encouraged him in his attentions. Larcher remonstrated with his wife on her folly, but she saucily refused to alter her line of conduct. But for the scandal of the thing Larcher would have forbidden Jeringham the house; and, to mark his disapprobation, gave him the cold shoulder on every occasion. Nevertheless, this inconvenient person persisted in thrusting himself between husband and wife, to the anger of the former and the delight of the latter. The introduction of this third element only made matters worse.

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The house was divided into camps, for Mona supported her mistress in her frivolity, and, indeed, seemed herself to have an admiration for handsome Mark Jeringham, who was very generous in money matters. Denis, in whose eyes his master was perfect, hated the interloper as much as Larcher, and loudly protested against the attention of Mona and his mistress. Another friend who supported Larcher was Francis Hilliston, then a gay young lawyer of thirty-five, who often paid a visit to Horriston. He also frequented The Laurels, but was much disliked by Mrs. Larcher, who greatly resented his loyal friendship for her husband. Things were in this position on the 23d of June, 1866, when events occurred which resulted in the murder of Captain Larcher, the disappearance of Jeringham, and the arrest of Mrs. Larcher on a charge of murder.

A masked ball in fancy dress was to be given at the Town Hall on that night, and hither Mrs. Larcher was going as Mary, Queen of Scots, accompanied by Jeringham in the character of Darnley. George Larcher refused to be present, and went up to London on the night in question, leaving his faithful friend Hilliston to look after his matrimonial interests at the ball. Before he left a terrible scene took place between himself and his wife, in which he forbade her to go to the dance, but she defied him, and said she would go without his permission. Whereupon Larcher left the house and went up to London, swearing that he would never return until his wife asked his pardon and renounced the friendship of Jeringham.

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Now, here began the mystery which no one was able to fathom. Mrs. Larcher went to the ball with Jeringham, and having, as she said to Hilliston, who was also at the ball, enjoyed herself greatly, returned home at three in the morning. The next day she was ill in bed, although she had left the Town Hall in perfect health, and Mark Jeringham had disappeared. Larcher was not seen in the neighborhood for five days, and presumably was still in London; so during his absence Mrs. Larcher kept her bed. Then his body, considerably disfigured, was found at the mouth of the river Sarway, some four miles down. Curious to state it was clothed in a fancy dress similar to that worn by Jeringham on the night of the ball.

On the discovery of the body public curiosity was greatly excited, and a thousand rumors flew from mouth to mouth. That a crime had been committed no one doubted for a moment, as an examination proved that George Larcher had been stabbed to the heart by some slender, sharp

instrument. The matter passed into the hands of the police, and they paid a visit to The Laurels for the purpose of seeing what light Mrs. Larcher could throw on the matter. At this awful period of her frivolous life Francis Hilliston stood her friend, and it was he who interviewed the officers of the law when they called.

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Mrs. Larcher was still in bed, and, under the doctor's orders, refused to rise therefrom, or to receive her visitors. She protested to Hilliston, who in his turn reported her sayings to the police, that she knew nothing about the matter. She had not seen her husband since he left her on the 23d of June, and no one was more astonished or horror-struck than she at the news of his death. According to her story she had left the ball at three o'clock, and had driven to The Laurels with Jeringham. He had parted from her at the door of the house, and had walked back to Horrison. His reason for not entering, and for not using the carriage to return, was that he did not wish to give color to the scandal as to the relations which existed between them, which Mrs. Larcher vowed and protested were purely platonic.

Furthermore, she asserted that her illness was caused by a discovery which she had made on the night of the ball: that Mona Bantry was about to become a mother, and to all appearance she believed that the father of the coming child was none other than her husband. Far from thinking that he had been murdered, she had been waiting for his return in order to upbraid him for his profligacy, and to demand a divorce. Mona Bantry had disappeared immediately after the discovery of her ruin, and Mrs. Larcher professed that she did not know where she was.

This story, which was feasible enough, satisfied the police authorities for the moment, and they retired, only to return three days later with a warrant for the arrest of Mrs. Larcher. In the interval a dagger had been found in the grounds of The Laurels, on the banks of the river, and, as it was stained with blood and exactly fitted the wound, it was concluded that with this weapon the crime had been committed. Inquiry resulted in the information being obtained that Mrs. Larcher, in her character of Mary, Queen of Scots, had worn this dagger on the night of the ball. Hence it was evident, so said the police, that she had killed her husband.

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The theory of the police was that Captain Larcher had returned from London on the night of the ball, and had witnessed the parting of his wife and Jeringham at the door. Filled with jealous rage he had upbraided his wife in the sitting room, the window of which looked out on the cliff overhanging the river. In a moment of fury she had doubtless snatched the dagger from her girdle and stabbed him to the heart, then, terrified at what she had done, had thrown the body out of the window, trusting that the stream would carry it away, and so conceal her crime. This the river had done, for the body had been discovered four miles down, where it had been carried by the current. As to the dagger being in the grounds in place of the room, the police, never at a loss for a theory, suggested that Mrs. Larcher had stolen out of the house, and had thrown the dagger over the bank where it was subsequently discovered.

Mrs. Larcher asserted her innocence, and reiterated her statement that she had not seen her husband since the day of the ball. He had not returned on that night, as the servants could testify. The only domestics who had not retired to bed when she returned at three o'clock were Mona and Denis. Of these the first had gone away to hide her shame, and all inquiries and advertisements failed to find her. But at the trial Denis—much broken down at the ruin of his sister—swore that Captain Larcher had not returned from London on that evening, and that Mrs. Larcher had gone straight to the sitting room, where she first made the discovery of Mona's iniquity, and then had afterward retired to bed. Mrs. Larcher asserted that the dagger had been lost by her at the ball, and she knew not into whose hands it had fallen.

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The trial, which took place at Canterbury, was a nine days' wonder, and opinions were divided as to the guilt of the erring wife. One party held that she had committed the crime in the manner stated by the police, while the others asserted that Jeringham was the criminal, and had disappeared in order to escape the consequences of his guilt. "Doubtless," said they, "he had been met by Larcher after leaving the house, and had killed him during a quarrel." The use of the dagger was accounted for by these wiseacres by a belief that Mrs. Larcher had given it to Jeringham as a love token when she parted from him at the door of The Laurels.

The evidence of Denis, that he had been with or near Mrs. Larcher till she retired to bed, and that the captain had not set foot in the house on that evening, turned the tide of evidence in favor of the unfortunate woman. She was acquitted of the crime, and went to London, but there died—as appeared from the newspapers—a few weeks afterward, killed by anxiety and shame.

The child Claude was taken charge of by Mr. Hilliston, who had been a good friend to Mrs. Larcher during her troubles, and so the matter faded from the public mind.

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What became of Jeringham no one ever knew. His victim—as some supposed Larcher to be—was duly buried in the Horrison Cemetery, but all the efforts of the police failed to find the man who was morally, if not legally, guilty of the crime. Denis also was lost in the London crowd, and all those who had been present at the tragedy at The Laurels were scattered far and wide. New matters attracted the attention of the fickle public, and the Larcher affair was forgotten in due

course.

The mystery was never solved. Who was guilty of the crime? That question was never answered. Some accused Mrs. Larcher despite her acquittal and death. Others insisted that Jeringham was the criminal; but no one could be certain of the truth. Hilliston, seeing that Mr. and Mrs. Larcher were dead, that Mona, Denis, and Jeringham had disappeared, wisely kept the matter secret from Claude, deeming that it would be folly to disturb the mind of the lad with an insoluble riddle of so terrible a nature. So for five-and-twenty years the matter had remained in abeyance. Now it seemed as though it were about to be reopened by Mrs. Bezel.

"And who—" asked Claude of himself, as he finished this history in the gray dawn of the morning, "who is Mrs. Bezel?"

To say the least, he had a right to ask himself this question, for it was curious that the name of Mrs. Bezel was not even mentioned in connection with that undiscovered crime of five-and-twenty years before.

CHAPTER V.

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A STRANGE COINCIDENCE.

IN spite of Tait's methodical habits, circumstances beyond his control often occurred to upset them. On the previous day the unexpected arrival of Claude had altered his plans for the day, and after his return from the theater on the same evening, he had—contrary to his rule—passed the night in reading. The invaluable Dormer had procured "A Whim of Fate" from Mudie's, and Tait found it lying on the table in company with biscuits and wine. Excited by the performance, he did not feel inclined to retire at his usual hour of midnight, and while sipping his wine, picked up the first volume to while away the time till he should feel sleepy.

Alas! this novel, about which everyone in London was talking, proved anything but soporific, and for the whole of that night Tait sat in his comfortable chair devouring the three volumes. The tale was one of mystery, and until he learned the solution Tait, conventional and incurious as he was, could not tear himself from the fascination of the printed page. When the riddle was read, when the criminal was hunted down, when the bad were punished, and the good rewarded, the dawn was already breaking in the east. In his Jermyn Street hotel, Claude Larcher was rising, stiff and tired, from the perusal of a tragedy in real life; in his Earls Street chambers, Spenser Tait was closing the third volume of John Parver's work. Each had passed a wakeful night, each had been fascinated by the account of a crime, the one real, the other fictional. So does Fate, whose designs no one can presume to explain, duplicate our lives for the gaining of her own ends.

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Rather disgusted by his departure from the conventional, and heartily blaming the too ingenious John Parver for having caused such departure, Tait tumbled hastily into bed, in order to snatch a few hours' sleep. Dormer, ignorant of his master's vigil, woke him remorselessly at his usual hour, with the unexpected intelligence that Mr. Larcher was waiting to see him in the sitting room. From the telegram of the previous night, and this early visit, Tait rightly concluded that his friend was in trouble, so without waiting to take his bath, he hurriedly slipped on a dressing gown, and appeared sleepy and disheveled in the sitting room. Larcher, who looked likewise dissipated, arose to his feet as the little man entered, and they eyed one another in astonishment, for the appearance of each was totally at variance with his usual looks.

"Well," said Tait interrogatively, "I see you've been making a night of it."

"I might say the same of you," replied Larcher grimly; "a more dissipated looking wretch I never saw. Have you fallen into bad habits at your age?"

"That depends on what you call bad habits, Claude. I have not been round the town, if that is what you mean. But, seduced by the novel of a too ingenious author, I have sat up all night devouring his three volumes. Such a thing has not occurred with me since I unfortunately tried to read myself to sleep with 'Jane Eyre.' Charlotte Brontë and John Parver are both answerable for my white nights. But you," continued Tait, surveying his friend in a quizzical manner; "am I to understand that——"

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"You are to understand that my night has been a duplicate of your own," interrupted Larcher curtly.

"What! Have you been reading 'A Whim of Fate'?"

"No, my friend, I have not. While you were devouring fiction, I have been making myself acquainted with a tragedy in real life."

Larcher thereupon savagely threw on the breakfast table a roll of papers, and looked defiantly at his friend. Tone and expression failed to elicit surprise.

"Oh!" said Tait reflectively, "then Hilliston gave you bad news, after all. I guessed he had from your refusal to accompany me to the theater last night."

"You guessed rightly. He gave me such news as I never expected to hear. You will find it amply set forth in those papers, which I have been reading all night."

"Dear me. I trust it is nothing serious. Has Mrs. Bezel——"

"I don't know anything about Mrs. Bezel," said Larcher loudly. "So far as she is concerned I am as much in the dark as ever. But my parents——"

"What of them?" interrupted Tait, uttering the first thought which came into his mind. "Are they alive, after all?"

"No. They are dead, sure enough," muttered Claude gloomily.

"In that case what can Mr. Hilliston or Mrs. Bezel have to say about them," demanded the other, looking puzzled. "No scandal about Queen Elizabeth, I hope?"

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"Confound it, man, don't be so flippant! I've had bad news, I tell you. My father,"—here Larcher gulped down his emotion with some difficulty—"my father was murdered!"

"Murdered!" repeated Tait, looking aghast, as well he might.

"Yes! And my mother was accused of having murdered him. There you have it."

It was some little time before Tait could face the skeleton so unexpectedly produced from the Larcher cupboard. Hitherto his acquaintance with crime had been mainly derived from fiction after the style of John Parver, or from the columns of the press; but now he was brought face to face with a tragedy indirectly connected with his dearest friend, and naturally enough did not like the situation. Nevertheless, like the wise little man he was, he made no comment on the truth so suddenly blurted out, but pushed his friend into a comfortable chair, and proposed breakfast.

"Breakfast!" cried Claude, clutching his hair; "I could not eat a morsel. Have you no feelings, you little monster, to propose breakfast to me, after hearing such hideous news. Why don't you give me sympathy, and try and help me, instead of sitting at your confounded rasher of bacon like a graven image."

"I'll do all in my power later on," said Tait quietly; "but you are upset by this news, and no wonder. Try and eat a little, then you can tell me all about it, and I'll give you the best advice in my power."

Thus adjured, Claude drew in his chair, and managed to eat a morsel of toast and drink a cup of coffee, after which he lighted his pipe, and smoked furiously, while Tait, anxious that his friend should regain his self-control, made a lengthened meal, and talked of divers matters. Breakfast over, he also filled his favorite pipe, and, drawing a chair close to that of Larcher's, waited for an explanation.

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"Well, Claude," said he, after a pause, during which the other showed no disposition to speak, "tell me your trouble."

"I have told you," grumbled Larcher angrily; "if you want to know any more about it, read those papers."

"It would take too long, and, as it happens, I am already tired with reading. Tell me about the affair as shortly as possible, and then we can go through the papers together. You say your father was murdered. Who committed the crime?"

"No one knows! The criminal is still at large."

"After five-and-twenty years he is likely to remain so."

"No!", cried Larcher vehemently, striking the table; "I'll hunt him down, and find him out, and put a rope round his neck, so help me God!"

"You say your mother was accused of the crime," said Tait, ignoring this outburst.

"Yes. But she was acquitted on the evidence of my father's valet. Shortly afterward she died in London. I don't wonder at it," said poor Claude distractedly; "the shame, the disgrace! If she survived she was bitterly punished. I should like to see the man who would dare to asperse her memory."

"No one will do so," said Tait soothingly. "Control yourself, my dear fellow, and we will look into this matter together. I have just been reading about a crime, but I did not think I would be so soon concerned in dealing with one."

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"You will help me, Tait? You will stand by me?"

"My dear friend, can you ask? I am completely at your service, and together we will do all in our power to discover the murderer of your father and clear the memory of your mother."

"It is clear. She was acquitted by the jury. Don't you dare to——"

"I don't dare to say anything," interrupted Tait impatiently. "Do be reasonable, my good fellow. So long as I am ignorant, I can say nothing. Tell me the particulars and we may arrive at some conclusion. Now then, give me a *précis* of the case."

Dominated by the superior calm of his friend, Claude related the Larcher affair as succinctly as possible. The details of the case had impressed themselves too strongly on his brain for him to hesitate in the narration, and, keeping his emotions well in hand, he managed to give a fairly minute account of the tragedy which had taken place at Horrison in the year 1866.

The effect on Tait was surprising. A look of blank astonishment overspread his face as Larcher proceeded with his story, and when it was finished he looked anxiously at his friend. Apart from the details of the case, he was deeply interested in the matter from another point of view. Larcher waited to hear what his friend thought of the case, but instead of commenting thereon Tait both acted and spoke in an apparently irrelevant manner.

Without a word he heard Claude to the end, then rose from his seat, and walking to the other end of the room returned with three volumes bound in red cloth.

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"This book is called 'A Whim of Fate,'" said he placing the volumes at Larcher's elbow. "Have you read it?"

"Confound it, what do you mean?" burst out Claude, with justifiable wrath. "I tell you of a serious matter which nearly concerns myself, and you prattle about the last fashionable novel."

"Wait a minute," said Tait, laying a detaining hand on his friend's coat sleeve. "There is more method in my madness than you give me credit for."

"What do you mean?"

"The story you tell me is most extraordinary. But the information I am about to impart to you is more extraordinary still. You say this crime at Horrison was committed five-and-twenty years ago."

"Yes, you can see by the date of those newspapers."

"It has very likely faded out of all memories."

"Of course! I don't suppose anyone is now alive who gives it a thought."

"Well," said Tait, "it is certainly curious."

"What is curious? Explain yourself."

"The story you tell me now was known to me last night."

Larcher looked at his friend in unconcealed surprise, and promptly contradicted what seemed to be a foolish assertion.

"That is impossible, Tait. I heard it only last night myself."

"Nevertheless, I read it last night."

"Read it last night!" repeated Larcher skeptically.

"In this book," said Tait, laying his hand on the novel.

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"What do you mean?" demanded the other impatiently.

"I mean that John Parver, the author of this book, has utilized the events which took place at Horrison in 1866 for the purpose of writing a work of fiction. The story you tell me is told in these pages, and your family tragedy is the talk of literary London."

CHAPTER VI.

[pg 45]

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION.

THIS astonishing statement was received by Claude with a disbelieving smile; and so convinced was he of its untruth that he affected anger at what he really believed to be the flippancy of Tait's conduct.

"It is no doubt very amusing for you to ridicule my story," said he, with cold dignity, "but it is hardly the act of a friend. Some matters are too serious to form the subject of a jest; and this——"

"I am not jesting," interrupted Tait eagerly. "I assure you that the tragedy which concerned your parents forms the subject-matter of this novel. You can read the book yourself, and so be convinced that I am speaking the truth. The names and places are no doubt fictional, but the whole story is narrated plainly enough."

Larcher turned over the three volumes with a puzzled expression. That a story with which he had only become acquainted within the last twenty-four hours should be printed in a book, and that the book itself should be brought so speedily under his notice, seemed to him quite inexplicable. The strangeness of the occurrence paralyzed his will, and, contrary to his usual self-dependence, he looked to Tait for guidance.

"What do you think of it?" he asked irresolutely.

"Ah! That requires some consideration, my friend. But before we go into the matter let us understand our position toward each other. You believe this story of your father's death?"

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"Certainly. Mr. Hilliston would not tell me an untruth, and moreover this bundle of extracts from provincial newspapers confirms his statement. I truly believe that my father, George Larcher, was murdered at Horrison in 1866 by—and there you have me—I know not by whom. My own opinion is that Jeringham is——"

"One moment, Claude! Let us settle all preliminaries. Are you resolved to take up this matter!"

"I am! I must clear the memory of my mother, and avenge the death of my father."

"Would it not be better to let sleeping dogs lie?" suggested Tait, with some hesitation.

"I do not think so," replied Claude quietly. "I am not a sentimental man, as you know; and my nature is of too practical a kind to busy itself with weaving ropes of sand. Yet in this instance I feel that it is my duty to hunt down and punish the coward who killed my father. When I find him, and punish him, this ghost of '66 will be laid aside; otherwise, it will continue to haunt and torture me all my life."

"But your business?"

"I shall lay aside my business till this matter is settled to my satisfaction. As you know, I have a private income, and am not compelled to work for my daily bread. Moreover, the last four years

have brought me in plenty of money, so that I can afford to indulge my fancy. And my fancy," added Claude in a grim tone, "is to dedicate the rest of my life to discovering the truth. Do you not approve of my decision?"

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"Yes, and no," said Tait evasively. "I think your hunt for an undescribed criminal, whose crime dates back twenty-five years, is rather a waste of time. All clues must have disappeared. It seems hopeless for you to think of solving the mystery. And if you do," continued the little man earnestly, "if you do, what possible pleasure can you derive from such a solution? Your father is a mere name to you, so filial love can have nothing to do with the matter. Moreover, the criminal may be dead—he may be——"

"You have a thousand and one objections," said Larcher impatiently, "none of which have any weight with me. I am in the hands of Fate. A factor has entered into my life which has changed my future. Knowing what I now know, I cannot rest until I learn the truth. Do you know the story of Mozart?" he added abruptly.

"I know several stories of Mozart. But this special one I may not know."

"It is told either of Mozart or Mendelssohn! I forget which," pursued Larcher, half to himself. "When Mozart—let us say Mozart—was ill in bed, one of his friends struck a discord on the piano, which required what is technically known as a resolution for its completion. The omission so tortured the sensitive ear of the musician that, when his friend departed, he rose from his bed and completed the discord in accordance with musical theory. Till that was done he could not rest."

"And the point of your parable?"

"Can you not see? This incomplete case of murder is my discord. I must complete it by discovering the criminal, and so round off the case, or submit to be tortured by its hinted mystery all my life. It is not filial love, it is not sentiment, it is not even curiosity, it is simply a desire to complete a matter hitherto left undone. Till I know the sequel to the Horrison tragedy, I shall feel in a state of suspense—and suspense," added Claude emphatically, "is torture to men of my temperament."

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"Your reason is a trifle whimsical," said Tait, smiling at the application of this musical theory to the present instance, "but I can understand your feelings. Indeed, I feel the same way myself."

"You!"

"Why not? In reading 'A Whim of Fate,' I could not go to rest without knowing the end, and I feel a like curiosity toward this tragedy of real life. I shall not be content till I learn the truth. My feelings are precisely the same as your own. Therefore," pursued Tait, with emphasis, "I propose to assist you in your search. We will discuss the matter calmly, and see what is best to be done. In spite of the lapse of five-and-twenty years, who knows but what we may lay hands on the murderer of your father, who is no doubt now living in fancied security."

"Unless he is dead."

"Who is making the objections now?" said Tait, smiling. "Well, Claude, will you accept me as your brother detective in this matter?"

"Willingly, and I thank you for this proof of your friendship."

"I am afraid there is an element of selfishness mixed up in my offer," said Tait, shrugging his shoulders. "It is not every day that one can find an interesting case like this to dissect. Excitement is the joy of life, and I rather think we will be able to extract a great deal from this investigation. Come! We now understand one another."

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Larcher grasped the hand held out to him, and gratefully accepted the aid thus offered. From that moment the two dedicated themselves to hunt down the criminal at whose hands George Larcher had met his death. It was as strange a compact as had ever been made. Halting Nemesis, who had rested all these years, once more resumed her stealthy progress, and before her ran these two young men, as ministers of her long-delayed revenge. This junction of unforeseen circumstances savored of the dramatic.

"The first thing to be done," said Tait, when the compact was thus concluded, "is to read both cases."

"Both cases!" repeated Claude curiously.

"Yes! You remember how Browning gives half a dozen aspects of the same case in his 'Ring and the Book.' In a minor degree we benefit in the same manner. There," said Tait, pointing to the roll of newspapers, "is the case from the real point of view, and here, in these three volumes, we will find the same case as considered in a fictional fashion by the novelist. By reading both we may come to some conclusion whence to start in our talk. Last night you read the newspapers; I the novel. To-day we will reverse the process. I will view the affair as set forth by the provincial press, and you will devour the three volumes of John Parver as I did last night."

"And afterward?"

"Eh! Who can say?" replied Tait, shrugging his shoulders. Several sojourns in Paris had left their trace in Gallic gestures, and possibly in Gallic flippancy. "We must know what foundation we have before we build."

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Claude nodded. He was of the same way of thinking himself, and commented on his friend's speech after his own fashion.

"Yes," said he a trifle vindictively, "we must build our gallows stanch and strong. You can proceed with your toilet, and afterward we will read novels and newspapers, as you suggest. The result of our reading must appear in our actions. I rather think," he added slowly, "that the result will be a visit to Mr. Hilliston."

"Without doubt. He was an eye-witness, and it is always preferable to obtain evidence first hand."

"Then," said Claude reflectively, "there is Mrs. Bezel."

"Quite so! The enterprising lady who started the whole thing. Was she also an eye-witness?"

"I can't say. Her name does not appear in the newspapers."

"Humph!" muttered Tait, scratching his chin. "Nor in those three volumes can I find a character likely to develop into Mrs. Bezel of Hampstead."

"I wonder who she can be," said Claude curiously, "or what she can have to do with the case."

"That we must find out. Depend upon it, there is more in this case than in newspapers or novel. We must find out all about Mrs. Bezel, and," said Tait, with emphasis, "we must learn all that is to be learned concerning John Parver."

"Who is John Parver?"

"Who was the Man in the Iron Mask?" replied Tait, in a bantering tone. "I cannot say. But whomsoever he may be, he knows all about this case."

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"There is that possibility, certainly," assented the other smoothly, "but I think it hardly likely. A man of to-day would not readily come across the account of a tragedy occurring in a little known town twenty-five years ago. Do you know," he added, after a pause, "that it occurs to me that the publication of this book, containing an account of the case, may have been the cause which incited Mrs. Bezel to write the letter."

"I thought so myself. Mrs. Bezel may think that John Parver is a *nom de plume* assumed by Claude Larcher."

"Or another alternative. Mrs. Bezel may be John Parver herself. It is the fashion nowadays for women to write under the names of men."

There was a few minutes' silence, during which each man was intent on his own thoughts. Tait, whose brain turned quicker than that of Larcher, was the first to break the silence.

"Well," said he, moving briskly toward his bedroom door, "before we can say or do anything we must learn the facts of the case."

As he vanished into his room Claude laid his hand on the first of the three volumes.



"LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE."

ON the journey of life we sometimes come to a dead stop. Obstacles arise which bar our further progress, and circumstances, impossible to do away with, confront us on all sides. We cannot go back, for in life there is no retrogression; we cannot proceed, owing to blocked paths, and so stand hopeless and powerless, waiting for the word or action of Fate. She, unseen but almighty deity, alone can remove the hindrance which prevents our progress, and until she speaks or acts, we can do nothing but wait. It is on such occasions that we feel how truly we are the puppets of some unknown power.

Francis Hilliston had arrived at some such stoppage. Hitherto his keen brain, his strong will, his capability for decisive action, had carried him onward from past to present, through present to future. When obstacles had arisen they had been easily swept away, and with his own life in his hands, he was perfectly satisfied of his power to mold it to his liking. Possibly Fate, who is a somewhat jealous deity, felt angered at the egotistic self-reliance of the man; for without warning she brought him to a dead stop, then grimly waited to see how his boasted cunning would outwit her. As she probably foresaw, the man did nothing but await her decision. It was the only thing he could do.

For five-and-twenty years the Horrison tragedy had been unmentioned, unthought of; Hilliston deemed that it was relegated to the category of unknown crimes, and having in mind his friendship for the parents, and his love for the son, was not unwilling that it should be so. He did not wish Claude to know of the matter, he was not desirous that he should come in contact with Mrs. Bezel; and hitherto had managed so well that neither contingency had eventuated. Congratulating himself on his dexterity, he remained lulled in fancied security, when Fate, observant of his complacency, sent a bolt from the blue, and brought him up short. Now, Hilliston, forced by circumstances to tell the truth to Larcher, did not know what to do. He could only wait for the fiat of the higher power. [pg 53]

Grimly satisfied that she had brought home his fault, and had shown him his moral weakness, Fate made the next move, and sent Larcher and his friend to Lincoln's Inn Fields to again set Hilliston on his former journey. The paralysis of will which had seized the elder man did not extend to the younger; for Claude arrived full of anxiety to begin the search for the undiscovered criminal. The first result of his compact with Tait was this visit to the lawyer.

"Claude Larcher; Spenser Tait," muttered Hilliston, glancing at the cards brought in by his clerk. "I thought as much; the matter is out of my hands now. Show the gentlemen in," he added sharply.

The clerk departed, and Hilliston walked quickly to the window, where he stood biting his nails. All geniality had vanished from his face; he looked older than his years, and an unaccustomed frown wrinkled his expansive forehead. A crisis had come which he knew not how to meet; so, after the fashion of men when they feel thus helpless, he left the decision in the hands of Fate. Which was precisely what Fate wanted. [pg 54]

"Good-morning, Claude! Good-morning, Mr. Tait!" said Hilliston, welcoming the young men with artificial enthusiasm. "I expected to see you today."

"Surely you did not expect to see me?" said Tait, in a silky tone, as he placed his hat on the table.

"Indeed, I did! Where Damon is Phintias is sure to be. That Claude's perusal of those papers would result in your accompanying him to this office, I felt sure. I was right. Here you are!"

Mr. Hilliston affected a cheerfulness he was far from feeling. With increasing age a distaste had come for violent excitements, and with one of Claude's temperament he knew that the chances were that the ensuing quarter of an hour would be somewhat stirring. Contrary to his expectations, however, Larcher was eager, but calm, and Hilliston, assuring himself that the calmness was genuine, began to hope that the interview would pass off better than he expected. Still, none of us like to reopen a disagreeable chapter of the book of life, and this Mr. Hilliston, against his will and inclination, was about to do.

"Well, sir," said Claude, when they were all seated, and the hush of expectancy was in the air, "I have read those papers."

"Yes," said Mr. Hilliston interrogatively; "and what do you think of the matter?"

"I think it is a very black case."

"You are quite right, Claude. It is a very black case indeed. I did all in my power to bring the criminal to justice, but without success."

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"Who is the criminal?" asked Larcher, with a keen glance at his guardian.

Hilliston shuffled his feet uneasily, by no means relishing the directness of the question.

"That is a difficult question to answer," he said slowly; "in fact an impossible one. My suspicions point to Jeringham."

From this point Tait made a third in the conversation.

"That is because Jeringham disappeared on the night of the murder," he said leisurely.

"Yes. I think that circumstance alone is very suspicious."

"He was never found again?"

"Never. We advertised in all the papers; we employed detectives, inquired privately, but all to no result. The last person who saw Jeringham was Mrs. Larcher. He parted from her at the door of The Laurels, and vanished into the night. It still hides him."

"What do you conclude from that, sir?" asked Claude, after a pause.

"I can only conclude one thing," replied Hilliston, with great deliberation, "that your father, suspicious of Jeringham, returned on that night from London, and saw the parting. The result is not difficult to foresee. It is my own opinion that there were words between the men, possibly a struggle, and that the matter ended in the murder of your father by Jeringham. Hence the discovery of the body thrown into the river, hence the flight of the murderer."

"Was this the generally received opinion at the time?"

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"Yes. I can safely say that it was believed Jeringham was guilty, and had fled to escape the consequences of his crime."

"In that case, how was it that Mrs. Larcher was arrested?" asked Tait skeptically.

"You cannot have read the case carefully, to ask me that," replied Hilliston sharply. "She was arrested on the evidence of the dagger. Without doubt the crime was committed with the dagger, and as she had worn it, the inference was drawn that she was the guilty person. But she was acquitted, and left the court—as the saying is—without a stain on her character."

"Nevertheless she died, Mr. Hilliston."

"Shame killed her," said the lawyer sadly. "She was a foolish woman in many ways,—your pardon, Claude, for so speaking,—but she was not the woman to commit so foul a crime. Indeed, I believe she was fondly attached to her husband till Jeringham came between them."

"Ah!" interposed Tait composedly, "that is John Parver's view."

"John Parver?" repeated Hilliston, with well-bred surprise. "I do not know that name in connection with the case."

"Nor do we know the name of Mrs. Bezel," said Claude quickly.

Hilliston started, and looked at Claude as though he would read his very soul. The inscrutability of the young man's countenance baffled him, and he turned off the remark with a dry laugh.

"With Mrs. Bezel we will deal hereafter," he said shortly; "but who is this John Parver!"

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"He is the author of a book called 'A Whim of Fate.'"

"A novel?"

"Yes. A novel which embodies the whole of this case."

"That is strange," said Hilliston quietly, "but no doubt the author has come across the details

in some old provincial journal, and made use of them. The Larcher affair caused a great deal of talk at the time, but it is certainly remarkable that a novelist should have made use of it for fictional purposes after the lapse of so many years. I must read the book. Just note the name of it here, Mr. Tait, if you please."

Tait did so, and Hilliston continued:

"Is my character in the book?"

"I think so. Under the name of Michael Dene!"

"I trust the author has been flattering to me. By the way, who does he say committed the crime?"

"Michael Dene."

Hilliston went gray on the instant, as though a sudden blow had been struck at his heart. Two pairs of keen eyes were fixed on his face with some surprise, and uneasy at the scrutiny, he strove to recover his composure.

"Upon my word," he said, with quivering lips, "I am infinitely obliged to John Parver for describing me as a murderer. And what motive does he ascribe to me, or rather to Michael Dene, for the committal of the crime?"

"Love for the wife," said Tait, smiling.

"Eh! That is rather the rôle of Jeringham, I should say," replied Hilliston, the color coming back to lips and cheek. "I must read this novel, and if possible discover the identity of the author."

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"Oh, we will do that!"

"Claude!" cried the lawyer, in astonishment.

"I and Tait. We intend to follow out this case to the end."

"It is useless! Five-and-twenty years have elapsed."

"Nevertheless, I am determined to hunt down the murderer of my father," said Claude decisively. "Besides, we have two eye-witnesses to the tragedy. Yourself and Mrs. Bezel."

"Ah! Mrs. Bezel! I forgot her. Certainly, I will do all in my power to help you, Claude. Your father was my dearest friend, and I shall only be too glad to avenge his fate. But if I could not do it at the moment, how can I hope to do so now—after so long a period has elapsed?"

"Leave that to us, sir. Tait and I will attend to the active part of the business. All we ask you to do is to give us such information as lies in your power."

"I will do that with pleasure," said Hilliston, who by this time was thoroughly master of himself. "What is it you wish to know?"

"We wish to know all about Mrs. Bezel. Who is she? What has she to do with the case? Why is not her name mentioned in these pages?"

"For answers to these questions you had better apply to the lady herself. You have her address. Why not call on her?"

"I intend to do so to-morrow."

The old man rose from his seat, and took a turn up and down the room. Then he paused beside Claude, and laid a trembling hand on the young man's shoulder.

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"I have been a good friend to you, Claude."

"You have been my second father—my real father," said Larcher gently. "I shall never forget your kindness. I would return it if I could."

"Then do so, by letting sleeping dogs lie."

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Hilliston?" asked the other, with a subtle change in his tone.

"Abandon this case. Do not call on Mrs. Bezel. You can do no good by reopening the affair. It was a mystery years ago, it is a mystery still; it will remain a mystery till the end of time."

"Not if I can help it. I am sorry to disoblige you, sir, but my mind is made up. I am determined to find out the truth."

Hilliston sighed, passed his hand across his forehead, and returned to his seat, hopeless and baffled. He was sufficiently acquainted with Claude's character to know that he was not easily turned from his purpose, and that his resolution to solve the mystery would be resolutely carried out. Yet he made one more attempt to bend the young man to his will.

"If you are wise you will not call on Mrs. Bezel."

"Why not, sir?"

"It will give you great pain."

"All my pain is past," replied Claude quickly. "I can suffer no more than I did when reading these papers. I must call on Mrs. Bezel; I must know the truth, and," added he significantly, "I have your promise to assist me."

"I will do all in my power," answered Hilliston wearily, "but you do not know what are you doing. I am older and more experienced than you, and I give you my best advice. Do not see Mrs. Bezel, and leave the Larcher affair alone." [pg 60]

The result of this well-meant advice was that Claude called the next morning on Mrs. Bezel.

CHAPTER VIII.

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BOTH SIDES OF THE QUESTION.

MAN'S life has frequently been compared to a river. In childhood it is a trickling thread, in youth a stream, in manhood a majestic river, and finally in old age is swallowed up in the ocean of death. A very pretty parable, but somewhat stale. It is time that life was indicated by a new metaphor. Let us therefore compare the life of man to the ocean itself. Like the ocean life has its calms and storms, its sullen rages, its caressing moments; and like the ocean—for this is the main point of the illustration—it has its profound depths, containing a hundred secrets unknown to the outer world. Francis Hilliston was like the ocean: all knew the surface, few were acquainted with the depths below.

A man who leads a double life need never feel dull. He may be nervous, anxious, fearful lest his secret should be discovered, but the constant vigilance required to hide it preserves him from the curse of ennui. He ever keeps the best side of his nature uppermost; his smiles are for the world, his brow is smoothed to lull suspicion. But to continue the simile of the ocean: in the depths lie many terrible things which never come to the surface; things which he scarcely dare admit even to himself. Francis Hilliston was one of these men.

Everyone knew Hilliston of Lincoln's Inn Fields, or thought they did, which is quite a different thing. He was widely respected in the profession; he was popular in society; hand and glove with prominent and wealthy personages. His house at Kensington Gore was richly furnished; his wife was handsome and fashionable; he gave splendid entertainments, at which none was more jocund than the host himself; he was, outwardly, all that was prosperous and popular. In his professional capacity he was the repository of a thousand secrets, but of all these none was more terrible than the one locked up in his own breast. [pg 62]

Long years of training, constant necessity, had taught him how to control his emotions, to turn his face into a mask of inscrutability; yet he succeeded ill at times, as witness his interview with the two young men. Not all his powers of self-repression could keep his face from turning gray; nor prevent the perspiration beading his brow; nor steady his voice to well-bred indifference. Usually he succeeded in masking his emotion; this time he had failed, and, worst of all, he knew that he had failed.

It was not Claude that he feared, for the young man was not of a suspicious nature; and even had he been so, would certainly have scoffed at the idea of attributing any evil to the one who had been to him a father. Tait, silent, observant, and cynical, was the person to be dreaded. Accustomed by his profession to read faces, Hilliston had seen that the quiet little man was possessed of one of those inquisitive penetrative natures, which suspect all men, and from a look, a gesture, a pause, can draw evidence to support any suspicion they may entertain.

Certainly Tait had no reason to distrust Hilliston when he entered the room, but during the interview he appeared dissatisfied with the lawyer's manner. That Hilliston should attempt to dissuade Claude from prosecuting a search for his father's murderer seemed strange; but that he should betray such marked agitation at the idea of such searching taking place was stranger still. Altogether Tait left the office in a very dissatisfied state of mind. Hilliston had sufficient penetration to note this, and when left alone was at his wit's end how to baffle the unwarrantable curiosity of this intruder.

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"I don't mind Claude," he said, pacing up and down the room, "he has not sufficient brain power to find out anything. I do not want him to know. But this Tait is dangerous. He is one of those dogged creatures, who puts his nose to the scent, and never leaves the trail till the prey is captured. It is with him I have to deal, not with Claude."

His agitation almost mastered him, and he hurriedly took a small bottle from a drawer in his desk. Dropping the contents of this into a glass of water, he drank off the draught, and in a short space of time regained his composure, in some measure. Then he sat down to think, and plot, and plan how to baffle the vigilance of Tait.

"That infernal woman has done it all," he muttered savagely; "she has lighted the fire. Let us see how she will put it out. But she cannot put it out," he added, striking his forehead with his clenched fist; "it will blaze and burn. I shall burn with it unless——"

There was a strange smile on his lips, as an idea entered his mind, and he glanced quickly at his watch.

"Four o'clock. Claude can't possibly call on Margaret to-day, so I have yet time to prepare her for his visit. I must silence her at any cost. She must hold her tongue or ruin us both. Great Heavens! to think that she should break out like this after five-and-twenty years. It is enough to drive me mad."

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By this time he had put on his gloves, and stretched his hand toward his hat, which stood on a side table. A glance in the glass showed him how old and gray he looked, and the sight was so unexpected that he started in dismay.

"Bah! I look as though I were going to fail," he said to himself, "but I must not fail. I dare not fail. At sixty, rich, honored, respected, I am not going to fall from the pedestal I have reached. I shall reassure Claude. I shall baffle Tait. I shall silence Margaret. The first move in the game is mine."

Calm, dignified, easy, he left his office, and stepped into the brougham waiting at the door. To judge by appearance, one would have thought him the most respectable and upright man in London. No one knew what lurked behind that benevolent expression. His mask had fallen for the moment when Tait was present; now it was on again, and he went forth to deceive the world. Yet he had an uneasy consciousness that one man at least guessed his real character.

"Never mind," he thought, as the footman closed the door of the brougham, "it will be strange if, with my age and experience and reputation and money, I cannot baffle him."

He did not go direct home, as it was yet early, and he had one or two things to do in connection with his new task. First he drove to Tait's chambers, and ascertained from the porter that the two young men were within.

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"Never mind sending up my name, I won't disturb them," he said, when the porter requested his card. "I only wished to speak to Mr. Tait about a box at the theater."

"If it is the Lyceum you mean, sir, I have just got two stalls for Mr. Tait."

"Ah! I may see them there," replied Hilliston negligently; and as he drove away reflected: "Good! They have not yet been to Hampstead; nor do they intend to go to-night. Mr. Tait has yet to learn the value of time."

Driving through Piccadilly he stopped at a bookshop, and with some difficulty, for the demand was large, obtained a copy of "A Whim of Fate." He began to read it in the brougham, and skimmed its pages so rapidly that by the time he reached Kensington Gore he had nearly

finished the first volume. He did not recognize himself in the character of Michael Dene, and became more convinced than ever that the coincidence of the Larcher affair forming the plot of a novel, was due to the author's reading the case in some old provincial newspaper. On every page it betrayed that, to him, the story was hearsay.

Fortunately Mrs. Hilliston was driving in the Park, so the lawyer shut himself up in his library, and went on reading the story. He did not see his wife till dinner, which took place at eight o'clock, and then descended in his ordinary clothes, looking ill and pale. Something he had read in the novel had startled him more than he cared to confess—even to himself.

"You must excuse my dress, Louise," he said, on taking his seat, "but I have been so engrossed with a novel that I did not hear the dressing bell."

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"It has not had a pleasant effect on you," replied his wife, smiling; "you do not look at all well."

"I am not well," said Hilliston, who merely trifled with his food; "you must excuse me going with you to the Lamberts' to-night, as I think I shall call in and see my doctor."

"Are you so bad as all that?" questioned Mrs. Hilliston anxiously. "Why not send for Dr. Bland?"

"I prefer going to see him, Louise. You will probably not be back till three in the morning, so I will go to bed immediately on my return. Have no fear, my dear, it is only a trifling indisposition."

After these plain statements it was rather strange that Hilliston, in place of driving to Dr. Bland's, who lived in Hill Street, should direct the cab, which he picked up by the Park railings, to drive to Hampstead.

CHAPTER IX.

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MRS. BEZEL.

ONE cannot always judge by appearances either as regards human beings or houses. Mr. Hilliston was one excellent illustration of this rule; Clarence Cottage was another. It was in a narrow and crooked lane trending downward to the right, at the summit of Fitzjohn's Avenue; an unpretentious two-story building, divided from the public thoroughfare by a well-cultivated garden. Therein grew thyme and lavender, marigolds and pansies; for the owner of the cottage loved those homely flowers, and daily gazed at them from the bow-window wherein her couch was placed.

Mrs. Bezel never walked in her garden, for the all-sufficient reason that she was a helpless paralytic, and had not used her limbs for over ten years. Still a moderately young woman of forty-five, she possessed the remains of great beauty, ravaged by years of anxiety and mental trouble. Those passing along the lane usually saw her pale face at the window, and pitied the sufferings written in every line; sufferings which were apparent even to a casual glance. Noting the homely garden, the mean-looking dwelling, the anxious expression of the invalid, they deemed her to be some poor sickly creature, the scapegoat of nature and the world, who had sought this secluded spot in order to hide her troubles. This view was not entirely correct.

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She was in ill-health, it is true; she dwelt in a small house certainly; and the anxious expression was seldom absent from her face. But she was in easy circumstances, untroubled by pecuniary worries, and the interior of the cottage was furnished with a magnificence more suggestive of Park Lane than of Hampstead. The outward aspect of the house, like that of Mr. Hilliston, was a lie.

Her sitting room resembled the boudoir of some Mayfair beauty. The curtains were of silk, the carpet velvet pile, the walls were adorned with costly pictures, and every corner of the small apartment was filled with sumptuous furniture. All that art could contribute, all that affection could suggest, were confined in the tiny space, and had Mrs. Bezel possessed the mines of Golconda she could not have been more luxuriously lodged. The house was a gem of its kind, perfect and splendid.

Mrs. Bezel took little interest in these material comforts. Her life was passed between a couch in the bow-window, a well-cushioned chair by the fire, and a downy bed in the next room.

She had little appetite and did not enjoy her food; mental anxiety prevented her interesting herself in the splendors around her; and the only pleasure she took was her dreary journey in a Bath-chair when the weather permitted. Then, as she inhaled the fresh breeze blowing across the Heath, she gazed with longing eyes at London, almost hidden under its foggy veil, far below, and always returned with reluctance to the familiar splendors of her narrow dwelling. Fortune had given her much, but by way of compensation had deprived her of the two things she most desired—of health and of love.

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Even on this warm June evening a fire burned in the grate, for Mrs. Bezel was a chilly creature, who shrunk at the least breath of wind. According to custom, she had left the window couch at seven o'clock, and had taken her simple meal while seated in her large chair to the right of the fireplace. After dinner she took up a novel which was placed on a small table at her elbow, and tried to read; but her attention was not fixed on the book, and gradually it fell from her hands, while she gazed idly at the fire.

What she saw therein Heaven only knows. We all have our moments of retrospection, and can picture the past in the burning coals. Some even picture the future, but there was none for this woman. She was old, weary, diseased, worn-out, and therefore saw in the fire only the shadows of past years. Faces looked out of the flaming valleys, scenes arranged themselves in the red confusion; but among them all there was always one face, one scene, which never vanished as did the others. This special face, this particular scene, were fixed, immovable, cruel, and insistent.

The chime of the clock striking half-past nine roused her from her reverie, and she again addressed herself to the novel with a sigh. Tortured by her own thoughts, Mrs. Bezel was not accustomed to retire before midnight, and there were nearly three hours to be got through before that time. Her life was as dreary, and weary, and heart-breaking as that of Mariana in the Moated Grange.

The tread of a firm footfall in the distance roused her attention, and she looked expectantly toward the door, which faced her chair. The newcomer passed up the narrow garden path, entered the house, and, after a pause in the hall, presented himself in the sitting room. Mrs. Bezel knew who it was before the door opened; for standing on the threshold was the man with the face she had lately pictured amid the burning coals. Francis Hilliston and the woman who called herself Mrs. Bezel looked steadily at one another, but no sign of welcome passed between them. He was the first to break the awkward silence.

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"How are you this evening, Margaret?" he asked, advancing toward her; "better, I hope. There is more color in your cheeks, more brightness in your eyes."

"I am the same as ever," she replied coldly, while he drew a chair close to the fire, and stretched out his hands to the blaze. "Why have you come here at this hour?"

"To see you."

"No doubt! But with what purpose?"

Hilliston pinched his nether lip between finger and thumb, frowning the while at the fire. Whatever had been, there was now no love between this woman and himself. But on no occasion had he noted so hostile a tone in her voice. He was aware that a duel of words and brains was about to ensue, and, knowing his antagonist, he took the button off his foil. There was no need for fine speaking or veiled hints in this conversation. It was advisable that all should be plain and straightforward, for they knew each other too well to wear their masks when alone. Under these circumstances he spoke the truth.

"I think you can guess my errand," he said suavely. "It concerns the letter you wrote to Claude Larcher."

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"I thought as much! And what more have you to say in connection with that affair?"

"I have merely to inform you that the man whom you desire to see is in London, and will no doubt answer your kind invitation in person."

Mrs. Bezel stretched out her hand and selected a letter from the little pile on her table.

"If you will look at that," she said coldly, "you will see that Claude intends to call on me at three o'clock to-morrow."

Taking the letter in silence, Hilliston turned frightfully pale, and the perspiration stood in large beads on his forehead. He expected some such appointment to be made, yet the evidence in his hand startled him all the same. The promptitude of action spoke volumes to one of his acute perceptions. To defend his good name would require all his skill and experience, for he had to do

with men of action, who acted as quickly as they thought. The duel would be more equal than he had thought.

"Are you still determined to tell all," he said in a low tone, crushing the paper up in his hand.

"Yes."

The monosyllable was uttered in so icy a manner that Hilliston lost his temper completely. Before this woman there was no need for him to retain his smiling mask, and in a frenzy of rage he hurried into rapid speech, frantic and unconsidered.

"Ah, you would ruin me!" he cried, springing to his feet; "you would drag up those follies of '66, and make London too hot to hold me! Have I not implored, threatened, beseeched, commanded—done everything in my power to make you hold your peace? Miserable woman, would you drag the man you love down to——"

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"The man I loved you mean," responded Mrs. Bezel, in nowise moved by this torrent of abuse. "Pray do not be theatrical, Francis. You know me well enough to be aware that when my mind is made up I am not easily moved. A man of your brains," she added scornfully, "should know that loss of temper is but the prelude to defeat."

Recognizing the truth of this remark, Hilliston resumed his seat, and subdued his anger. Only the look of hatred in his eyes betrayed his real feelings; otherwise he was calm, suave, and self-controlled.

"Have you weighed the cost of your action?" he demanded quietly.

"Yes. It means ruin to us both. But the loss is yours, not mine. Helpless and deserted, life has no further charms for me, but you, Mr. Hilliston, doubtless feel differently."

"Margaret," he said entreatingly, "why do you speak like this? What harm have I done you that——"

"What harm!" she interrupted fiercely. "Have you not ruined me, have you not deserted me, have you not robbed me of all that I loved? My life has been one long agony, and you are to blame for it all. Not a word," she continued imperiously. "I shall speak. I insist upon your knowing the truth!"

"Go on," he said sullenly; "I listen."

"I loved you once, Francis. I loved you to my own cost. For your sake I lost everything—position, home, respect, and love. And you—what did you do?"

Hilliston looked round the room, and shrugged his shoulders. Look and gesture were so eloquent that she commented on them at once.

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"Do you think I valued this splendor? I know well enough that you gave me all material comforts. But I wanted more than this. I wanted love."

"You had it."

"Aye! I had the passion such as you call love. Did it endure? You know well that it did not. So long as I was healthy and handsome and bright your attentions continued, but when I was reduced to this state, ten years ago, what did you do? Left me to marry another woman."

"It was not my fault," he muttered uneasily; "my affairs were involved, and, as my wife had money, I was forced to marry her."

"And you did marry her, and no doubt neglect her as you do me. Is Mrs. Hilliston any happier in her splendid house at Kensington Gore than I in this miserable cottage? I think not. I waited and waited, hoping your love would return. It did not; so I took my own course—revenge!"

"And so wrote to Claude Larcher!"

"Yes. Listen to me. I wrote the first letter on the impulse of the moment. I had been reading a book called 'A Whim of Fate,' which contained——"

"I know! I know! I read it myself this evening."

"Then you know that someone else is possessed of your secret. Who is John Parver?"

"I don't know. I intend to find out. Meanwhile I am waiting to hear the conclusion of your story."

Mrs. Bezel drew a long breath, and continued:

"The book, which contained an account of the tragedy at Horrison, brought the fact so visibly before me that I wrote on the impulse telling you that I wished to see Claude, and reveal all. You came and implored and threatened. Then my impulse became a fixed determination. I saw how I could punish you for your neglect, and so persisted in my scheme. I wrote to Claude, and he is coming here to-morrow."

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"What do you intend to tell him?"

"So much of the death of his father as I know."

"You must not—you dare not," said Hilliston, with dry lips. "It means ruin!"

"To you, not to me."

"Impossible," he said curtly. "Our relations are too close for one to fall without the other."

"So you think," rejoined Mrs. Bezel coolly; "but I know how to protect myself. And of one thing you may be assured, I will say nothing against you. All I intend to do is to tell him of his father's death."

"He knows it already."

"What?"

"Yes! Did you think I was not going to be beforehand with you," sneered Hilliston triumphantly. "I guessed your intention when you wrote me that letter, and when Claude arrived in town I saw him before he could call here. I did not intend to tell him of the matter till your action forced me to do so. He has read all the papers in connection with his father's death, and intends to hunt down the murderer. Now, do you see what you have done?"

Apparently the brutal plainness of this speech strongly affected Mrs. Bezel. It seemed as though she had not comprehended till that moment what might be the result of her actions. Now an abyss opened at her feet, and she felt a qualm of fear.

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"Nevertheless, I intend to go on now that I have begun," she said gloomily. "I will answer any questions Claude may ask me."

"You will put him in possession of a clew."

"It is not improbable; but, as I said, life has no charms for me."

"You don't think of my sufferings," said Hilliston bitterly, rising to his feet.

"Did you think of mine during all these lonely years?" she retorted, with a sneer. "I shall punish you, as you punished me. There is such a thing as justice in this world."

"Well, I warn you that I shall protect myself."

"That is your lookout. But I will show you this mercy, as I said before. That nothing will be told by me of your connection with this affair. As to myself, I will act as I think best."

"You will tell him who you are?"

"Yes; I will tell him my real name."

"Then I am lost!"

"Surely not," she rejoined scornfully. "Francis Hilliston is old enough in villainy and experience to protect himself against a mere boy."

"It is not Claude I fear, but his friend, Spenser Tait. He is the dangerous person. But enough

of this," added Hilliston, striking the table imperiously. "I forbid you to indulge in these follies. You know I have a means whereby to compel your obedience."

"It is your possession of that means that has turned me against you," she retorted dauntlessly. "If you give me back my——"

"Margaret! Not a word more! Let things remain as they are."

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"I have said what I intend to do."

Hilliston ground his teeth. He knew that nothing he could say or do would shake the determination of this woman. He had already experienced her resolute will, and not even the means of which he spoke would shake her immovability. There was nothing more but to retire and protect himself as best he could. At all events, she promised to remain neutral so far as he was concerned. That was something gained. Before leaving the house, however, he made one final effort to force her to his will.

"I will not give you any more money."

"I don't care, Francis. This cottage and its contents are settled on me. A sale of this furniture will produce sufficient money to last my life. I can't live long now."

"I will deny all your statements."

"Do so!"

"I will have you declared insane and shut up in an asylum."

Mrs. Bezel laughed scornfully, and pointed toward the door.

"If that is all you have to say you had better go," she said jeeringly. "You know well enough that you cannot harm me without jeopardizing your own position."

They looked at one another fiercely, each trying to outstare the other. Hilliston's eyes were the first to fall, and he hastily turned toward the door.

"So be it," he said, with his hand on the knob; "you want war. You shall have it. See Claude, tell him all. I can defend myself."

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On leaving the house a few minutes later, he paused irresolutely by the gate and looked back.

"If I could only find the paper," he muttered, "she could do nothing. As it is——"

He made a gesture of despair and plunged into the darkness.

CHAPTER X.

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A FEW FACTS CONNECTED WITH THE CASE.

WHEN the two young men left Lincoln's Inn Fields after the momentous interview with Hilliston, they walked on in silence for some distance, each busied with his own thoughts. Like most solitaries, Tait had a habit of speaking aloud, and, unmindful of the presence of Claude, he stopped short at the gate of the New Law Courts to give vent to his feelings.

"It is decidedly suspicious," he said in a low tone, "and quite inexplicable."

"What are you talking about?" asked Claude irritably, whereupon Tait became aware that he was not alone, but nevertheless showed no disposition to balk the question.

"I was thinking of Mr. Hilliston," he returned quietly. "I am not at all satisfied with his conduct. He is hostile to us, Claude."

"Hostile? Impossible! He is doing all in his power to help us."

"So it appears," answered Tait dryly. "Nevertheless I think that he intends to thwart us in our plans—if he can."

"Now you are talking nonsense," said Claude, as they resumed their walk. "Why, he first brought the case under my notice."

"And why? Because he wanted to be beforehand with Mrs. Bezel. If he had not told she would have done so, and naturally enough he wished to be first in the field."

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"But I can't think ill of him," protested Larcher. "He has been a second father to me."

"No doubt! There is such a thing as remorse."

"Remorse? You are mad!"

"Not at all. I am suspicious. We will discuss Mr. Hilliston later on, when I will give you my reasons for speaking thus. Meanwhile he has decided to play a game against us!"

"Nonsense! He has no motive."

"Pardon me. I think he has, but what it is I am unable to say—as yet. However, he will make two moves in the game within the next twenty-four hours."

"Indeed," said Claude ironically, "perhaps you can tell me what those two moves will be."

"Certainly," answered Tait serenely. "As to the first, he will call at my rooms to find out if we have gone to see Mrs. Bezel to-night, and——"

"Why at your rooms?"

"Because he thinks you are staying with me. And, moreover, knowing that we are acting together, he knows your movements will coincide with mine."

"Ah! And the second move?"

"He will write you a letter asking you to stay with him at Kensington Gore."

"I don't see what there is suspicious about that," said Claude petulantly.

"I know you don't. But it is my belief that he is afraid of your investigations in this case, and wishes to keep you under his eye."

"But good Heavens, man! he advised me to pursue the matter."

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"On the contrary, he advised you to let sleeping dogs lie."

"So he did," cried Claude, with a sudden recollection of the interview. "But why? What harm can my investigations do to him?"

"Ah! That is a difficult question to answer," said Tait reflectingly. "To my mind they will show that Hilliston was not the friend of your father he pretended to be."

"But according to those papers he acted like a friend throughout."

"Yes, according to those papers."

Larcher faced round suddenly, struck by the significance of the remark. He was a clever young man, but could not see clearly before him, and honest himself, was far from suspecting dishonesty in others. Instead of agreeing with Tait in his estimate of Hilliston, he vehemently defended the lawyer.

"You must not speak like that, Tait," he said angrily. "Mr. Hilliston is an honest man, and has been like a father to me. I owe all to him."

"Perhaps you do," retorted Tait significantly. "However, we need not quarrel over the matter. I am content to wait, and will bet you five pounds that the inquiry is made to-night, and the letter

is sent to-morrow."

Larcher did not accept the bet thus confidently offered, but walked on stiffly with his head in the air. He was seriously annoyed with Tait for daring to cast an imputation on the character of a man to whom he owed all. Never could he bring himself to believe that Hilliston intended him evil, and deemed that the lawyer, despite his manifest reluctance, would help him by all the means in his power to discover the assassin.

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Nevertheless, Tait proved to be in the right. As the two young men passed down the stairs on their way to the theater—whence Tait insisted on taking Claude with a view of distracting his mind—they were met by the porter.

"Beg pardon, sir," addressing himself to Tait, "but a gentleman called some time ago and asked for you and Mr. Larcher."

"Who was he? Why did you not show him up?"

"He would not give his name, sir, and did not wish to come up. He only asked if you had a box for the theater, and when I said you had stalls, drove off."

"Ah! Can you describe his appearance?"

"Not very tall, sir. Clean shaven, with white hair and a red face. Looked like a country gentleman, sir."

"Thank you! that will do," replied Tait quietly, and left the house with Claude.

For a few minutes he enjoyed his companion's astonishment at this proof of Hilliston's double-dealing, and it was not till they were in the cab that he spoke.

"Well," he said, smiling, "was I not right when I said that he would make the first move?"

"You are right so far," muttered Claude, who looked ill at ease, "but I cannot bring myself to suspect my guardian."

"You want another proof, perhaps. Well, we will wait for your invitation to Kensington Gore."

Claude shook his head, and seemed so indisposed to talk that Tait judged it wise to humor his silence. The young man's thoughts were anything but pleasant. He had been accustomed to look up to Hilliston as the model of an English gentleman, honest, honorable, upright, and noble. If, then, this suspicion of Tait's should prove correct,—and the last act of Hilliston certainly gave color to it,—where was he to find honest and honorable men? If Hilliston proved false, then Claude felt he could no longer trust the human race. Still he fought against the supposition, and secretly hoped that the second prophecy of his friend would not be fulfilled.

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Alas, for his hopes! At eleven the next morning, while they were discussing the situation, a letter was delivered to Claude by special messenger. It proved to be from Hilliston, and contained a warm invitation for Larcher to take up his abode at the Kensington Gore house. "As you may only be in London for a short period, my dear Claude," wrote his guardian, "my wife and I must see as much of you as possible." With a bitter smile Claude tossed the letter across to Tait.

"You see I was right," said the latter, for the second time, after skimming the note. "Mr. Hilliston is playing a double game. He wishes to keep you under his eye, thinking that, as you trust him, you will keep him informed as to your doings, so that being forewarned he may be forearmed."

"Do you really think he is my enemy, Tait?"

"I am really not prepared to say," replied the little man, with some hesitation. "His behavior of yesterday struck me as suspicious. He seemed unnecessarily agitated, and moreover urged you not to see Mrs. Bezel. Perhaps he thinks she will tell you too much. Taking all these facts into consideration I cannot help thinking that Hilliston is asking you to his house for some motive in connection with our search."

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"But he showed me the papers."

"I know that, but as I told you yesterday it was Hobson's choice with him. If he hadn't imparted the information, Mrs. Bezel would have done so. Of two evils he chose the least, and by showing you the papers proved to all outward appearance that he was your firm friend. Should you bring any charge against him, he will meet it by the very argument you have just made use

of."

"Good Heavens!" groaned Claude, in despair, "is everybody as treacherous as you think him to be."

"A good number of people are," replied Tait suavely. "A long residence in London does not strengthen one's belief in human nature. It is a city of wild beasts,—of wolves and foxes,—who rend and betray for the gaining of their own ends. If Hilliston is what I believe him to be, we must do our best to baffle him; and so you must continue to be his friend."

"How can I, if he wishes to betray me?"

"Ah, you are so unsophisticated, Claude," said the hardened man of the world; "you betray your feelings too plainly. In this city it is worse than madness to wear your heart on your sleeve. If you are convinced that Hilliston bears you ill——"

"I am not convinced. I can't believe any man would be so base."

"Ah, bah, that is a want of experience," retorted Tait, raising his eyebrows; "I'll pick you out a dozen of my decent friends who are as base or baser than I believe them to be. Respectability is all a question of concealment nowadays, and it must be confessed that your guardian wears his mask very prettily."

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"But do you think he is——"

"Never mind what I think," interrupted Tait impatiently. "Hilliston may turn out to be an angel, after all. But his conduct of yesterday and this morning appears to be suspicious, and in dealing with the matters we have in hand it is as well to be careful. Keep your faith in Hilliston if it assists you to continue the friendship. He must suspect nothing."

"Do you then wish me to accept this invitation?"

"No. Why go into the lion's den? Write and thank him and—decline."

"I have no excuse."

"Indeed! Then I will provide you with one. You are engaged to stay with me at Thorston for a month. By the end of that time you will know sufficient of Hilliston to decide for yourself as to the wisdom of accepting or declining his invitation."

"But if we go to Thorston we cannot prosecute our inquiries."

"Yes, we can. I tell you that book, which contains the story of your father's murder, also contains a description of Thorston. I recognize every scene."

"Well?"

"Well," repeated Tait sharply, "can't you see? The author of that book must either live at Thorston or have stayed a few months there. Else he could not have described the village so accurately. We must make inquiries about him there, and should we be fortunate enough to discover him, we must extract his secret."

"What secret?"

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"Upon my word, Claude, you are either stupid or cunning. Why, find out where he got his material from. That may put us on the right track. Now, write to Hilliston, and then go up to Hampstead and find out what Mrs. Bezel has to say."

"Won't you come, too?" said Claude, going to the writing desk.

"No. I have my own business to attend to."

"Is it connected with our enterprise?"

"I should think so. It is my intention to call on the firm who published 'A Whim of Fate,' and find out all I can concerning the author. When you return from Mrs. Bezel we will compare notes, and on what information we obtain will depend our future movements."

CHAPTER XI.

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A STARTLING DISCOVERY.

IN one of his novels Balzac makes the pertinent remark that "It is impossible for man to understand the heart of woman, seeing that her Creator himself does not understand it." These are not the precise words, but the sentiment is the same. And who, indeed, can understand a woman's heart; who can aver that he has a complete comprehension of her character? Very young men lay claim to such knowledge, but as they grow older, and the vanity of youth gives way to the modesty begotten by experience, they no longer pretend to such omniscience, and humbly admit their inability to solve the riddle of femininity. Had the Sphinx proposed such an enigma to Œdipus he would not have been able to guess it, and so, meeting the fate of other victims, would have deprived Thebes of a king and Sophocles of a tragedy.

Yet, if we bear in mind that women work rather from impulse than from motive, we may arrive at some knowledge of the organ in question. If a woman is impulsive, and most women are, she acts directly on those impulses; and so startles men by paradoxical actions. As a rule, the male intellect has logical reasons wherefrom it deduces motives upon which to act. Not so with women. They obey the impulse of the moment, reckless of the consequence to themselves or to anyone else. Consequently, it is impossible to foretell how a woman will act in a given circumstance, but it may be asserted that she will obey the latest thought in her mind. Even from this point of view, the feminine mind is still a riddle; but one which is more capable of explanation.

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For example, Mrs. Bezel read "A Whim of Fate," and thus, after five-and-twenty years, the Horriston tragedy was freshly impressed on her brain. Seized with remorse, terrified by the memory of the crime, she, acting on the impulse, wrote to Hilliston stating that she intended to see Claude Larcher and reveal all. The dismay of the lawyer at this mad proposal, and his steady opposition thereto, turned what was originally a mere whim into a fixed idea. She saw a way of punishing the man for the withdrawal of his love ten years before, when she lost her beauty and became paralyzed. Delighted at learning that she had still some power to wound him, she persisted in her project, and so wrote the letter to Larcher, which he received the day after his arrival in London.

To baffle Hilliston, and prevent him from intercepting the letter, she was obliged to use all her wits, and so hit on the idea of learning the name of the young man's club. How she managed to obtain it is best known to herself; but Hilliston, never dreaming of this pertinacity, was unable to thwart her schemes, and, beyond writing to Claude, telling him to call, could do nothing. Had he guessed that she would address her invitation to the club, he might have called and obtained it in the character of Larcher's guardian; but, knowing her helpless condition, the thought that it might be there never entered his mind. So the letter arrived, was duly answered, and Claude was coming to-day at three o'clock to hear what Mrs. Bezel had to say.

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The visit, though due to her own action, was a source of considerable anxiety; for she was not at all certain of what she would say. It was impossible to tell all without inculpating Hilliston, and this, for reasons of her own, Mrs. Bezel was unwilling to do. All her talk of the previous night had been so much rodomontade to frighten the man she hated, but she was too well aware of her dependent position to think of doing him an injury. Her impulse had led her into deep water, as she knew instinctively.

She was a woman who had lived every moment of her life, but now, stretched on a bed of sickness, she missed her former triumphs and excitements. This visit promised a great deal of amusement, and the use of much diplomacy, therefore she was unwilling to abandon her plans. At the same time she determined to give the young man as little information as she possibly could. It would not be through her agency that the mask would be torn from Hilliston's face. She was resolved on that point.

Yet the matter, starting originally from an impulse, had now gone too far for her to draw back. Claude had seen the papers, and therefrom must have guessed that she desired to impart certain information with regard to the crime which had cost him a father. Mrs. Bezel therefore compromised the matter, and settled in her own mind to tell him half the truth, or, at all events, only sufficient to interest him without aiding him. Had she been a man, and had taken this decision, all would have gone well, but being a woman she reckoned without her impulse, and it betrayed her.

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Moreover, she had a revelation to make which would effectively tie Larcher's hands should he learn too much; but this she did not intend to make unless driven into a corner. She was in that corner before the interview was finished, though she little expected to get there. Hilliston, clever

as he was, could not understand her present actions; she did not understand them herself, else she would not have ventured to receive Claude Larcher.

He duly arrived at three o'clock, and Mrs. Bezel glanced approvingly at his stalwart figure and handsome face. Claude had one of those sympathetic, yet manly, natures, to which women are instinctively drawn by the law of sex, and Mrs. Bezel proved no exception to this rule. She was too thoroughly a woman not to relish masculine society, and, despite her perplexity, was glad she had sent the invitation, if only for the sake of talking to this splendid looking young man. There was another reason, which she revealed in a moment of impulse. But that was later on.

Meanwhile Claude, seated by her couch in the window, was wondering who she was, and why she had sought this interview. He was certainly aware that she had some information to impart concerning the fate of his parents, but as he had not seen her name in the papers containing the account of the case, he was at a loss to fix her identity. His doubts were soon set at rest. Mrs. Bezel was a more prominent actor in the Horrison tragedy than he had any idea of.

"You were doubtless astonished to get my letter," said Mrs. Bezel, when the first greetings were over, "especially as you do not remember your parents, and my name is also unknown to you."

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"Were you a friend of my parents, madam?" asked Claude, too anxious for information to reply directly to her remark.

"Yes. I—I knew them. That is, I lived at Horrison," stammered Mrs. Bezel, passing a handkerchief across her dry lips.

"You lived at Horrison? At the time of the murder?"

Mrs. Bezel nodded; she was not yet sufficiently self-controlled for speech.

"In that case," continued Claude eagerly, "you must know all the details of the crime."

"Only those that were reported in the papers."

"Still you must be acquainted with those concerned in the tragedy. With my father, with Jeringham, Denis Bantry, with Mona, his sister."

"Yes," said Mrs. Bezel calmly; "I knew them all."

"Have you any idea who committed the crime?"

"Not the slightest."

"But you must have some suspicions?"

"Oh, yes! But they may be wrong. I believe that Mr. Jeringham had something to do with it."

"Oh!" said Claude, remembering Hilliston's opinion, "some believe him to be guilty."

"I cannot say for certain," replied Mrs. Bezel, shaking her head. "The flight of Mr. Jeringham certainly showed that he had something to conceal."

"What kind of a man was Mr. Jeringham?"

"Tall and fair. Amiable as a rule, but liable to violent passions."

"Was he not in love with my mother before she married my father?"

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Mrs. Bezel turned away her head, and the color rose to her face. The nervous movement of her hands plucking at her dress showed how profoundly she was moved by this question.

"I believe so. But she—Mrs. Larcher loved her husband."

"Then why was my father jealous of Jeringham?" said Claude, who could not reconcile this statement with the evidence given at the trial.

"How should I know?" cried Mrs. Bezel, turning on him with sudden passion. "If George Larcher had not been so blinded by jealousy he would have seen that there was nothing between

them. Your mother knew Jeringham all his life; they were like brother and sister. It is true he wished to marry her, but when he saw that her heart was given to your father, he bowed to her decision. He came to Horrison as her friend, not as her lover."

"But he was constantly with her."

"Do you dare to speak thus of your mother, sir?"

"I—I cannot help doing so," stammered Claude, startled by the anger in her voice. "God knows I wish to revere the memory of my mother, but I cannot help seeing that she was morally responsible for the tragedy."

"She was not! She was not!" said Mrs. Bezel vehemently. "How dare you speak thus? Your father neglected her. He left her to the companionship of Mark Jeringham, while he indulged in his predilection for literary work. All day long he shut himself up in his study, and let his wife sit alone, and miserable. Was it any wonder, then, that she should turn to her old friend for consolation? There was nothing between them—nothing to which any Pharisee could have taken exception."

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"But surely my father was sufficiently sensible to see all this?"

"He saw nothing, or what he did see was distorted by his jealousy. The police, in their endeavors to fix the crime on your mother, took the same view of the relations between her and Jeringham. Oh, I know what you read in those papers shown to you by Mr. Hilliston!"

So surprised was Claude by this unexpected introduction of his guardian's name that he could not suppress a start.

"How do you know that Mr. Hilliston showed me the papers?"

Mrs. Bezel saw that she had said too much, but, unable to go back on her words, rapidly resolved to make that revelation which she had hitherto intended to keep as a last resource.

"Mr. Hilliston told me that he had done so."

"Do you know him?"

"Yes," said Mrs. Bezel, seizing her opportunity to lead up to the revelation. "I know him as the best and kindest of men. I know him as one who has been a good friend to you—orphan as you thought yourself."

"Orphan as I thought myself," muttered Claude, turning pale. "Is it not true—am I not an orphan?"

"No!"

"Great Heavens! What is this you tell me? My father—"

"Your father is dead. He was murdered, as you know."

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"Then my mother?"

Mrs. Bezel looked at the agonized face of the young man, and covered her own, with a quick indrawn breath.

"She lives!"

"My mother! She lives! Are you mad? She died in London shortly after her acquittal."

"So it was supposed, but it was not true. Could you expect that unhappy woman to face the scorn and contempt of the world after having been accused of her husband's murder? She did not die, save to the world. She fled from society and sought refuge here—here where she lies a helpless invalid."

"Mrs. Bezel!"

"I am not Mrs. Bezel. I am your mother."

CHAPTER XII.

[pg 94]

REVELATIONS.

It was only natural that a silence should ensue between these two so strangely brought together. Claude, seated pale and anguished in his chair, tried to collect his thoughts, and stared wildly at his mother. She, with her face buried in the cushions, sobbed bitterly. After the way in which her son had spoken, it was cruel that she should have been forced to make such a revelation at such a moment. He condemned, he reproached, her conduct in the past, and she again tasted the full bitterness of the cup which had been held to her lips twenty-five years before.

On his part Claude did not know what to say; he hardly knew what to think. Convinced by a perusal of the papers that his mother was morally guilty of his father's death, he was overwhelmed to find that she was still alive, and capable, for all he knew, of offering a defense for her share in the tragedy. After all, he had no right to judge her until he heard what she had to say. Blood is thicker than water, and she was his mother.

Now he saw the reason why Hilliston objected to his calling at Hampstead; why he advised him to let sleeping dogs lie. After so long a period it was worse than useless to bring mother and son together. Their thoughts, their aims, their lives, were entirely diverse, and only pain could be caused by such a meeting. Claude silently acknowledged the wisdom of Hilliston's judgment, but at the same time could hardly refrain from condemning him for having kept him so long in ignorance of the truth.

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Mrs. Bezel—as we must still continue to call her—was astonished at this long silence, but raised her head to cast a timid glance at Claude. His brow was gloomy, his lips were firmly set, and he looked anything but overjoyed at the revelation which she had made. Guessing his thoughts, the unhappy woman made a gesture of despair, and spoke in a low voice, broken by sobs.

"You, too, condemn me?"

"No, mother," he replied, and Mrs. Bezel winced as she heard him acknowledge the relationship; "I do not condemn you. I have heard one side of the question. I must now hear the other—from you."

"What more can I tell you than what you already know," she said, drying her eyes.

"I must know the reason why you let me think you dead all these years."

"It was by my own wish, and by the advice of Mr. Hilliston."

Claude bit his lip at the mention of this name, and cast a hasty glance round the splendidly furnished room. A frightful suspicion had entered his mind; but she was his mother, and he did not dare to give it utterance. His mother guessed his thoughts, and spared him the pain of speaking. With a womanly disregard for the truth she promptly lied concerning the relationship which her son suspected to exist between his guardian and herself.

"You need not look so black, Claude, and think ill of me. I am unfortunate, but not guilty. All that you see here is mine; purchased by my own money."

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"Your own money?" replied Claude, heaving a sigh of relief.

"Yes! Mr. Hilliston, who has been a good friend to me, saved sufficient out of my marriage settlement to enable me to furnish this cottage, and live comfortably. It is just as well," added she bitterly, "else I might have died on the streets."

"But why did you let Hilliston bring me up to think I was an orphan?"

"I did not wish to shadow your life. I did not wish you to change your name. I had to change mine, and retire from the world, but that was part of my punishment."

"Still if——"

"It was impossible, I tell you, Claude," interrupted his mother impatiently. "When you grew up you would have asked questions, and then I would have been forced to tell you all."

"Yet, in spite of your precautions, I do know all. If you took all this trouble to hide the truth, why reveal it to me now?"

Mrs. Bezel pointed to three books lying on an adjacent table. Claude quite understood what she meant.

"I see," he remarked, before she could speak, "you think that the author of that book knows about my father's murder."

"I am certain he does. But what he knows, or how he knows, I cannot say. Still, I am certain of one thing, that he tells the story from hearsay."

"What makes you think that?"

"It would take too long to tell you my reasons. It is sufficient to state that the fictitious case differs from the real case in several important particulars. For instance," she added, with a derisive smile, "the guilty person is said to be Michael Dene, and he is——"

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"Is drawn from Mr. Hilliston."

"How do you know that?" she asked, with a startled air.

Claude shrugged his shoulders. "I have eyes to read and brains to comprehend," he said quietly; "There is no doubt in my mind that the lawyer of the fiction is meant for the lawyer of real life. Otherwise, I think the writer drew on his imagination. It was necessary for him to end his story by fixing on one of the characters as a criminal; and owing to the exigencies of the plot, as developed by himself, he chose Michael Dene, otherwise Mr. Hilliston, as the murderer."

"But you don't think——"

"Oh, no! I don't think Mr. Hilliston is guilty. I read the trial very carefully, and moreover I do not see what motive he could have to commit the crime."

"The motive of Michael Dene is love for the murdered man's wife."

"In other words, the author assumes that Hilliston loved you," said Claude coolly; "but I have your assurance that such is not the case."

"You speak to me like that," cried Mrs. Bezel angrily; "to your mother?"

Larcher's expression did not change. He turned a trifle paler, and compressed his lips firmly, otherwise he gave no outward sign of his emotion. Knowing so much of the case as he did, he could not look on this woman in the light of a mother; she had indirectly contributed to his father's death; she had deserted him for twenty-five years; and now that she claimed his filial reverence, he was unwilling to yield it to her. Perhaps he was unjust and harsh to think this, but the natural tie between them was so weakened by time and ignorance that he could find no affection in his heart to bestow on her. To him she was a stranger—nothing more.

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"Let us understand each other," he said coldly. "That you are my mother is no doubt true, but I ask you if you have performed your maternal duties? You obliterated yourself from my life; you left me to be brought up by strangers; in all ways you only consulted your own desires. Can you then expect me to yield you that filial obedience which every mother has a right to expect from her son? If you——"

"Enough, sir," said Mrs. Bezel, white with anger, "say no more. I understand you only too well, and now regret that I sought this interview, which has resulted so ill. I hoped that you would be glad to find your mother still alive; that you would cherish her in her affliction. I see I was wrong. You are as cold and bitter as was your father."

"My father?"

"Yes. Do you think that all the wrong was on my side. Had I nothing to forgive him? Ah! I see by your face that you know to what I allude. It was your father and my husband who betrayed me for Mona Bantry."

"You have no proof of that," said Claude, in a low voice.

"I have every proof. The girl told me with her own lips. I returned from that ball at three o'clock in the morning, and Mr. Jeringham left me at the door. I entered the house alone and proceeded to my sitting room. There I found Mona and—my husband."

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"Ah! He did return from London on that night?"

"Yes. He returned, thinking I was out of the way, in order to see his mistress. In his presence she confessed her guilt. I looked to him for denial, and he hung his head. Then hardly knowing what I did, overcome with rage, I snatched the dagger which I wore as part of my costume, and—"

"And killed him," shrieked Claude, springing to his feet. "For Heaven's sake, do not confess this to me!"

"Why not? I did no wrong! I did not kill him. I fainted before I could cross the room to where he stood. When I recovered I was alone. My husband and Mona Bantry had disappeared. Then I retired to bed and was ill for days. I know no more of the case."

"Is this true?" asked Claude anxiously.

"Why should it not be true? Do you think I would invent a story like that to asperse the memory of your father? Vilely as he treated me, I loved him. I do not know who killed him. The dagger I wore disappeared with him. It was found in the garden; his body in the river four miles down. But I declare to you solemnly that I am ignorant of whose hand struck the blow. It might have been Mona, or Jeringham, or—"

"Or Hilliston!"

"You are wrong there," replied his mother coolly, "or else your judgment has been perverted by that book. Mr. Hilliston was still at the ball when the tragedy occurred. His evidence at the trial proved that. Don't say a word against him. He has been a good friend to you—and to me."

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"I do not deny that."

"You cannot! When I was arrested and tried for a crime which I never committed, he stood by me. When I left the court alone and friendless, he stood by me. I decided to feign death to escape the obloquy which attaches to every suspected criminal. He found me this refuge and installed me here as Mrs. Bezel. He took charge of you and brought you up, and looked after your money and mine. Don't you dare to speak against him!"

Exhausted by the fury with which she had spoken, the unfortunate woman leaned back in her chair. Claude, already regretting his harshness, brought a glass of water, which he placed to her lips. After a few minutes she revived, and feebly waved him away; but he was not to be so easily dismissed.

"I am sorry I spoke as I did, mother," he said tenderly, arranging her pillows. "Now that I have heard your story, I see that you have suffered greatly. It is not my right to reproach you. No doubt you acted for the best; therefore, I do not say a word against you or Mr. Hilliston, but ask you to forgive me."

The tears were rolling down Mrs. Bezel's cheeks as he spoke thus, and without uttering a word, she put her hand in his in token of forgiveness. Claude pressed his lip to her faded cheek, and thus reconciled—as much as was possible under the circumstances—they began to talk of the case.

"What do you intend to do?" asked Mrs. Bezel weakly.

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"Find out who killed my father."

"It is impossible—after five-and-twenty years. I have told you all I know, and you see I cannot help you. I do not know whom to suspect."

"You surely have some suspicion, mother?"

"No, I have no suspicions. Whomsoever killed your father took the dagger out of my sitting room."

"Perhaps Mona——"

"I think not. She had no reason to kill him."

"He had wronged her."

"And me!" cried Mrs. Bezel vehemently. "Do not talk any more of these things, Claude. I know nothing more; I can tell you nothing more."

"Then I must try and find John Parver, and learn how he became acquainted with the story."

"That is why I sent for you; why I revealed myself; why I told you all I have suffered. Find John Parver, and tell me who he is, what he is."

This Claude promised to do, and, as his mother was worn out by the long conversation, he shortly afterward took his leave. As he descended Fitzjohn's Avenue a thought flashed into his mind as to the identity of John Parver.

"I wonder if John Parver is Mark Jeringham?" said Claude.

The question was to be answered on that very evening.

CHAPTER XIII.

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ON THE TRACK.

IT was nearly six o'clock when Claude returned to Earls Street, and Tait, already dressed for the evening, was waiting his arrival with considerable impatience. His usual imperturbability had given place to a self-satisfied air, as though he had succeeded in accomplishing a difficult undertaking. He uttered a joyful exclamation when he saw Claude enter, but a look of apprehension passed over his face when he noted the altered appearance of his friend.

"What is wrong?" he asked, as Claude threw himself into a chair, with a sigh of fatigue. "Do you bring bad news? My dear fellow, you are completely worn out. Here, Dormer, a glass of sherry for Mr. Larcher."

The servant, who was putting the finishing touches to the dinner-table, speedily obeyed this order, and Tait made his friend drink the wine without delay. Then he proceeded to question him regarding the reason of his pallor, but with his usual caution first sent Dormer out of the room. Only when they were alone did he venture to speak on the subject about which both were thinking.

"Well!" he demanded anxiously, "you saw Mrs. Bezel?"

"Yes; I was with her for two hours."

"Ah!" said Tait, with great satisfaction; "she must have told you a good deal in that time."

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"She did. She told me more than I expected."

"Did it concern your parents?"

"It did."

"Good! Then you no doubt heard her version of the crime."

"Yes!"

These unsatisfactory replies, which dropped so strangely from Larcher's lips, at once puzzled and irritated the questioner.

"You don't seem anxious to confide in me," he said, in a piqued tone.

"I will tell you all. I am anxious to tell you all," replied Larcher, finding his tongue, "but I do not know how to begin."

"Oh, I shall save you that trouble by asking you questions. In the first place, who is Mrs. Bezel?"

"My mother!"

Tait bounded from his chair with an expression of incredulity. This unexpected information, so abruptly conveyed, was too much for his self-control.

"Your mother!" he stammered, hardly thinking he had heard aright. "Are you in earnest? I cannot believe it. According to the notice in the newspapers, according to Hilliston, your mother died in London in 1867."

"She did not die. Her death was a feigned one, to escape the notoriety gained by her trial at Canterbury."

"Did Mr. Hilliston know she was alive?"

"Yes. It was by his advice that she changed her name."

"Oh! Oh!" said Tait, with marked significance; "Hilliston knew, Hilliston advised. Humph! John Parver may be right, after all." [pg 104]

"Tait, be silent! You are speaking of my mother."

"I beg your pardon, my dear fellow, but I really do not understand."

"You will shortly. I will tell you the story of my mother's troubles, and Hilliston's kindness."

"Hilliston's kindness," repeated Tait, in a skeptical tone. Nevertheless he resumed his seat, and signified his willingness to hear the narrative.

The wine had done Claude good, and restored his self-possession; so, now master of himself, he related all that had passed between himself and Mrs. Bezel. Gifted with a retentive memory, and no mean powers as a narrator, he succeeded in giving Tait a vivid impression of the conversation. The little man, with his head slightly on one side, like a bright-eyed sparrow, listened attentively, and not till the story was finished did he make an observation thereon. To this capability of listening without interruption Tait owed a great deal of his popularity.

"Truth is stranger than fiction, after all," said he, when Claude ended; "and the novel is less dramatic than the episode of real life. John Parver did not dare to insinuate that the supposed dead widow of the murdered man was alive. Humph! this complicates matters more than ever."

"At least it clears the character of Hilliston."

"Yes," assented Tait doubtfully; "I suppose it does."

"Can you doubt it?" said Larcher, dissatisfied with this grudging consent. "You can now see why Hilliston was agitated at our interview; why he asked me not to see Mrs. Bezel, so-called; why he called here the same evening to find out if I had gone; and finally why he wished to prepare me before seeing her, by telling of the tragedy." [pg 105]

"Oh, I see all that," said Tait quietly. "Nine men out of ten would consider Hilliston a most disinterested person. But I am the tenth man, and am therefore skeptical of his motive."

"But what motive can he have for——"

"That is just it," interrupted Tait vivaciously. "I can't see his motive, but I will find it out some day."

"Well, you can speak for yourself," said Claude, frowning. "After what my mother has told me, I believe Hilliston to be an upright and honorable man."

"You are quite right to do so on the evidence. Still, if I were you I would not keep him informed of all our movements, unless——Do you intend to go on with the matter?" he asked abruptly.

"Assuredly! I am determined to find out who killed my father."

Tait walked to the fireplace and took up his position on the hearth-rug. An idea had entered his mind, which he did not intend to put into words. Nevertheless it was indirectly the reason for his next speech.

"I think, after all, it would be best to take Hilliston's advice, and let sleeping dogs lie."

He had not calculated the effect of these words on his hearer, for Claude also arose from his chair, and looked at him with angry surprise.

"I don't understand you," he said coldly. "Some hours back, and you were more eager than I to pursue this unknown criminal. Now you wish to withdraw. May I ask the reason of this sudden change." [pg 106]

"It seems to be useless to hope to find the assassin," replied Tait, shrugging his shoulders. "One cannot discover a needle in a haystack."

"Oh, yes you can—by patient research."

"Well, even that would be easier than to hope to solve a mystery which has been impenetrable for five-and-twenty years."

"It has been impenetrable for that time because no one has tried to solve it. This is not your real reason for wishing to end the case. What is your reason? Speak! I insist upon knowing the truth."

The other did not reply, but thrust his hands deeper into his pockets, and maintained a masterly silence. Irritated by this negative attitude, Claude placed his hands on the little man's shoulders and looked at him indignantly.

"I know what your reason is, Tait," he said rapidly; "it is not that you fear we may learn too little, but that you expect we will learn too much."

"Yes," replied Tait simply, "that is the reason. Is it not an all-sufficient one for you to pause?"

"No!" shouted Claude savagely; "it is all-sufficient for me to go on. You think that I may discover that Hilliston is the criminal, or learn that my mother is accountable for the crime. I tell you no such thing will happen. Hilliston was not near The Laurels on the fatal morning. My mother—I have told you how she exonerated herself, and the exoneration was substantiated by Denis Bantry. Both are innocent."

"It may be so. But who is guilty?"

"Jeringham. I believe that he discovered that my father had returned, and perhaps knowing of this intrigue between him and Mona Bantry, remained at The Laurels, unknown to my mother, in order to assist her as a friend." [pg 107]

"How did Jeringham obtain possession of the dagger?"

"I cannot say. We must find out. But he did obtain possession of the dagger, and during a quarrel with my father killed him with it. He fled to avoid the consequences. Oh, yes! I swear that Jeringham is guilty. But I will hunt him down, if I have to do it alone."

"You will not do it alone," said Tait quietly. "I am with you still."

"But you said——"

"I know what I said! I think it is best to leave well alone. But since you are set on learning the truth, I will help you to the best of my ability. Only," added Tait explicitly, "should you discover the truth to be unpalatable, do not blame me."

"I won't blame you. I am certain that you will find that I am right, and that Hilliston and my mother had nothing to do with the affair. Help me, that is all I ask. I will bear the consequences."

"Very good! Then we had better get to work," said Tait dryly. "Just go and dress, my dear fellow, or you'll keep dinner waiting."

"Why should I dress? I am not going out to-night."

"Indeed you are! We are due at Mrs. Durham's 'At Home' at ten o'clock."

"I shan't go. I am in no mood for frivolity. I would rather stay at home and think over the case. It is only by hard work that we can hope to learn the truth."

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"Very true. At the same time it is necessary for you to go out to-night, if only to meet with John Parver."

"The author of 'A Whim of Fate,'" asked Claude eagerly, "is he in town?"

"Yes. And he will be at Mrs. Durham's to-night. We must see him, and find out where he obtained the materials for his novel."

"Do you think such information will lead to any result?" asked Claude dubiously.

"I don't think. I am sure of it," retorted Tait impatiently. "Now go and dress."

Larcher departed without a word.

CHAPTER XIV.

[pg 109]

THE UPPER BOHEMIA.

THE name Bohemia is suggestive of unknown talent starving in garrets, of obdurate landladies, of bacchanalian nights, and shabby dress. Murger first invested the name with this flavor, and since his time the word has become polarized, and indicates nothing but struggling humanity and unappreciated genius. Yet your true Bohemian does not leave his country when he becomes rich and famous. It is true that he descends from the garret to the first floor; that he fares well and dresses decently; but he still dwells in Bohemia. The reckless air of the hovels permeates the palaces of this elastic kingdom of fancy.

Mrs. Durham was a Bohemian, and every Thursday received her *confrères* in the drawing room of a very elegant mansion in Chelsea. She had written a novel, "I Cling to Thee with Might and Main," and this having met with a moderate success, she posed as a celebrity, and set up her *salon* on the lines of Lady Blessington. Everyone who was anyone was received at her "At Homes," and by this process she gathered together a queer set of people. Some were clever, others were not; some were respectable, others decidedly disreputable; but one and all—to use an expression usually connected with crime—had done something. Novelists, essayists, painters, poets, and musicians were all to be found in her rooms, and a more motley collection could be seen nowhere else in London. Someone dubbed the Chelsea Mansions "The Zoo," and certainly animals of all kinds were to be found there, from monkeys to peacocks.

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It was considered rather the thing to be invited to "The Zoo," so when brothers and sisters of the pen met one another there they usually said: "What! are you here?" as though the place were heaven, and the speaker justifiably surprised that anyone should be saved except himself or herself. Literary people love one another a degree less than Christians.

Hither came Tait and Claude in search of John Parver. That young man had made a great success with his novel, and was consequently much sought after by lion hunters. However, Tait had learned that he was to be present at Mrs. Durham's on this special evening, and hoped to engage him in conversation, so as to learn where he had obtained the materials for his story.

When they arrived the rooms were quite full, and Mrs. Durham received them very graciously. It was true that they were not famous, still as Tait was a society man, and Claude very handsome, the lady of the house good-humoredly pardoned all mental deficiencies. Tait knew her very well, having met her at several houses, but she addressed herself rather to Claude than to his friend, having a feminine appreciation of good looks.

"My rooms are always crowded," said she, with that colossal egotism which distinguished her utterances. "You know they call me the new George Eliot."

"No doubt you deserve the name," replied Claude, with mimic gravity.

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"Oh, I suppose so," smirked the lady amiably. "You have read my novel, of course. It is now in

its fourth edition, and has been refused by Smith and Mudie. I follow the French school of speaking my mind."

"And a very nasty mind it must be," thought Larcher, who had been informed about the book by Tait. He did not, however, give this thought utterance, but endeavored to generalize the conversation. "You have many celebrities here to-night, I presume?"

"My Dear Sir!" exclaimed Mrs. Durham, in capitals, "every individual in this company is famous! Yonder is Mr. Padsop, the great traveler, who wrote 'Mosques and Mosquitoes.' He is talking to Miss Pexworth, the writer of those scathing articles in *The Penny Trumpet*, entitled 'Man, the Brute.' She is a modern woman."

"Oh, indeed!" said Claude equably, and looked at this latest production of the nineteenth century, "she is rather masculine in appearance."

"It is her pride to be so, Mr. Larcher. She is more masculine than man. That is her brother, who designs ladies' dresses and decorates dinner tables."

"Ah! He isn't masculine. I suppose nature wanted to preserve the balance in the family. The law of compensation, eh?"

"Oh, you are severe. Tommy Pexworth is a dear little creature, and so fond of chiffons. He knows more about women's dress than his sister."

"So I should think," replied Claude dryly. He took an instant and violent dislike to Mr. Pexworth, who was one of those feminine little creatures, only distinguished from the other sex by wearing trousers. "A charming pair," he added, smiling. "I don't know which I admire the most. The sister who is such a thorough gentlemen, or the brother who is a perfect lady."

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"You are satirical," smiled Mrs. Durham, enjoying this hit at her friends. "Now you must take me down to have some refreshment. Really, you must."

Thus inspired, Claude elbowed the hostess through the crush, and escorted her to a bare counter in the dining room, whereon were displayed thin bread and butter, very weak tea, and fossil buns. Mrs. Durham evidently knew her own refreshments too well to partake of them, for she had a mild brandy and soda, produced from its hiding place by a confidential waiter. She asked Claude to join her, but he refused on the plea that he never drank between meals.

"But you are not a brain-worker," said Mrs. Durham, hurriedly finishing her brandy and soda, lest her guests should see it and become discontented with the weak tea; "if I did not keep myself up I should die. Ah! Why, here is Mr. Hilliston."

"Hilliston!" said Claude, astonished at seeing his guardian in this house.

"Yes. Do you know him? A dear creature—so clever. He was my solicitor in a libel action against *The Penny Trumpet*, for saying that I was an ungrammatical scribbler. Just fancy! And they call me the new George Eliot. We lost our case, I'm sorry to say. Judges are such brutes! Miss Pexworth says they are, ever since she failed to get damages for her breach of promise case."

"Here comes Mr. Hilliston," said Larcher, rather tired of this long-tongued lady. "I know him very well, he is my guardian."

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"How very delightful!" said Mrs. Durham, with the accent on the "very." "Oh, Mr. Hilliston," she continued, as the lawyer approached, "we were just talking about you!"

"I trust the absent were right for once," replied Hilliston, with an artificial smile and a swift glance at Claude. "I have just come to say good-by."

"Oh, not yet, surely not yet! Really!" babbled Mrs. Durham with shallow enthusiasm. Then finding Hilliston was resolved to go, and catching sight of a newly arrived celebrity, she hastened, after the amiable fashion of her kind, to speed the parting guest. "Well, if you must, you must. Good-by, good-by! Excuse me, I see Mr. Rawler, a delightful man—writes plays, you know. The new Shakspeare; yes!" and thus talking she melted away with a babble of words, leaving Hilliston and his ward alone.

They were mutually surprised to see one another, Claude because he knew his guardian did not affect Bohemianism, and Hilliston because he thought that the young man had left town. The meeting was hardly a pleasant one, as Hilliston dreaded lest Mrs. Bezel should have said too much, and so prejudiced Claude against him.

"I understood from your refusal of my invitation that you had gone to Thorston with Tait," said he, after a pause.

"I am going to-morrow or the next day," replied Claude quickly, "but in any event I intended to call on you before I left town."

"Indeed!" said Hilliston nervously; "you have something to tell me?"

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"Yes. I have seen Mrs. Bezel."

"Good. You have seen Mrs. Bezel."

"And I have made a discovery."

"Oh! Has the lady informed you who committed the crime?"

"No. But she told me her name."

"Margaret Bezel!" murmured Hilliston, wondering what was coming.

"Not Margaret Bezel, but Julia Larcher, my mother."

"She—she told you that?" gasped Hilliston, his self-control deserting him for the moment.

"Yes. I know why she feigned death; I know how you have protected her. You have been a kind friend to me, Mr. Hilliston, and to my mother. I am doubly in your debt."

Hilliston took the hand held out to him by Claude, and pressed it cordially. The speech relieved him from all apprehension. He now knew that Mrs. Bezel had kept their secret, and immediately took advantage of the restored confidence of Claude. His quick wit grasped the situation at once.

"My dear fellow," he said with much emotion, "I loved your poor father too much not to do what I could for his widow and son. I hope you do not blame me for suppressing the truth."

"No. I suppose you acted for the best. Still, I would rather you had informed me that my mother was still alive."

"To what end? It would only have made you miserable. I did not want to reveal anything; but your mother insisted that you should be made acquainted with the past, and so—I gave you the papers."

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"I am glad you did so."

"And now, what do you intend to do?" asked Hilliston slowly. "You know as much as I do. Is there any clew to guide you in the discovery that your mother still lives?"

"No. She can tell me nothing. But I hope to find the clew here."

"Ah! You intend to speak with John Parver?"

"I do," said Claude, rather surprised at this penetration; "do you know him?"

"I exchanged a few words with him," replied Hilliston carelessly. "I only came here to-night at the request of Mrs. Durham, who is a client of mine. As I paid my respects to her, she was talking to John Parver, and he was introduced to me as the latest lion. So you still intend to pursue the matter?" added Hilliston, after a pause.

"Assuredly! If only to clear my mother, and restore her to the world."

"I am afraid it is too late, Claude. You know she is ill and cannot live long."

"Nevertheless, I wish her to take her own name again. She will not do so until the assassin of her husband—of my father—is discovered, so you see it is obligatory on me to find out the truth."

"I trust you may be successful," said Hilliston, sighing; "but my advice is still the same, and it would be best for you to let the matter rest. After five-and-twenty years you can discover nothing. I cannot help you; your mother cannot help you, so—"

"But John Parver may," interrupted Larcher sharply. "I will see how he learned the details of the case."

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Before Hilliston could make further objection, Tait joined them, and not noticing the lawyer, hastily took Claude by the arm.

"I have been looking for you everywhere," said he. "Come and be introduced to Mr. Linton."

"Who is Mr. Linton?"

"John Parver. He writes under that name. Ah, Mr. Hilliston, I did not see you. How do you do, sir?"

"I am quite well, Mr. Tait, and am just taking my departure," replied Hilliston easily. "I see you are both set on finding out the truth. But you will learn nothing from John Parver."

"Why not, Mr. Hilliston?"

"Because he knows nothing. Good-night, Claude—good-night, Mr. Tait!"

When Hilliston disappeared Tait looked at Claude with a singular expression, and scratched his chin.

"You see," said he quietly, "Mr. Hilliston has been making inquiries on his own account."

"You are incurably suspicious," said Claude impatiently. "Hilliston is my friend."

"Yes. He was your father's friend also, I believe."

"What do you mean?"

"Nothing! Nothing! Come and cross-examine Frank Linton, alias John Parver."

Clearly Tait was by no means so satisfied with Hilliston as Claude.

CHAPTER XV.

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A POPULAR AUTHOR.

BEARING in mind that the character of Hilliston had been rehabilitated by Mrs. Bezel, it was natural that Claude should feel somewhat annoyed at the persistent mistrust manifested toward that gentleman by Tait. However, he had no time to explain or expostulate at the present moment; and moreover, as he knew that the little man was assisting him in this difficult case out of pure friendship, he did not deem it politic to comment on what was assuredly an unfounded prejudice. Tait was singular in his judgments, stubborn in his opinions; so Claude, unwilling to risk the loss of his coadjutor, wisely held his peace. His astute companion guessed these thoughts, for in place of further remarking on the inexplicable presence of Hilliston, he turned the conversation toward the man they were about to see.

"Queer thing, isn't it?" he said, as they ascended the stairs. "Linton is the son of the vicar of Thorston."

"Ah! That no doubt accounts for his intimate knowledge of the locality. Do you know him?"

"Of course I do—as Frank Linton; but I had no idea that he was John Parver."

"Why did he assume a *nom de plume*?"

Tait shrugged his shoulders. "Paternal prejudice, I believe," he said carelessly. "Mr. Linton does not approve of sensational novels, and, moreover, wishes his son to be a lawyer, not a literary man. Young Frank is in a solicitor's office in Lincoln's Inn Fields, and he employed his evenings in writing 'A Whim of Fate.' He published it under the name of 'John Parver,' so as to hoodwink his father, but now that he has scored a success I have no doubt he will confess."

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"Do you think we will learn anything from him?"

"We will learn all we wish to know as to where he obtained his material. The young man's head is turned, and by playing on his vanity we may find out the truth."

"His vanity may lead him to conceal the fact that he took the plot from real life."

"I don't think so. I know the boy well, and he is a great babbler. No one is more astonished than I at learning that he is the celebrated John Parver. I didn't think he had the brains to produce so clever a book."

"It is clever!" assented Claude absently.

"Of course it is; much cleverer than its author," retorted Tait dryly; "or rather, I should say, its supposed author, for I verily believed Jenny Paynton helped him to write the book."

"Who is Jenny Paynton?"

"A very nice girl who lives at Thorston. She is twice as clever as this lad, and they are both great on literary matters. But I'll tell you all about this later on, for here is Linton."

The celebrated author was a light-haired, light-complexioned young man of six-and-twenty, with bowed shoulders, a self-satisfied smile, and a pince nez, which he used at times to emphasize his remarks. He evidently possessed conceit sufficient to stock a dozen ordinary men, and lisped out the newest ideas of the day, as promulgated by his college, for he was an Oxford man. Although he was still in his salad days, he had settled, to his own satisfaction, all the questions of life, and therefore adopted a calm superiority which was peculiarly exasperating. Claude, liberal-minded but hot-blooded, had not been five minutes in his company before he was seized with a wild desire to throw him out of the window. Frank Linton inspired that uncharitable feeling in many people.

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For the moment, Mr. Linton was alone, as his latest worshiper, a raw-boned female of the cab-horse species, had just departed with a fat little painter in quest of refreshment. Therefore, when he turned to greet Claude, he was quite prepared to assume that fatigued self-conscious air, with which he thought fit to welcome new votaries.

"Linton, this is Mr. Larcher," said Tait abruptly. "Claude, you see before you the lion of the season."

"It is very good of you to say so, Mr. Tait," simpered the lion, in no wise disclaiming the compliment. "I am pleased to make your acquaintance, Mr. Larcher."

"And I yours, Mr. Linton, or shall I say Mr. Parver?"

"Oh, either name will answer," said the author loftily, "though in town I am known as Parver only."

"And in Thorston as Linton," interpolated Tait smartly. "Then your father does not yet know what a celebrated son he has?"

"Not yet, Mr. Tait. I intend to tell him next week. I go down to Thorston for that purpose."

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"Ah! My friend and I will no doubt meet you there. We also seek rural felicity for a month. But now that you have taken London by storm, I suppose you intend to forsake the law for the profits."

"Of course I do," replied Linton quickly. "I never cared for the law, and only went into it to please my father."

"And now you go into literature to please Miss Paynton."

Linton blushed at this home thrust, and being readier with the pen than the tongue, did not know what answer to make. Pitying his confusion, and anxious to arrive at the main object of the interview, Claude interpolated a remark bearing thereon.

"Did you find it difficult to work out the plot of your novel, Mr. Linton?" he said, with assumed carelessness.

"Oh, not at all! The construction of a plot is second nature with me."

"I suppose you and Miss Paynton talked it over together," said Tait artfully.

"Well, yes," answered Linton, again falling into confusion; "I found her a good listener."

"I presume it was all new to her?"

"I think so. Of course she gave me some hints."

Evidently Linton was determined to admit nothing, so seeing that Tait's attack was thus repulsed, Claude brought up his reserve forces.

"I saw in a paper the other day that your book was an impossible one—that nothing analogous to its story ever happened in real life."

"Several critics have said that," replied Linton, growing angry, and thereby losing his caution, "but they are wrong, as I could prove did I choose to do so." [pg 121]

"What!" said Claude, in feigned astonishment. "Did you take the incident from real life?"

"The tale is founded on an incident from real life," answered Linton, flushing. "That is, Miss Paynton told me of a certain crime which was actually committed, and on her hint I worked out the story."

"Oh, Miss Paynton told you," said Tait smoothly; "and where did she see the account of this crime?"

"Ah, that I cannot tell you," replied Linton frankly. "She related the history of this crime, and refused to let me know whence she obtained it. I thought the idea a good one, and so wrote the novel."

"Why don't you tell this to the world, and so confound the critics?"

"I do! I have told several people. For instance, I told a gentleman about it this very evening, just because he made the same remark as Mr. Larcher did."

Tait drew a long breath, and stole a look at Claude. That young man had changed color and gave utterance to the first idea that entered his mind.

"Was it Mr. Hilliston who made the remark?"

"Hilliston! Hilliston!" said Linton thoughtfully. "Yes, I believe that was the man. A tall old gentleman, very fresh-colored. He was greatly interested in my literary work."

"Who could help being interested in so clever a book?" said Claude, in a meaning tone. "But Mr. Hilliston is a lawyer, and I suppose you do not like members of that profession."

"Now, why should you say that?" demanded Linton, rather taken aback by this perspicacity. [pg 122]

"Well, for one thing you admit a dislike for the law, and for another you make Michael Dene, the solicitor, commit the crime in 'A Whim of Fate.'"

"Oh, I only did that as he was the least likely person to be suspected," said the author easily. "Jenny—that is, Miss Paynton—wanted me to make Markham commit the crime."

"Markham is Jeringham," murmured Tait, under his breath. "Who committed the crime in the actual case?" he added aloud.

"No one knows," answered Linton, shrugging his shoulders. "The case as related to me was a mystery. I solved it after my own fashion."

"In the third volume you trace the assassin by means of a breastpin belonging to Michael Dene," said Claude, again in favor. "Is that fact or fiction?"

"Fiction! Miss Paynton invented the idea. She said that as the dagger inculpated the woman the breastpin found on the banks of the river would lead to the detection of the man. And, as I worked it out, the idea was a good one."

"Ah!" murmured Tait to himself, "I wonder if Mr. Hilliston had anything to do with a

breastpin."

By this time Linton was growing rather restive under examination, as he was by no means pleased at having to acknowledge his indebtedness to a woman's wit. Seeing this Tait abruptly closed the conversation, so as to avoid waking the suspicions of Linton.

"A very interesting conversation," he said heartily. "I like to get behind the scenes and see the working of a novelist's brain. We will say good-by now. Linton, and I hope you will call at the Manor House next week, when we will all three be at Thorston."

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"Delighted, I'm sure," replied the author, and thereupon melted into the crowd, leaving Claude and Tait looking at one another.

"Well," said the former, after a pause, "we have not learned much."

"On the contrary, I think we have learned a great deal," said Tait, raising his eyebrows. "We know that Linton got the whole story from Jenny Paynton, and that Mr. Hilliston is in possession of the knowledge."

"What use can it be to him?"

"He will try and frustrate us with Miss Paynton, as he did Mrs. Bezel with you."

"Do you still doubt him?" asked Claude angrily.

"Yes," replied Tait coolly, "I still doubt him."

CHAPTER XVI.

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A FALSE MOVE.

THE next day the two young men repaired to the club for the purpose of having luncheon and discussing their plans. Contrary to the wish of Claude, his friend did not deem it advisable to at once depart for Thorston, as he wished to remain in town for a few days on business connected with Hilliston.

"You see, you are quite in the dark regarding that gentleman," said Tait, as they lighted their cigarettes after dinner, "and before we commence operations at Thorston it will be advisable to know that he is not counteracting our efforts."

"In that case you had better go down to Thorston and I will remain in town so as to keep an eye on Hilliston."

"I don't think that will be necessary," replied Tait reflectively, "it is more than probable that Hilliston will visit Thorston."

"For what purpose?"

"Can't you guess? Last night he learned from Linton that Jenny Paynton supplied the material for that novel. Consequently he will see her, and, if possible, find out where she heard the story."

"Yes; I suppose he will," said Claude thoughtfully. "By the way, who is Miss Paynton, who now seems to be mixed up in the matter?"

"She is the daughter of an old recluse called Ferdinand Paynton."

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"A recluse! Humph! That's strange."

"Why so? You would not say so if you saw the old man. He is an invalid and lives in his library. A charming companion, though I must say he is rather sad."

"Where does he live?"

"At Thorston, half a mile from the Manor House. Not very rich, I should think. His cottage is small, like his income."

"And his daughter lives with him?"

"Yes. A pretty girl she is, who inherits his literary tastes. It is my impression that she wrote the most part of that novel. From all I know of Frank Linton he is given more to poetry than to prose. Jenny has the brain, not Frank."

"Ho, ho!" said Claude, smiling. "Is it the skeptical misogynistic Tait I hear speaking?"

"Himself. I admit that I do not care for women, as a rule, but there are exceptions to every rule, and in this case Jenny Paynton is the exception."

"Is she in love with our author?"

"No. But I rather think he is in love with her, as you will be when you see her."

"I! What are you talking about, Tait? I have more to do than to fall in love with country wenches, however pretty."

"Jenny is not a country wench," said Tait, with some displeasure; "she is a highly educated young woman."

"Worse and worse! I hate highly educated bluestockings."

"You won't hate Jenny, at all events. Especially as it is probable you will see a great deal of her." [pg 126]

"No; I shall keep away from her," said Claude doggedly.

"That's impossible. We must maneuver to get at the truth. By asking her straight out she certainly will not gratify our curiosity. We must plot and plan, and take her unawares. She is not a fool, like Linton, remember."

"What! Do you call a lion of the season by so opprobrious a name?"

"I do," replied Tait serenely; "because I don't believe he wrote the book."

"Well! well! Never mind Linton. We have pumped him dry. The next thing is to tackle the fair Jenny. How do you intend to set about it?"

"I can't say, at present. We must be guided by circumstances. I will introduce you to the rector and to Mr. Paynton. There will be musical parties and lawn tennis *fêtes*, so in some way or another we may find out the truth?"

"Does anyone else live with Paynton; his wife, for instance."

"No. His wife died before he came to Thorston, where he has been for a long time. An old servant called Kerry lives with him."

"Man or woman?"

"Man. A queer old fellow, rather morose."

"H'm! A flattering description. By the way, he bears the same name as the ancient retainer in Boucicault's play."

"Why shouldn't he?"

"It may be an assumed name."

Tait threw a surprised glance at his friend, and laughed quickly. [pg 127]

"Who is suspicious now?" said he, smiling. "You blame me for suspecting Hilliston, yet here you are doubtful of people whom you have never seen."

Before Larcher could answer this home thrust, a waiter entered with a letter for him which

had just arrived.

"From Hilliston," said Claude, recognizing the writing. "I wonder what he has to say?"

"It's only another move in the game," murmured Tait; then as Claude, after glancing at the letter, uttered an ejaculation of surprise, he added: "What is the matter?"

"Hilliston is going down to Eastbourne."

"Impossible!" cried Tait, holding out his hand for the letter. "He is surely not so clumsy as to show his hand so plainly."

"He does, though. Read the letter yourself."

"MY DEAR CLAUDE [wrote Hilliston]: Mrs. Hilliston has decided to leave town for Eastbourne this week, so it is probable we will see you and Mr. Tait down there. If you can spare the time come to dinner at half-past seven to-night, and tell me how you are getting on with your case.

"Yours very sincerely,

"FRANCIS HILLISTON."

"Well," said Claude, as Tait silently returned the letter, "what do you think?"

"I think that Hilliston intends to look up Jenny Paynton."

"I can see that," replied Claude impatiently, "but touching this invitation to dinner."

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"Accept."

"But I promised to see my mother to-night, and tell her about John Parver. She will expect me, as I have written."

"I will take your apologies to her," said Tait quietly.

"You?"

"Yes. Listen to me, Claude," continued the little man in a tone of suppressed excitement. "You will keep your belief in Hilliston. I tell you he is your enemy and wishes you to leave this case alone. To-night he will make one last attempt to dissuade you. If he succeeds he will not go to Eastbourne. If he fails you can depend on it he will try and see Jenny before we do. Now, to thwart his aims we will go down to Thorston by an early train to-morrow morning."

"But I must see my mother before I leave town."

"No! I will tell her all she wishes to know."

"She might not like it."

"This is not a case for likes or dislikes," said Tait grimly; "but a question of getting the better of Hilliston. You must dine with him to-night, and find out, if possible, if it was his wife or himself who suggested this visit to Eastbourne. You need not tell him we go down to-morrow. Say you don't know—that you await my decision. Try and learn all you can of his attitude and plans. Then we will discuss the matter when you return. On my part," continued Tait significantly, "I may have some something to say about your mother."

"You want to see her?"

"Yes. I am extremely anxious to see her."

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"Perhaps you suspect her!" cried Claude, in a fiery tone.

"Bless the man, what a temper he has!" said Tait jocosely. "I don't suspect anyone except Hilliston. But I am quicker than you, and I wish to learn precisely what your mother has to say. A chance remark on her part may set us on the right path."

"Well, I will be guided by you," said Claude, in a few minutes. "You can go to Hampstead, and

I will dine with Hilliston. But I don't like the task. To sit at a man's table and scheme against him is not my idea of honor."

"Nor is it mine. You are doing no such thing. All I wish you to do is to observe Hilliston's attitude and hold your tongue. There is nothing wrong in that. I want to find out his motive for this behavior."

"Then why not see him yourself!"

"I will see him at Thorston. Meantime it is necessary that I become acquainted with your mother. Now come and wire an acceptance to Hilliston, and write a letter to your mother for me to deliver."

Claude obeyed. He was quite content to accept the guidance of Tait in this matter, and began to think that his friend was right in suspecting Hilliston. Else why did the lawyer's plans so coincide with their own.

"Mind you don't tell Hilliston too much," said Tait, when the wire was despatched.

"I shall tell him that we go to Thorston shortly, and that we saw John Parver."

"No; don't tell him about John Parver. He will be certain to mention the subject first."

"Well, and if he does——"

"Oh, you must use your brains," replied Tait ironically. "Baffle his curiosity, and above all, make no mention of the breastpin episode related in the third volume."

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"Why not?"

"Because Jenny Paynton told Linton of that. She could not have obtained it from the newspapers, as it is not related therein."

"It is pure invention."

"No! I believe it to be a fact."

"But who could have told it to Miss Paynton?"

"Ah!" said Tait, in a low tone. "Find me the person who told her that and I'll find the man who murdered your father."

CHAPTER XVII.

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THE HUSBAND AT KENSINGTON GORE.

To a woman who rules by right of beauty it is a terrible thing to see her empire slipping from her grasp by reason of gray hairs and wrinkles. What desperate efforts does she make to protract her sway, how she dyes and paints and powders and tight laces—all to no end, for Time is stronger than Art, and finally he writes his sign-manual too deep to be effaced by cosmetics. Mrs. Hilliston was not yet beaten in the fight with the old enemy, but she foresaw the future when she would be shamed and neglected close at hand.

Perhaps it was this premonition of defeat that made her so unamiable, sharp, and bitter on the night when Claude came to dine. She liked Claude and had stood in the place of a mother to him; but he was a man, and handsome, so when she saw his surprised look at her changed appearance all the evil that was in her came to the surface.

Yet she need not have felt so bitter a pang, had she taken the trouble to glance at her image in the near mirror. It reflected a tall, stylish figure, which, in the dim light of the drawing room, looked majestic and beautiful. It was all very well to think that she appeared barely thirty in the twilight, but she knew well that the daylight showed up her forty-seven years in the most merciless manner. Velvet robes, diamond necklaces, and such like aids to beauty would not make

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up for lack of youth, and Claude's ill-advised start brought this home to her.

Ten years before she had married Hilliston in utter ignorance of the house at Hampstead. Though she did not know it she was not unlike her rival. There was the same majesty, the same imperious beauty, the same passionate nature, but Mrs. Bezel was worn and wasted by illness, whereas Mrs. Hilliston, aided by art, looked a rarely beautiful woman.

People said she had not done well to marry Hilliston. She was then a rich widow from America, and wanted to take a position in society. With her looks and her money, she might have married a title, but handsome Hilliston crossed her path, and, though he was then fifty years of age, she fell in love with him on the spot. Wearied of Mrs. Bezel, anxious to mend his failing fortunes, Hilliston accepted the homage thus offered. He did not love her, but kept that knowledge to himself, so Mrs. Derrick, the wealthy widow, secured the man she idolized. She gave all, wealth, beauty, love, and received nothing in return.

During all their married life her love had undergone no abatement. She loved her husband passionately, and her one object in life was to please him. At the time of the marriage she had rather resented the presence of Claude in Hilliston's house, but soon accepted him as an established fact, the more so as he took up his profession shortly afterward, and left her to reign alone over the heart of her husband. When the young man called she was always kind to him, she constantly looked after his welfare, and playfully styled herself his mother. Claude was greatly attached to her, and spoke of her in the highest terms, but for the life of him he could not suppress that start, though he knew it wounded her to the heart. During his five years of absence she had aged greatly, and art seemed rather to accentuate than conceal the truth.

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"You find me altered, I am afraid," said she bitterly; "age is robbing me of my looks."

"By no means," answered Claude, with a desire to please her; "at the worst, you are only growing old gracefully."

"Small comfort in that," sighed Mrs. Hilliston. "I do not want to grow old at all. However, it is no use fighting the inevitable, but I hope I'll die before I become a hag."

"You will never become one."

"I'm not so sure of that. I'm one of those large women who turn to bones and wrinkles in old age."

"In my eyes you will always be beautiful, Louise," said Hilliston, who entered at this moment. "You are an angel ever bright and fair."

"You have not lost the art of saying pretty things, Francis," replied his wife, greatly gratified; "but there is the gong. Claude, take your mother in to dinner."

The young man winced as she said this, thinking of his real mother who lay sick and feeble at Hampstead. Hilliston saw his change of countenance, and bit his lip to prevent himself remarking thereon. He guessed what Claude was thinking about, and thus his thoughts were turned in the same direction. At the present moment the memories thus evoked were most unpleasant.

During dinner Mrs. Hilliston recovered her spirits and talked freely enough. No one was present save Claude and her husband, so they were a very pleasant party of three. While in the full flow of conversation, Claude could not help thinking that Tait was unjust to suspect the master of the house of underhand dealings; for Hilliston was full of smiles and geniality, and did his best to entertain his guest. Could Claude have looked below the surface he would have been considerably astonished at the inward aspect of the man. Yet a hint was given him of such want of concord, for Hilliston showed the cloven hoof before the meal ended.

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"So you are going to Eastbourne," said Claude, addressing himself to Mrs. Hilliston. "I hope you will come over to Thorston during your stay."

"It is not unlikely," replied the lady. "Francis intends to make excursions all round the country."

"Only for your amusement, my dear," said Hilliston hastily. "You know how dreary it is to pace daily up and down that Parade."

"I think Eastbourne is dreary, in any case. It is solely on your account that I am going."

Hilliston did not answer, but stole a glance at Claude to see what he thought. The face of the young man was inscrutable, though Claude was mentally considering that Tait was right, and

Hilliston's journey to Eastbourne was undertaken to interview Jenny Paynton.

"I don't like your English watering-places," continued Mrs. Hilliston idly. "They are so exasperatingly dull. In America we can have a good time at Newport, but all your south coast is devoid of amusement. Trouville or Dieppe are more enjoyable than Eastbourne or Folkestone."

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"The fault of the national character, my dear Louise. We English take our pleasures sadly, you know."

For the sole purpose of seeing what effect it would produce on the lawyer Claude purposely introduced the name of the town where his father had met his death.

"I wonder you don't try an inland watering-place, Mrs. Hilliston," he said calmly; "Bath or Tunbridge Wells or—Horrison."

Hilliston looked up quickly, and then busied himself with his food. Discomposed as he was, his iron will enabled him to retain a quiet demeanor; but the effect of the name on the wife was more pronounced than it was on the husband. Her color went, and she laid down her knife and fork.

"Ah, I don't know Horrison," she said faintly. "Some inland—Ah, how hot this room is. Open the window," she added to the footman, "we want fresh air."

Rather astonished at the effect thus produced, Claude would have spoken but that Hilliston forestalled him.

"The room is hot," he said lightly, "but the fresh air will soon revive you, Louise. I am glad we are going to Eastbourne, for you sadly need a change."

"The season has been rather trying," replied his wife, resuming her dinner. "What were you saying about Horrison, Claude?"

"Nothing. I only know it is a provincial town set in beautiful scenery. I thought you might wish to try a change from the fashionable seaside place."

"I might go there if it is pretty," answered Mrs. Hilliston, who was now perfectly composed. "Where is Horrison?"

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"In Kent," interposed Hilliston quickly, "not very far from Canterbury. I have been there myself, but as it is a rather dull neighborhood, I would not advise you to try it."

Despite her denial Claude felt certain that Mrs. Hilliston was acquainted with Horrison, for on the plea of indisposition she left the table before the dinner was ended. As she passed through the door she playfully tipped Claude on the shoulder with her fan.

"Don't forget to come and see us at Eastbourne," she said vivaciously, "and bring Mr. Tait with you. He is a great favorite of mine."

This Claude promised to do, and, when she left the room, returned to his seat with a rather puzzled expression on his face. Hilliston saw the look, and endeavored to banish it by a hasty explanation.

"You rather startled my wife by mentioning Horrison," he said, in an annoyed tone. "I wish you had not done so. As it is connected with the case she naturally feels an antipathy toward it."

"What! Does Mrs. Hilliston know about my father's death?" asked Claude, in some surprise.

"Yes. When we married, she wanted to know why you lived in the house with me, so I was forced to explain all the circumstances."

"Do you think that was necessary?"

"I do. You know how suspicious women are," replied Hilliston lightly; "they will know the truth. But you can trust to her discretion, Claude. No one will hear of it from her."

At this moment a footman entered the room with a message from Mrs. Hilliston.

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"My mistress wants to know if you have the third volume of 'A Whim of Fate,' sir?" said the servant.

"No," replied Hilliston sharply. "Tell your mistress that I took it to my office by mistake. She will have it to-morrow."

Claude thought this strange, and when the footman retired Hilliston made another explanation equally as unsatisfactory as the first.

"I am so interested in that book that I could not leave it at home," he said quickly; "and now that I have met the author I am doubly interested in it."

Another proof of Tait's acumen. Hilliston was the first to introduce the subject of John Parver.

CHAPTER XVIII.

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A DUEL OF WORDS.

A LONGISH pause ensued between the two men. Hilliston seemed to be in no hurry to continue the conversation, and Claude, with his eyes fixed absently on his glass, pondered over the facts that Mrs. Hilliston had an aversion to Horrison, and that the lawyer had taken the third volume of the novel out of the house. The two facts seemed to have some connection with each other, but what the connection might be Claude could not rightly conclude.

From his frequent talks with Tait he knew that the third volume contained the episode of the scarfpin, which was instrumental in bringing the fictitious murderer to justice. The assassin in the novel was meant for Hilliston, and remembering this Claude wondered whether there might not be some reason for his removal of the book. Mrs. Hilliston had quailed at the mention of Horrison, and the explanation given by her husband did not satisfy Larcher. What reason could she have for taking more than a passing interest in the tragic story? Why, after ten years, should she pale at the mention of the neighborhood? Claude asked himself these two questions, but could find no satisfactory answer to either of them.

He was toying with his wineglass while thinking, when a sudden thought made him grip the slender stem with spasmodic force. Was it possible that Mrs. Hilliston could have been in the neighborhood five-and-twenty years before; that she could have heard some talk of that scarfpin which was not mentioned at the trial, but which Tait insisted was an actual fact, and no figment of the novelist's brain; and finally, could it be that Hilliston had purposely removed the third volume of "A Whim of Fate" so that his wife should not have her memory refreshed by a relation of the incident. It was very strange.

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Thus thinking, Claude glanced stealthily at his guardian, who was musingly smoking his cigar, and drinking his wine. He looked calm, and content, and prosperous. Nevertheless, Claude was by no means so sure of his innocence as he had been. Hilliston's confusion, his hesitation, his evasion, instilled doubts into the young man's mind. He determined to gain a knowledge of the truth by questions, and mentally arranged these as follows: First he would try and learn somewhat of the past of Mrs. Hilliston, for, beyond the fact that she was an American, he knew nothing of it. Second, he would lead Hilliston to talk of the scarfpin, and see if the reference annoyed him; and, third, he would endeavor to discover if the lawyer was averse to his wife reading the novel. With his plans thus cut and dried, he spoke abruptly to his guardian:

"I am sorry Mrs. Hilliston's health is so bad."

"It is not bad, my dear fellow," replied the lawyer, lifting his head. "She is a very strong woman; but of course, the fatigue of a London season tells on the healthiest constitution. That is why I wish her to go to Eastbourne."

"Why not take her to Horrison?"

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"Why should I? She connects the place with the story of your father, about whom I was forced to speak ten years ago; and, speaking personally, I have no desire to return there, and recall the horrors of the past."

"You were greatly affected by my father's death?"

"Naturally; he was my dearest friend. I would have given anything to discover the assassin."

"Did Mrs. Hilliston give you her opinion as to who was guilty?"

"No. I told her as little as I could of so painful a subject. She is not in possession of all the facts."

"At that rate why let her read 'A Whim of Fate'?"

"I don't wish her to read it," answered Hilliston quietly; "but I left the novel lying about, and she read the first two volumes. If I can help it, she shall not finish the story."

"Why object to her reading the third volume?"

"Because it would recall the past too vividly to her mind."

"I hardly follow you there," said Claude, with a keen look. "The fact to which you refer cannot exist for your wife. To her the novel can only be a second telling of the story related by you, when she wished to know who I was."

"That is very true. Nevertheless, it made so painful an impression on her excitable nature that I am unwilling that her memory should be refreshed. Take another glass of wine, my boy."

Hilliston evidently wished to turn the conversation, but Claude was too determined on learning the truth to deviate from his course. Slowly filling his glass with claret he pushed the jug toward Hilliston, and pursued his questioning:

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"The American nature is rather excitable, isn't it? By the way, is Mrs. Hilliston a pure-blooded Yankee?"

"Yes," said Hilliston, with suspicious promptitude; "she was a Chicago belle, and married a millionaire in the pork line called Derrick. He died soon after the marriage, so she came to England and married me."

"It was her first visit to England, no doubt."

"Her first visit," replied Hilliston gravely. "All her former life was passed in New York, Boston, and Chicago. But what odd questions you ask," added the lawyer, in a vexed tone. "Surely you do not think that my wife was at Horrison twenty-five years ago, or that she knows aught of this crime save what I have told her?"

"Of course, I think nothing of the sort," said Larcher hastily, and what is more he believed what he said. It was impossible that Mrs. Hilliston, American born and bred, who had only been in England twelve years, should know anything of an obscure crime committed in a dull provincial town thirteen years before the date of her arrival. Hitherto his questionings had eventuated in little, so he turned the conversation into another groove, and tried to learn if Hilliston knew anything of Jenny Paynton.

"What do you think of John Parver?"

"He seemed an intelligent young fellow. Is that his real name?"

"No. His name is Frank Linton, the son of the vicar of Thorston."

"What! He belongs to the place whither you go with Tait," exclaimed Hilliston, with a startled air. "That is strange. You may learn there whence he obtained the materials for his novel."

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"I know that. He obtained them from Miss Paynton."

"Who is she?"

"A literary young lady who lives at Thorston with her folks. But I fancy Linton mentioned that he had told you about her."

"Well he did and he didn't," said Hilliston, in some confusion; "that is, he admitted that the story was founded on fact, but he did not tell me whence he obtained such facts. I suppose it is your intention to question this young lady."

"Yes. I want to know how she heard of the matter."

"Pooh! Read it in a provincial newspaper, no doubt."

"I think not," replied Claude, with some point. "It is next to impossible that she should come across a paper containing an account of the trial. People don't keep such grewsome matters by them, unless they have an interest in doing so."

"Well, this young lady cannot be one of those persons. How old is she?"

"Four-and-twenty!"

"Ah!" said Hilliston with a sigh of relief, "she was not born when your father was murdered. You must see she can know nothing positive of the matter."

"Then how did she supply Linton with the materials for this book?"

"I can only answer that question by reverting to my theory of the newspaper."

"Well, even granting that it is so," said Larcher quickly, "she knows details of the case which are not set forth in the newspaper." [pg 143]

"How do you know this?" asked Hilliston, biting his lip to control his feelings.

"Because in the third volume——"

"Nonsense! nonsense!" interrupted Hilliston violently, "you seem to forget that the hard facts of the case have been twisted and turned by the novelist's brain. We do not know who slew your father, but the novelist had to end his story,—he had to solve the mystery,—and he has done so after his own fashion."

Rising from his seat, he paced hurriedly to and fro, talking the while with an agitation strange in so hard and self-controlled a man.

"For instance, the character of Michael Dene is obviously taken from me. It is not a bit like me, of course, either in speech, or looks, or dress. All the novelist knew was that I had given evidence at the trial, and that the dead man had been my dearest friend. The circumstances suggested a striking dramatic situation—that the dear friend had committed the crime for the base love of the wife. Michael Dene is guilty in the novel—but the man in real life, myself——You know all I know of the case. I would give ten years of my life, short as the span now is, to find the man who killed George Larcher."

This was strong speaking, and carried conviction to the heart of Claude, the more so when Hilliston further explained himself.

"On the night of the murder I was at the ball three miles off. I knew nothing of the matter till I was called upon to identify the corpse of your father. It was hardly recognizable, and the face was much disfigured, but I recognized him by the color of his hair and the seal on his finger." [pg 144]

"How was it that my father was dressed as Darnley?"

"John Parver explains that," said Hilliston sharply. "Jeringham—I forget his name in the novel—was dressed as Darnley, and I believe, as is set forth in the book, that George Larcher assumed the dress so that under his mask your mother might mistake him for Jeringham. Evidently she did so, as he learned that she loved Jeringham——"

"One moment," interposed Claude quickly, "my mother denies that Jeringham was her lover."

"Your mother?"

"Mrs. Bezel."

"True; I forgot for the moment that you knew she was alive. No doubt she is right; and Jeringham was only her friend. But in the novel he is her lover; Michael Dene, drawn from myself, is her lover. You see fact and fiction are so mixed up that there is no getting at the truth."

"I shall get at the truth," said Claude quietly.

"Never. After such a lapse of time you can discover nothing. Better let the dead past bury its dead. I advised you before. I advise you now. You will only torture your life, cumber it with a useless task. George Larcher is dead and buried, and dust by this time. No one knows who killed him, no one ever shall know."

"I am determined to learn the truth!"

"I hope you may, but be advised. Leave this matter alone. You do not know what misery you may be laying up for yourself. Why, you have not even a clew to start from! Unless," added Hilliston, with a sneer, "you follow the example of the novelist and elucidate the mystery by means of the scarfpin."

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Again Tait was right. Hilliston had himself introduced the subject of the scarfpin. Claude immediately took advantage of the opening.

"I suppose that episode is fiction?"

"Of course it is. No scarfpin was found in the garden. Nothing was found but the dagger. You know that Michael Dene is supposed to drop that scarfpin on the spot. Well, I am the living representative of Michael Dene, and I assure you I never owned a garnet cross with a central diamond."

"Is that the description of the scarfpin?"

"Yes. Do you not remember? A small Maltese cross of garnets with a diamond in the center. The description sounds fictitious. Who ever saw such an ornament in real life. But in detective novels the solution of the mystery turns on such gew-gaws. A scarfpin, a stud, a link, a brooch—all these go to hang a man—in novels."

This assertion that the episode of the scarfpin was fiction was in direct contradiction to that of Tait, who declared it to be true. Claude was torn by conflicting doubts, but ultimately put the matter out of his thoughts. Miss Paynton alone could give a correct opinion as to whether it had emanated from her fertile brain, or was really a link in the actual case. Judging from the speech of Hilliston, and the silence of the newspaper reports, Claude believed that Tait was wrong.

The lawyer and his guest did not go to the drawing room, as Mrs. Hilliston sent word that she was going to bed with a bad headache. Under the circumstances Claude took his leave, having, as he thought, extracted all necessary information from Hilliston. Moreover, he was anxious to get back to Tait's chambers and hear what the little man had to tell him about Mrs. Bezel. Hilliston said good-by to him at the door.

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"I shall see you at Eastbourne, I suppose," he said genially.

"Yes. I will drive over and tell you what Miss Paynton says."

The door closed, and Hilliston, with a frown on his face, stood looking at the floor. He was by no means satisfied with the result of the interview.

"I wish I could stop him," he muttered, clenching his fist; "stop him at any price. If he goes on he will learn the truth, and if he learns the truth—ah——"

He drew a long breath, and went upstairs to his wife. As he ascended the stairs it seemed to him as though he heard the halting step of Nemesis following stealthily behind.

CHAPTER XIX.

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TAIT BRINGS NEWS.

As quick as a fast hansom could take him, Claude drove to Earls Street, and found Tait impatiently waiting his arrival. The little man had a look of triumph in his eyes, which showed that his interview with Mrs. Bezel had been to some purpose. Dormer had placed wine and biscuits on the table, and, made hungry by his long journey to Hampstead, Tait was partaking of these modest refreshments when Claude entered the room.

"I thought you were never coming," said he, glancing at his watch; "past ten o'clock. You must have had an interesting conversation with Hilliston to stay so long."

"I have had a very interesting conversation. And you?"

"Oh, I got back thirty minutes ago, after being more than an hour with your mother."

"Was she disappointed at my non-appearance?"

"Very much so, but I explained that you had to dine with Hilliston. She did not seem to like that either."

"Absurd! She thinks no end of Hilliston, and advised me to see as much of him as possible."

"Nevertheless, the idea that you were dining with him did not please her; I could only quiet her by telling all I know about Mrs. Hilliston."

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When Tait made this remark Claude was taking off his cloak, but he paused in doing so to ask a question.

"What possible interest can my mother have in Mrs. Hilliston?"

"I don't know. But she asked me who she was, and where she came from. Insisted on a description of her looks, and altogether pumped me dry on the subject. I suppose she wished to know something of Hilliston's domestic felicity, and, as he has not enlightened her on the subject, applied to me."

This explanation, which was accepted implicitly by Claude, was by no means the truth. With his usual sharpness Tait had noted Mrs. Bezel was profoundly jealous of the lawyer's wife, and from this, and sundry other hints, had drawn conclusions by no means flattering to the lady herself. Still, as she was Claude's mother, he had too much good breeding, and too much liking for his friend, to state his belief—which was that the bond between Mr. Hilliston and Mrs. Bezel was not of so harmless a nature as they would have the world believe.

With this idea in his head, Tait began to look at the case from the point of view adopted by John Parver. Might it not be true that Hilliston was the secret lover of the wife and the murderer of the husband? Certainly the efforts he was making to stay Claude in solving the mystery gave color to the idea. If he were innocent of crime and illicit passion he would surely be anxious to hasten, instead of retarding, the discovery. Tait's private opinion was that Hilliston had the crime of murder on his soul, but for obvious reasons, not unconnected with Mrs. Bezel, he did not care to speak openly to Larcher. On the contrary, while admitting a disbelief in the lawyer, he feigned a doubt of his complicity in the matter which he was far from feeling.

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Under these circumstances he had advised Claude to leave the matter alone, for he dreaded the effect on his friend's mind when he learned the truth.

Whether Hilliston proved innocent or not, the unraveling of the mystery would necessarily result in the disclosure of the relations existing between him and Mrs. Bezel. Tait shrank from pursuing investigations likely to lead to such a result, but the determination of Claude to avenge his father's murder left him no option. Against his better judgment he was urged along the path of discovery; but trusted when the time came to soften the blow of the inevitable result.

In silence he heard the story related by Claude of the evening at Hilliston's, and did not comment on the information thus given so speedily as Larcher expected. He thought it wiser to delay any remarks till he had told the young man of his interview with Mrs. Bezel.

"I need not go into details, Claude," he said, anxious not to say too much, "but will tell you as shortly as I can. Mrs. Bezel—it is more convenient to speak of her so than to call her your mother—is not pleased that you should try and solve this mystery."

"I know that. She thinks it is hopeless, and is unwilling that I should waste my time to no purpose. But she should have thought of that before inducing Hilliston to show me the paper. Now it is too late, and for my own satisfaction, if not for hers, I must go on with the matter. Did you relate our conversation with Linton?"

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"Yes. And she takes the same view of it as Hilliston. That Miss Paynton got the case from a bundle of old newspapers."

"What do you think yourself?"

"I still hold to my opinion," said Tait quietly. "The affair was related to Jenny by someone who lived in Horrison at the time the murder took place. Else she would never have given Linton that fact about the scarfpin, which, as we know, is not mentioned in the report of the trial."

"Hilliston says that the episode is fiction."

"Mrs. Bezel says it is fact."

"What! Was a scarfpin of garnets really found in the grounds of The Laurels?"

"It was. Mrs. Bezel described the jewel to me, and asserted that it was discovered near the bank of the stream."

"Does she know to whom it belonged?"

"No! She had no recollection of having seen it before. Neither your father nor Jeringham wore a scarfpin of that pattern."

"It is curious that Hilliston should insist that such a pin never existed."

"It is very curious," assented Tait significantly, "especially as it was shown to him by Denis Bantry. This one fact ought to convince you that Hilliston is playing us false."

"My doubts were confirmed by his manner to-night," replied Claude gloomily. "I don't know what his reason may be, or how I can reconcile his present behavior with his kindness to my mother, but he certainly seems anxious to thwart us if he can." [pg 151]

Tait guessed what the reason was very well, but was too wise to explain himself. Granted that a bond existed between Mrs. Bezel and the lawyer, and the whole thing became clear, but Mrs. Bezel was Claude's mother, so Tait held his peace.

"Why wasn't the scarfpin produced at the trial?" asked Claude, seeing his friend made no answer.

"Only one man can answer that question—Denis Bantry."

"Does my mother know where he is?"

"No. She has not set eyes on him since she left Horrison."

"It is strange that he should have suppressed so important a piece of evidence," said Claude meditatively, "devoted as he was to my father. I should have thought he would have done his best to bring the murderer to justice."

"Perhaps he did not know who the murderer was. However, there is no doubt that the scarfpin must have told him something about which he judged it wise to hold his tongue. Perhaps Miss Paynton can enlighten us on the subject."

"Then she must know Denis Bantry."

"So I think," said Tait thoughtfully. "The episode of the scarfpin was only known to your mother, to Hilliston, and to Bantry. Jenny Paynton does not know your mother, who denied all knowledge of her. She cannot be acquainted with Hilliston, or he certainly would not have let her make use of the affair for Linton's book, even if he had told her. There only remains Denis Bantry. Now, I know that Jenny has lived all her life at Thorston, so if she saw this man anywhere it must have been there." [pg 152]

"Is there anyone in the neighborhood you think is he?" asked Larcher, greatly excited.

"None that I can call to mind. But then, I don't know the neighborhood very well. We must make a thorough exploration of it when we are down there."

"Certainly. But it seems to me that the only one who can put us in the right track is the girl."

"True enough. I only hope she will be amenable to reason."

Larcher poured himself out a glass of wine and drank it slowly. Then he lighted his pipe and returned to his chair with a new idea in his head.

"I wonder why Hilliston told that lie about the scarfpin, Tait?"

"Ask me something easier. I cannot say. We'll learn nothing from him. My dear fellow, it is no use asking further questions of your guardian or of your mother. We have found out all from them that we can. Nothing now remains but to see Jenny Paynton."

"Quite right. And we go to Thorston to-morrow?"

"By the ordinary train. I have written for the dogcart to meet us. By this time next week we may know a great deal—we may know the truth."

"That is, if Hilliston doesn't thwart us. He is going down to Eastbourne, remember."

"I know. But I intend to get what the Americans call the 'inside running,' by seeing Jenny to-morrow evening. The whole case turns on her explanation of the scarfpin episode.

"Well," said Claude, knocking the ashes out of his pipe, "we found Linton through his book, we found Jenny through Linton. Through her we may find Denis Bantry."

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"And through Denis Bantry we may find the man who killed your father," finished Tait triumphantly.

"Well, I know what the name of the man will be."

"What will it be?"

"Jeringham."

Tait shrugged his shoulders. Knowing what he did he was by no means certain on that point.

CHAPTER XX.

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A PRÉCIS OF THE CASE.

A MONTH ago had anyone prophesied that I, Spenser Tait, would be engaged in playing the part of an amateur detective, I should have flatly contradicted his prognostication. Yet here I am doing my best to solve the mystery which hangs round the death of my friend's father. I cannot say that I object to the task, for there is something tremendously exciting in this man hunt. My friendship for Claude is the principal factor which induces me to meddle with the business; but a slight flavoring of selfishness is also present.

Hitherto we had been fairly successful, and have at least found a clew likely to lead to some certain result. Between Mrs. Bezel, Hilliston, and Linton's book, we have learned a good deal of the case; and all our knowledge points to an interview with Jenny Paynton as the next step to be taken.

To-morrow we start for Thorston for this purpose, but before exploring the new field I judge it wise to set down all the facts which have come to our knowledge, and to deduce therefrom, if possible, a logical reason for our future actions. I have my suspicions, but these are vague and intangible. Claude has his suspicions, but these do not coincide with mine. He believes Jeringham to be guilty of the crime. I think Hilliston is likely to prove the assassin. Both of us may be wrong.

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To take the case of Mr. Hilliston. His attitude is decidedly aggressive at the present moment, and he is doing his best to dissuade Claude from investigating the case. Why should he do so? George Larcher was his dearest friend, and met with a cruel fate. If there is any chance of his fate being avenged, surely Hilliston should be the first to prosecute the inquiries. Instead of doing so he hangs back, and throws cold water on my efforts and on Claude's. He must have some reason for his actions. Is that reason to be found at Clarence Cottage in Hampstead?

This question brings me to a delicate point. My work is hampered by the fact that Mrs. Bezel is Claude's mother, and I dare not express myself as I should wish. I gather from the report of the trial that Mrs. Larcher was a vain and silly coquette, who threw away the love of a good man for the indulgence of her own selfish instincts. Guilty she may have been, but not with Jeringham. If she had any lover, it was Francis Hilliston. After a visit to Clarence Cottage I believe the view taken of the case by the novelist to be the right one.

During my interview with Mrs. Bezel I noted her every look and action. When Hilliston's name occurred she flushed up and looked savage; she was anxious to know all about the wife at Kensington Gore, and in every way showed that she had more interest in the man than she cared to confess. Again, she told me that her illness was of ten years' duration. Hilliston has been

married ten years. What is more likely than that he should have wearied of the invalid, and so deserted her for Mrs. Derrick, the rich widow.

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Mrs. Bezel is jealous of Hilliston and of his wife. Her love has changed to hatred, and I verily believe that she would harm him if she could. Already she has attempted to do so, for it was only her threat to reveal all to Claude that made Hilliston produce that report of the Larcher affair. She has told me all she knows, but I cannot help thinking that she is keeping back certain facts connected with the case. There is a hesitancy and doubt in her speech which points to some secret. If I could learn that secret it might establish the guilt of Hilliston.

And yet I cannot believe that. No woman, however vain, however frivolous, would have lived with the man who murdered her husband, who slew the father of her child. Mrs. Bezel's secret may not directly inculpate Hilliston, but it may point toward him as the possible assassin. But I cannot believe that she thinks him guilty. Their relations with one another forbids so horrible a supposition.

Nevertheless, Hilliston is afraid of the truth coming to light. He denies that the garnet scarfpin ever existed, while Mrs. Bezel said she saw it herself. If the lawyer is not afraid, why should he tell a deliberate lie? It is his word against that of Mrs. Bezel, and as her statement is backed up by the description in the novel, I believe she is telling the truth. Can it be possible that the scarfpin belonged to Hilliston and was dropped by him in the garden of The Laurels on the night of the struggle?

Here Hilliston proves an alibi. He stated to Claude that at the hour of three o'clock, when the crime was presumably committed, he was at the ball in the Horrison Town Hall. If that can be proved, he must, perforce, be innocent.

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Another supposition: Can Mrs. Larcher be actually guilty of her husband's death, and, knowing this, is Hilliston anxious to stop Claude in his investigations lest he should learn so terrible a truth? I cannot believe this, for Mrs. Larcher, or Bezel, set the ball rolling herself, and were she guilty she certainly would not have run such risk.

Then, again, Jeringham fled on the night of the murder. For what reason? If Hilliston killed Larcher why should Jeringham fly? If Mrs. Bezel killed her husband why should Jeringham fly? I see no reason in his flight, and yet if he were guilty and Hilliston knew him to be guilty why should he try and screen him at the present time? Altogether the case is so confusing that I do not know what to think or whom to suspect.

I wonder what has become of Mona Bantry and her child? Mrs. Bezel said she had not seen the girl or her brother for twenty-five years. Yet they must be somewhere. Circumstances point to Jenny Paynton having heard the story of the tragedy from Denis, for no one else could have revealed the episode of the scarfpin, or have described the jewel. If Denis told her he must live at Thorston, and if he lives there his sister must be with him. If this pair, who were in the house on the night of the murder, can be found, the truth may come to light.

After searching Thorston and finding out all I can from the Bantrys,—presuming them to be there,—it is my intention to go down to Horrison and find out someone who remembers the case. In spite of the lapse of time there must be some old people alive who danced at that ball in their hot youth. They may be able to say if George Larcher was there present in the character of Darnley, and at what time Hilliston left the ball. I may also hear what they think of Jeringham, and of the conduct of Mrs. Bezel. In making these investigations I shall not take Claude, as I shrewdly suspect the opinions of these oldsters regarding his mother are anything but flattering to that lady. If I go to Horrison I must go alone.

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On reading over these notes I am hardly satisfied with them. They do not seem to give me much basis on which to work. I suspect this person and the other, but I have very little evidence to back me up in such suspicions. The only thing that seems clear to me is that Hilliston has some object in thwarting our plans. What the object is I must find out. Perhaps I shall do so at Thorston, where I am certain to meet both Hilliston and his wife.

And that reminds me of what Claude related about her emotion this evening. It is certainly curious, but the worst of dabbling in detective business is that one is apt to get over-suspicious. In this case I think there is no ground for suspicion. Mrs. Hilliston is an American, and came to England twelve years ago. I know this for certain, for I remember when she made her *début* in society. This being the case, she cannot possibly have any connection with Horrison, and her emotion must have been merely the recollection of the story related by her husband when he told her of Claude.

Well, it is past midnight, and I had better end these unsatisfactory notes. Detective business is harder than I thought. How am I to evolve order out of all this chaos I hardly know, save to trust to luck and Jenny Paynton. And so to bed, as saith worthy Samuel Pepys.

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CHAPTER XXI.

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THORSTON.

It is astonishing how closely one village resembles another in appearance. The square-towered church, the one winding street, the low-roofed inn, and red-tiled cottages, isolated by narrow alleys; corn lands and comfortable farms around, and still further the mansions, more or less stately, of the county families. Go where you will in the southern countries, all the villages are so constituted; one description serves for all, though on occasions the expanse of the Channel introduces a new feature into the landscape. Thorston was of the same class, but, in its own opinion, had more pretensions to grandeur than its neighbors.

Before the Conquest it had been a considerable Saxon town, and, as its name indicates, had flourished before the introduction of Christianity into England. There, according to tradition, a temple to Thor the Thunderer had stood on the hill now crowned with the church; hence the name of Thor's town. Report said that Edward the Confessor had built the church, but of his work little remained, and the present building was due to the piety or fears of a Norman baron, who wished to expiate his sins after the fashion of those times, by erecting a house to some interceding saint. In the present instance this church was dedicated to St. Elfrida, the holy daughter of Athelstan, who renounced her father's court to found a nunnery by the winding river Lax, famous for salmon, as is plainly hinted by its Scandinavian appellation. Yet notwithstanding church and tradition, Thorston had never since been of much importance, and it was now but an ordinary rural village, quaint and sleepy.

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From Eastbourne the road, winding, dipping, rising, and curving like a white snake, ran over hill, through dale, along plain, till it ultimately formed the High Street of Thorston. Thence it ran again into the country, but at this point it made its way between houses, thatched and old; and toward the center opened into a market-place adorned by an antique cross. The Inn of St. Elfrida, with an effigy of the saint for a sign, stood on the right of this square, fronting the battered cross; directly opposite a narrow road led on to the village green, at the end of which rose the low hill whereon the Church of St. Elfrida stood amid its trees. Lower down by the Lax could be seen the ruins of her nunnery, and a well frequented by her was to be inspected in the near neighborhood. Here, said the legend, she fought with the devil, who strove to carry away the tower of the church, and being worsted, as the demons always were by Mother Church, he dropped the tower a few yards off the main building. As a matter of fact the square tower is detached from the church, but, as has before been stated, it was built by the Normans long after Elfrida was laid to rest. But the legend took no account of dates, nor did the natives of Thorston, who would have been highly offended had anyone denied the authenticity of their story. In confirmation thereof they referred to the guide book—a notable authority truly.

The whole neighborhood was full of St. Elfrida, who must have been a busy saint in her day, and numerous tourists came to view church, and tower, and holy well. The village derived quite an income from her reputation, and valued the saint accordingly. Amid ancient oaks stood the gray church with its detached tower; around lichened tombstones leaned over one another, and rank grass grew up to the verge of the low stone wall which ran like a battlement round the crest of the little hill. A flight of rugged steps led up to the lych-gate, and here stood a pretty girl in converse with Frank Linton, alias John Parver.

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It was a hot summer's day, and the golden light, piercing through the foliage of the trees, enveloped the girl in a glittering haze. She was extremely pretty; dark-eyed, dark-haired, with a complexion of roses and lilies, and as neat a figure as was ever seen. Envious people said that Miss Paynton pinched her waist, but such was not the case, for she was too careless of her appearance, and too careful of her health, to sacrifice the latter to the former. As a matter of fact, she appreciated brains more than beauty, and much preferred to exercise the first in clever conversation than to be complimented on the second. Linton, who had known her for many years, skillfully combined the two modes of paying homage to his divinity. That he received hard words in return was to be expected, for Jenny knew her power over the youth, and liked to exercise it. She was the least vain of mortals, but could not hide from herself that she was clever and pretty, and therefore entitled to indulge in coquetry.

"You grow more beautiful every day, Jenny," said Linton, who had lately arrived from town and was making up for lost time.

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"And you more stupid," retorted Miss Paynton, climbing up on the low wall, where she sat and smiled at him from under her straw hat. "If you have come here to pay me compliments you can go away again. I want you to talk sense, not nonsense."

"What shall I talk about?"

"As if there were any question of that," said she, in supreme disdain. "Are you not famous now? Tell me of your success."

"You know about it already. I sent you all the papers. 'A Whim of Fate,' is the book of the season."

"Oh, just think of that now! Oh, lucky, lucky Frank! So young and so successful. You ought to be happy."

"I am happy, because I now see a chance of making you my——"

"Now you are talking nonsense," cried Jenny, ruthlessly interrupting him. "I won't hear a word more, you ridiculous boy. You are my brother, nothing more."

"But——"

"Don't talk about it, Frank. Be sensible. Come now, you have not yet told me how your father received the news."

"Oh, he is pleased, of course," said Linton, unwillingly changing the subject; "but he reserves his opinion till he has read the book. If he doesn't like it he'll very likely order me to stop writing."

"I'm sure he won't," said Jenny promptly. "You'll make more as an author than as a lawyer."

"No doubt, if you continue to supply me with such excellent plots. I wish I had your invention, Jenny."

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"It was not invention. You know that quite well. I found an account of the trial in an old bundle of provincial newspapers. I couldn't have made up such a story."

"Jenny," asked Linton, with some apprehension, "has your father read the book?"

"No; I asked him to do so, but he refuses to read novels. History is what he likes—kings and dates, and battles. Father wouldn't waste a minute over fiction."

"I hope he won't be angry at your giving me the plot, Jenny."

Miss Paynton stared at him in surprise, and burst into a merry laugh. His objection seemed supremely ridiculous to her at that moment.

"My dear boy, why should he? The account of an old murder case can have nothing to do with him. I found the papers in the garret among a heap of old books. I don't suppose he knows of their existence."

"It was a real case, wasn't it?"

"Yes; it took place at Horrison in 1866. But of course the public need not know that."

"Well, I told someone about it."

"Oh, you are an idiot, Frank; or else," added Jenny more graciously, "you are very honest. I suppose you explained that the story was founded on fact?"

"Yes."

"Who asked you about it?"

"Three people. An old gentleman, and two young men."

"What are their names?" asked Jenny curiously.

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"I forget. The third one was called Tait, I think, but I don't remember the names of the other two. It doesn't matter, you know," continued the novelist hastily; "lots of authors found their plots on episodes in real life."

"Oh, it's of no consequence," said Jenny idly. "I suppose they thought the plot was too clever for you to invent. At all events the credit is due to you for solving the mystery."

"Ah! But did I solve it properly? Do you think Michael Dene committed the crime?"

"No, I don't!" rejoined Jenny promptly. "I think Jeringham did."

"Jeringham. Who is he?"

"I forgot," said Jenny, with some dismay, "I did not tell you the real names of the people. Jeringham is the man you call Markham in the book. If you remember, I wanted you to make him commit the crime."

"If I had done so no one would have read the book," protested the author. "His flight made it so patent that he was guilty; and I had to put the crime on to someone like Dene, whom no reader would suspect. Do you think that Markham—Jeringham really committed the murder?"

"Yes, I do. If he was innocent why did he fly?"

"Was he ever found again," asked Linton, with some curiosity.

"Never! It is five-and-twenty years ago since the murder was committed, and it is a mystery to this day."

"I'd like to read that newspaper report for myself," said the author, after a pause. "Could you not let me see it?"

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Jenny shook her head. "I'm afraid not," she replied guiltily. "You see Kerry found me with the papers one day and took them away. He was very angry, and said I had no business to look at them."

"My stars!" cried Linton, in a startled tone; "what will he say when he finds out that you and I have made use of them?"

"He won't find out," replied Jenny, jumping down off the wall. "Kerry never reads novels, and no one will tell him. Oh, it's quite safe, Frank, quite safe."

"I'm not so sure of that, Jenny. My father will talk about my book to Mr. Paynton, and he'll tell Kerry."

"Well, what if he does," cried Jenny, skipping down the steps. "I'm sure I don't care if Kerry does know. Who cares for a musty, fusty old crime of five-and-twenty years ago? Don't trouble about it, Frank. I'll take the blame."

Linton walked on in silence beside her, and they entered the market place on their way to the vicarage. He was beginning to have some qualms about the matter. Kerry had a very bad temper, and Linton was by no means anxious to encounter him.

"I wish we had left it alone," he said gloomily, pausing by the cross in the square.

"Nonsense! Don't be a moral coward," said Jenny pettishly. "I'll take the blame on myself. Kerry can't kill me be—"

At this point she was interrupted by a dog-cart containing two young men, which spun past rapidly. The driver took off his hat to Miss Paynton with a smile.

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"Oh!" said Jenny composedly, when the vehicle had vanished, "there is our new Lord of the Manor, Mr. Tait."

"Why, those are the two fellows who questioned me about my story!" cried Linton.

"Are they? Yes, you mentioned the name of Tait," said Jenny quietly; "but what does it matter? What a fuss you make over nothing."

"Jenny," said Linton solemnly, "there is going to be trouble over that story."

Miss Paynton stared at him in surprise, then pointed an accusing finger at him.

"Francis Linton," she said slowly, "you are a silly fool. If ever I help you again in your writing, I give you leave to marry me."

Then she ran away and left him dumfounded in the market place. But she was by no means so light-hearted as she appeared to be. Kerry's anger, the questions of the two strangers, made her feel uneasy, and she thought it would have been better had she left the provincial newspapers in the garret. But Fate decided otherwise, and Jenny Paynton, though she knew it not, was an unconscious instrument to revive interest in a forgotten case, to solve a mystery of five-and-twenty years, and to bring an unknown criminal to justice. Life is a chess board, we are the puppets, and Fate plays the game.

CHAPTER XXII.

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IN THE CHURCH.

THORSTON MANOR, built in broad meadow land, about a quarter of a mile from the village, was now the property of Spencer Tait. He had purchased it lately at a small price from old Miss Felcar, the last representative of that ancient family. She, unable to maintain the house in its original splendor, got quit of it altogether in this way, and shortly afterward took up her quarters at Eastbourne, leaving the house of her ancestors in the possession of a stranger.

The house itself was of no great pretensions, or age, dating only from the second George—a square, red-brick mansion, only redeemed from actual ugliness by the mellow beauty of its hues. The grounds themselves were better, and the trees best of all. An avenue curved nobly to the gate, which gave on the highroad, and to the right of this, fronting the house, was a delightful garden, laid out in the Dutch fashion. There were yew trees cut into quaint shapes, stiff and formal hedges running in straight lines, and beds of old-fashioned flowers. A fountain, a summer house, and a statue or two completed the furniture of this pleasant ground, to which Tait introduced his friend with unconcealed pride.

"I paid for this," he said, looking round as they paced the broad walks. "By itself the house is a monstrosity, only rendered endurable by its years; but you must confess that the garden is worth the money."

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"It is certainly quaint," replied Larcher, looking around with an absent air, "but I do not care for nature in buckram. The formality of this place offends my eye."

"Ah, my dear fellow, you have been used to the wildness of New Zealand woods of late. You will find these grounds grow on you. I shall leave you alone this afternoon to make the attempt."

"Indeed," said Larcher, in some surprise at this cavalier treatment, "and what do you intend to do?"

"I am going to church."

"To church—on a week-day?"

"Oh, I am not bent on devotion, Claude. But Miss Paynton is the organist of the parish. To-day is Wednesday, when she is accustomed to practice between three and five. I propose to see her there."

"Why?"

"Can't you guess? To forestall her with Hilliston. That gentleman is at Eastbourne, and will probably come over to-day or to-morrow to ask Jenny to hold her tongue. As we can't afford to run such a risk, I must get all I can out of her to-day."

"Can I come also?"

"No!" replied Tait promptly. "It would be necessary for me to introduce you."

"What of that? Does it matter?"

"It matters a great deal. Miss Paynton has, we believe, obtained the plot of Linton's novel from a report of the trial. She will know the name of Larcher, and when she hears that you are called so, she will probably take fright and hold her tongue."

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"But why should she think I have anything to do with the case?"

"Your own name. Your guardian's," answered Tait quietly. "Both are mentioned in the report of the trial. Oh, I assure you, Jenny is a clever girl, and knows that two and two make four. She will put this and that together, with the result that nothing will be gained by the interview."

"Well, well, go alone," said Claude crossly; "though I envy you the chance. She is a pretty girl, from the glimpse I caught of her."

"And as wise as she is pretty," laughed Tait. "I will need all my wits to deal with her. Now, is it settled?"

"Yes. You go to your organist, and I'll potter about these green alleys and think myself an abbe of Louis XIV.'s time."

Having come to this amicable understanding, they went in to luncheon, after which Tait gave Claude a sketch of the people in the neighborhood. Later on he sent him into the Dutch garden with a cigar and a book, then betook himself by a short cut through the park to the Church of St. Elfrida. Shortly after four he entered by the main door, and found himself in the aisle listening to the rolling notes of the organ.

There was no attempt at decoration in that church, for the vicar was broad in his views, and hating all ritualism from his soul, took a pride in keeping the edifice bare and unadorned. The heavy arches of gray stone, the white-washed walls, with here and there a mural tablet, the plain communion table under the single stained-glass window; nothing could be less attractive. Only the deep hues of roof and pews, the golden pipes of the organ, and the noble lectern, with its brazen eagle, preserved the church from looking absolutely irreverent. Through the glazed windows of plain glass poured in the white light of day, so that the interior lacked the reverent gloom, most fitted to the building, and the marks of time were shown up in what might be termed a cruel manner. Of old, St. Elfrida's had been rich in precious marbles, in splendid altars, and gorgeous windows, many-hued and elaborate; but the Puritans had destroyed all these, and reduced the place to its present bareness, which the vicar took a pride in preserving. It seemed a shame that so noble a monument of Norman architecture should be so neglected.

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The red curtains of the organ loft hid the player, but Tait knew that it was Jenny by the touch, and sat down in a pew to wait till she had finished her practising. One piece followed the other, and the stately music vibrated among the arches in great bursts of sound, a march, an anthem, an offertory, till Tait almost fell asleep, lulled by the drone of the pipes. At length Jenny brought her performance to an end, and having dismissed the boy who attended to the bellows, tripped down the aisle with a music book under her arm. She looked as fresh and pink as a rose, but quite out of place in that bare, bleak building. Toward her Tait advanced with a bow.

"Here I am, you see, Miss Paynton," he said, shaking her by the hand. "I heard your music, and could not help coming in to listen. I hope you do not mind my intrusion."

"Oh, the Lord of the Manor can go anywhere," said Jenny demurely. "I am glad to see you again, Mr. Tait. The second time to-day, is it not?"

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"Yes; I drove past you in the market place, if I remember rightly. Won't you sit down, Miss Paynton, and give me all the news. I am terribly ignorant of local gossip, I assure you."

Nothing loath, the girl seated herself in a pew near the door, and occupied herself in fixing her glove. Remembering the conversation with Linton, she was slightly uneasy at Tait's very direct request, but thinking that it could not possibly have anything to do with the plot of Linton's novel, resigned herself to circumstances. Before the conversation ended she wished that she had refused to speak to Tait at that moment; but it was then too late.

"News," she repeated with a laugh, "do we ever have any news in this dreary place. I should rather ask you for news, Mr. Tait, who are fresh from London."

"Oh, but no doubt our young author has already told you all that is worth hearing," said Tait, deftly leading up to his point; "he has been quite the lion of the season."

"Yes. He has been very fortunate," replied Jenny carefully. She did not relish the sudden introduction of this forbidden subject.

"And he owes it to you, I believe."

"To me. Good gracious, Mr. Tait! what have I to do with Frank's success?"

"According to what he says, everything."

"What do you mean," she said, sitting up very straight, with a deeper color than usual on her cheek.

"Why," said Tait, looking directly at her, and thereby adding to her confusion, "Frank told me that you supplied the plot of 'A Whim of Fate.'" [pg 173]

"And what if I did, Mr. Tait?"

"Oh, nothing, only I must compliment you on your—shall we say selection or invention?"

"The former," replied Jenny, with extraordinary quickness. "Since Frank makes no secret of it, why should I? The plot was told him by me, and I found it set forth as a trial in a newspaper of 1866."

"H'm! In the *Canterbury Observer*, I believe?"

"How do you know that is the name of the paper?" she asked in a nervous tone.

"I learned it from the same source that supplied me with the history of the Larcher affair."

"What! You also know the name of the case?"

"As you see."

"Frank does not know it. I did not show him the papers. I suppressed all names when I told the story," she said incoherently; "but now you—you——"

"I know all. Yes, you are right," observed Tait complacently. "I am better acquainted with the plot of 'A Whim of Fate' than John Parver himself."

Jenny sat looking at him in a kind of wild amazement. From the significance of his tone, the extent of his knowledge, she vaguely felt that something was wrong. Again, the anger of Kerry, the conversation of Linton, came into her mind, and she saw into what difficulty the chance telling of that ancient crime had led her. Tait noticed that she was perplexed and frightened, so dexterously strove to set her more at ease by making a clean breast of it, and enlisting her sympathy for Claude.

"You saw the friend who was with me in the cart, Miss Paynton?" [pg 174]

"Yes. Who is he?"

"Claude Larcher!"

"Claude La—— What do you mean, Mr. Tait? I am in the dark. I do not understand. Have I done anything wrong in—in——"

"In telling the case to Linton?" finished Tait smoothly. "By no means. As a matter of fact you have done my friend a service."

"He is called Larcher! Who is he?" she asked again with an effort.

"He is the son of George Larcher, who was murdered at Horrison in 1866."

CHAPTER XXIII.

FACT AND FICTION.

A SILENCE ensued between them; Tait waiting to mark the effect of his revelation, while Jenny tried to grasp the idea that fiction had changed unexpectedly to fact. To her the case had been more or less of a romance, far removed and impossible; as such she had told it to Linton; but

now, brought face to face with the fact that the murdered man's son was in the neighborhood, she scarcely knew what to think, certainly she was ignorant what to say. The shock would have unstrung a more nervous woman, but Jenny Paynton was not wanting in pluck, and so braced herself up to do what was required of her. Yet it took her a little time to recover, and seeing this, Tait afforded her the opportunity by talking broadly of the matter; later on he intended to enter into details.

"I do not wonder you are startled, Miss Paynton," he said easily; "this is a coincidence such as we rarely meet with in real life. My friend was ignorant of his father's fate, but one evening papers were put into his hands which recounted the tragedy; papers similar to those whence you obtained the story. He came to tell me all, but scarcely had he begun his relation, when I became aware that I knew everything beforehand."

"Had you also seen the papers, Mr. Tait?"

"No; but I had read 'A Whim of Fate.' There I found the Larcher affair set forth in the guise of fiction. Astonished at this I sought out Linton, who, I learned, was the author hidden under the name of John Parver, and asked him whence he obtained his material. He mentioned your name, and so I have come to you."

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"Why?"

"Can you ask? To find out all you know of the matter."

"For what reason?"

"I think you can guess my reason," replied Tait quietly. "My friend Claude Larcher wishes to find out who killed his father."

"After five-and-twenty years? Impossible!"

"So I said at first. Now I am of a different opinion. In a short space of time we have found out a great deal. With your help we will discover more, and so in the end the matter may be cleared up."

"You want my help?"

"Decidedly! It is solely for that reason that Larcher and I have come here."

It was a pale-faced Jenny who sat considering a reply to this remark. She began to be aware that she had inadvertently set a ball rolling, the progress of which she was powerless to stop. That chance discovery in the garret had resuscitated an old scandal, and brought her into contact with people of whose existence she had hitherto been ignorant. As a matter of fact Jenny was responsible for the revival of the Larcher affair. Her narration of the plot had caused the writing of the novel, and that in its turn had freshened the memory of Mrs. Bezel, with the result that Claude had been told the truth. Now he had come to the source to learn more.

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"I don't see how I can help," said Jenny, fencing with the inevitable. "If, as you say, Mr. Larcher saw the *Canterbury Observer*, he must know as much as I do about the matter."

"Very true," replied Tait promptly; "but there are many things in the novel which are not mentioned in the report of the case."

"Those things are fictitious. You must go to Frank for information about them."

"Was that scarfpin episode fictitious?"

"No," replied Jenny, with some hesitation. "Kerry told me that."

"Kerry!"

"Our man-servant. He has been with my father ever since I can remember, and is quite the autocrat of the household. He found me with those papers one day after I told Frank the story, and took them away from me. You have no idea how angry he was that I had read them."

"Yet he told you about the scarfpin?"

"Oh! that was because I asked him who had committed the crime," said Jenny quickly. "At first he would not talk about it, but when I said that no doubt Jeringham was guilty, since he had

fled, Kerry denied it, and asserted that the crime was committed by the man who owned the garnet scarfpin."

"Did he say who owned it?"

"No. He went away before I could ask him, and will not let me speak of the matter. In the book Frank makes Michael Dene the owner of the pin."

"Ah! and Michael Dene is Francis Hilliston in real life."

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"How do you know that?" asked the girl quickly, with a nervous start.

"My dear young lady, I have read the report of the case and the novel. It is easy to see who your fictitious personages are. Do you know Mr. Hilliston?"

"A little. He has visited my father once or twice, but we have not seen him now for many years. In fact, I had almost forgotten his name till I saw it in the case."

"Humph! In the novel Michael Dene, the man meant for Hilliston, commits the crime. Was that your idea or Linton's?"

"It was Frank's. Dene was the least likely person to be suspected, and it was necessary to keep up the mystery to the end. But I think he ought to have made Markham commit the crime."

"Markham is Jeringham, is he not?" said Tait thoughtfully. "With your permission, Miss Paynton, we will use the real names, not the fictitious. It will help us to understand the matter more clearly."

Jenny stood up, and tucked the music book under her arm. The recollection of Kerry's anger made her feel that she was unwise to talk so freely to a stranger about the matter. Hitherto, Tait had taken his own way; now she was resolved to take hers.

"I don't want to speak any more about it," she said resolutely. "I am very sorry I told Frank the story, and meddled with those papers. Let me pass, Mr. Tait, and drop the subject."

"No, don't do that," cried Tait, rising in his turn, and barring her way. "You must not fail me at the eleventh hour. My friend is bent on learning the truth, and surely you will not grudge him help. Remember it is the murderer of his father whom he desires to bring to justice."

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"I can't say any more. I know no more, Mr. Tait. Do you know what I am about to do?"

"No," said Tait, looking at her grave face in some wonder.

"I am going home to tell my father and Kerry what use I made of those papers. If I have acted wrongly, it is but right that they should know."

"They will know shortly without your telling, Miss Jenny."

"Ah, you intend to speak of the matter yourself?"

"Perhaps! But in this case I allude to Hilliston."

"Hilliston!" repeated Jenny, in surprise. "What has he to do with the matter?"

"A great deal, I fancy. More than you or I suspect. He is now at Eastbourne, and I am certain he will come over here to see you to-morrow."

"To see me! Why?"

"Because he wants you to hold your tongue about these matters."

"Mr. Tait," she cried, with a sudden flush, "surely you are not biased by Frank's book? You imply that Mr. Hilliston is afraid of the truth."

"I think he is! In fact I am sure he is."

"Do you believe he committed that cowardly crime of twenty-five years ago?" asked Jenny, with scorn.

"What is your own opinion?" was the counter question.

"I believe that Jeringham was the murderer. Yes! Captain Larcher went in disguise to that ball, and learned the truth from the lips of his own wife. I believe she loved Jeringham. I believe he followed her home on that fatal night, urging her to fly. Then Captain Larcher appeared on the scene, and in the struggle that ensued he was killed. Jeringham fled, and Mrs. Larcher died. That, I am certain, is the true history of this crime."

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"You, then, think that Mrs. Larcher was privy to the murder?"

"Oh, I don't say that!" said the girl, shrinking back; "it is impossible to say. But I have no right to talk to you about these matters, Mr. Tait. I have told you all I know. Let me pass, please."

Tait bowed, and stood aside hat in hand. She flitted down the aisle, a slim girlish figure, and had arrived at the door when his voice arrested her.

"One moment, Miss Paynton," he said, following her quickly.

"What is it?"

"Don't tell your father of this for twenty-four hours."

"Why?"

"Because I want to prove to you that what I say is true. Hilliston will inform your father himself, and ask you to be silent."

"It is too late for that now—unfortunately."

"Why unfortunately? You should be glad to have strengthened the hands of justice. However, we need not speak of that now. Will you promise to withhold your confession for the time I ask?"

"I promise nothing, Mr. Tait. Good-evening!"

"But, Miss Paynton," he said, following her again, "you surely will not be so rash. You can have no idea how important these matters are to my friend. Mr. Hilliston is certain to inform your father within the next twenty-four hours, so surely you can give us that time to do what we can. I beg of you——"

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Jenny stopped irresolutely, and looked at Tait with a mixture of anger and doubt. The matter had now grown so intricate that she did not know what to do, what to say. She had not known Tait long enough to be guided by his advice, or to rely on his judgment; and her impulse was to tell her father and receive suggestions as to what was best to be done under the circumstances. Yet, she also mistrusted Hilliston, as his connection with the Horrison case seemed to her to be by no means as simple as had appeared at first sight. She was suspicious of him, and if he came over to Thurston especially to ask her to be silent, that would go a long way toward confirming her doubts. And then, after all, no harm could be done within the twenty-four hours, as afterward she could tell her father; thus, at once satisfying her conscience and her curiosity, she made the compromise.

"Very well, Mr. Tait," she said gravely. "I promise to be silent for twenty-four hours."

CHAPTER XXIV.

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A NEW SUSPICION.

SPENSER TAIT walked back to the Manor House with the pleasing conviction that he had passed a very profitable hour. He had warned Jenny about the probable movements of Hilliston, and thus had put her on her guard against that astute individual. Once an idea enters a woman's head, it is impossible to get it out again, and Tait, by half hinting a confirmation of Jenny's suspicions regarding the lawyer, had made her uneasily conscious that Hilliston was a man to be watched and reckoned with. If Hilliston fulfilled Tait's prophecy, the little man believed that Jenny would resent his interference, penetrate his motives, and thwart him, if possible. In spite of her denial that she thought him guilty, Tait could not but perceive that the reading of the case had not

biased her in favor of the dead man's friend. Jenny believed that Jeringham had committed the crime, but, if Hilliston acted indiscreetly, it would not take much to induce her to alter that opinion. Tait chuckled as he thought of these things; for he had not only cut the ground from under Hilliston's feet by warning Jenny of his possible arrival, but had, as he truly thought, converted a passive spectator into an active enemy.

Again, he had learned that it was the old servant who had informed the girl concerning the scarfpin episode. Kerry said that the man who owned the scarfpin was guilty; and Kerry knew to whom the scarfpin belonged. If he could only be induced to part with the information there might be some chance of solving the mystery; but Kerry's—or rather Denis Bantry's—past conduct and present attitude were so doubtful that it was difficult to know how he would act, even though he were driven into a corner. Tait had little doubt in his own mind that Kerry was the old servant of Captain Larcher, for no one but he knew the truth about the scarfpin. Nevertheless, he failed to understand why the man had changed his name, and why he was staying at Thorston as servant to a recluse like Paynton. Only a personal interview with him could settle these vexed questions, but Tait was of two opinions whether Kerry would be amenable to reason, and confess his reasons for such concealment.

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Thus thinking, and trying to come to some conclusion regarding the new aspect placed upon affairs by the conversation with Jenny, the little man arrived home, and learning that Claude was still in the garden, he went there to report the result of his interview, and discuss the situation. Larcher was leaning back in a comfortable garden chair, with an open book on his knee, but, instead of reading, he was staring with unseeing eyes into the fresh green of the tree above him. On hearing Tait's brisk step he hastily lowered his head with a flush, as though he had been caught doing something wrong, and grew still more confused when he saw his friend looking at him with a queer expression of amusement.

"She is a pretty girl," said Tait significantly; "and I don't wonder you are thinking of her."

"Thinking of who?" asked Claude merrily, at this reading of his thoughts. "Are you a mind reader?"

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"So far as you are concerned, I am. Knowing how easily influenced you are by the sight of a pretty face, I don't think I am far wrong in guessing that your thoughts were with Jenny Paynton."

"Well, yes," replied Claude, with a frank laugh. "I do not deny it. The glimpse I caught of her as we drove past in the cart charmed me greatly. I have rarely seen a more sympathetic and piquant face."

"Bah! You say that of every woman you meet. Your geese are always swans."

"Jenny is, at all events!" said Larcher promptly; "and you cannot deny that; but I admire her exceedingly—that is, as a pretty woman. You see, I already call her Jenny in my own mind, but that is because you always talk of her by her Christian name. Now, Jenny is——"

"My dear Don Juan," said Tait blandly; "don't you think we had better leave off these erotics and get to business. You must not indulge in the ideal to the exclusion of the real."

"Oh, not that business!" sighed Larcher wearily. "I don't believe we'll do any good with it. The mystery of my father's death is likely to remain one to the end of time for all I can see. Every trace is obliterated by the snows of twenty-five years."

"Not entirely, my friend. For instance, I have learned an important fact to-day."

"From Miss Paynton?"

"Yes. We had a long conversation, and she was considerably startled when she learned the object of your visit here."

"Was it wise of you to tell her?"

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"Why, yes," returned Tait decidedly. "We can do nothing without her help, and that she will refuse to give us unless she learns the reason of our inquiries."

"What is her opinion of the matter? The same as Linton's, I suppose?"

"By no means. She thinks that Jeringham killed your father; but I am not altogether sure that she does not suspect Hilliston. After all, she may come round to Linton's opinion before long."

"Did you tell her that we suspected Hilliston?" asked Claude anxiously.

"Not directly. But I permitted myself to hint as much. However, I only aided the seed of suspicion to sprout, for it was already implanted in her mind. You look astonished, Claude, but recall to your recollection the report of that case, and you will see that Hilliston was far too much mixed up in the matter to be as ignorant as he pretended to be at the trial. According to his evidence he had not left the ballroom, and consequently could have known nothing of the tragedy which was then being enacted at The Laurels. Yet, he knows details which, so far as I can see, prove him to have been an eye-witness."

Claude jumped to his feet, and began restlessly pacing up and down the gravel walk. He yet retained some belief in Hilliston, and was reluctant to think that one to whom he owed so much should be guilty of so foul a crime. It was true that certain circumstances looked black against him, but these were purely theoretical, and by no means founded on absolute facts. After due consideration Claude inclined to the belief that Tait was too easily satisfied of Hilliston's guilt, and was willing to accept any stray facts likely to confirm his theory. Thus biased he could not possibly look on the matter in a fair and equitable manner. The wish was altogether too greatly father to the thought.

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"I don't think you give Hilliston a fair show, Tait," he said, stepping before his friend. "If he winks an eye you look on it as a sign of his guilt. My mother assured me solemnly that Hilliston was at the ball when the tragedy occurred."

"Oh, in that case, I have nothing more to say," said Tait coldly. "Still," he added rather spitefully, "I should like to know why Mr. Hilliston is so anxious to keep the matter quiet."

"Tait!" said Claude hoarsely, sitting down by his friend and seizing his arm; "do you know I have often asked myself that question, and I have found a reply thereto; the only reply of which I can think."

He paused, and looked fearfully around; then wiped the sweat off his white face with a nervous gesture. Tait eyed him in amazement, and could not understand what had come over his usually self-possessed friend; but he had no time to speak, for Claude, with an irrepressible shiver, whispered in a low voice:

"What if my mother should be guilty, after all? Ah, you may well look astonished, but that is the hideous doubt which has haunted me for days. My mother says she ran at my father with a dagger, but fainted before she struck him. What if she did not faint; if she really killed him, and Hilliston, knowing this, is trying to screen her, and trying to save me from knowing the truth?"

"But, my dear fellow, the trial——"

"Never mind the trial. We now know that Denis swore falsely when he asserted that my father was not in the house on that night. We know that he was in the house, and that my mother found him with Mona Bantry. Her jealousy might have carried her to greater lengths than she intended to go. Denis saved her at the trial by telling a lie; but we know the truth, and I cannot rid myself of a doubt, that she may be guilty. If so, in place of being an enemy, Hilliston is acting the part of a friend in placing obstacles in our way."

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Tait shook his head. "I do not believe Mrs. Bezel is guilty," he said quietly; "if she had been, she would certainly not have written to you, and thus forced Hilliston to show you the papers. Banish the thought from your heart, Claude. I am as certain as I sit here that your mother is innocent of the crime."

"If I could only be certain!"

"And why should you not be," exclaimed Tait vigorously. "An eye-witness could tell you the truth."

"Where can I find an eye-witness?" cried Claude, with an impatient frown. "Mona Bantry and Jeringham have both fled; they are probably dead by this time. My mother denies that she struck the blow, and Hilliston, she says, was at the ball when the murder took place. Who can tell me the truth?"

"Denis Bantry," said Tait quietly. "Listen to me, Claude. The episode of the garnet scarfpin, which to my mind is the clew to the assassin, is only known to your mother, to Hilliston, and to Denis Bantry. Now Hilliston denies that such a trinket exists; your mother insists that it was found on the bank of the river after the murder. The only person who can give the casting vote—who can arbitrate, so to speak—is Denis Bantry."

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"And where is Denis Bantry? Lost or dead, years ago."

"Nothing of the sort, my friend. Denis Bantry is alive and in this neighborhood. Yes; Jenny

Paynton admitted to me that the scarfpin episode was related to her by their old servant, Kerry. Therefore, it naturally follows that Kerry is Denis Bantry."

"But why is he hiding here under another name?" said Larcher, after he had digested this piece of information, with a due display of astonishment.

"That I cannot say. Unless," here Tait hesitated before uttering his opinion, "unless Denis Bantry is the guilty person."

"But that is impossible; that is out of the question," said Claude decidedly. "He was devoted to my father, as you know. Why should he turn and kill him without a cause?"

"Ah!" said Tait significantly; "what if he had a cause, and a very good one, to kill your father. Recall your mother's confession. She returned at three o'clock in the morning and found her husband alone with Mona, the sister of Denis. She accused Mona of being her husband's mistress, and the girl confessed her guilt, which your father evidently could not deny. Now what is more probable than that Denis, attracted by the high voices, should have followed your mother to the room. There he would hear the truth, probably while waiting at the door. What follows? With his impulsive Irish temperament he dashes in, hot to avenge the wrong done to his sister. The dagger dropped by your mother is at his feet; he picks it up and kills his master on the instant. Your mother, in a faint on the floor, knows nothing of what is going on, and brother and sister remove the body to the river, where they drop it in. Then Mona is sent away by Denis to hide her shame and evade awkward questions, while he remains."

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"But why should he remain?" interrupted Claude smartly. "Would it not have been wiser for him to fly?"

"And so confess his guilt. No! He induces Jeringham to fly, with a threat of denouncing him as the murderer of Larcher. Jeringham is in such a dilemma that, seeing that all the evidence will be against him, he takes to flight. Thereupon Denis is able to save his mistress, and himself, by denying that Larcher came to the house on that night. Of course, this is all pure theory; still it is as circumstantial as the rest of the evidence we have in hand."

But Claude was by no means inclined to agree with this last remark. "There are flaws in your argument," he said, after a few moments' reflection. "If Denis intended to deny that my father was in the house on that night, why should he induce Jeringham to fly?"

"To make assurance doubly sure. No doubt he intended first to put the blame on Jeringham, but finding that Mrs. Larcher was likely to be accused, he made things safe for her by denying that his master returned on that evening. Only four people knew of the return; Mona, who fled, Mrs. Larcher, who held her tongue to save her neck; Denis, who swore falsely to serve his mistress; and Jeringham, who thought he might be accused of the crime."

"But why wouldn't he have denounced Denis?"

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"He was doubtless ignorant that Denis was the criminal. You forget that Jeringham was in the garden, and knew nothing of what was taking place in the sitting room. Denis rushed out, and finding Jeringham may have told him that Mrs. Larcher had killed her husband on his account. The man, bewildered and shocked, yet sees that he is complicated in the case through his love for Mrs. Larcher; he guesses that owing to the gossip of the place he may be accused of the crime, and so does the wisest thing he could do,—the only thing he could do,—and seeks refuge in flight."

"Then you think Denis is guilty?"

"I can't say. As you see, I can make a strong case out against your mother, against Jeringham, against Denis. Yes, I could even make a case against Mona Bantry; but it is sole theory. Yet Denis must have some reason for hiding here under the name of 'Kerry,' and for keeping those papers found by Jenny which contained a report of the case. The case is strong against Hilliston, I admit, but is stronger against your father's own servant."

"I don't think so," said Claude quietly. "If Denis had killed my father, he would not have told Jenny about the scarfpin."

"Why not! The scarfpin may have belonged to Jeringham—to Hilliston. For his own safety—now that the case is recognized after so many years by a girl's rash action—Denis would not hesitate to blame them to save himself. Taking it all round," added Tait, with the air of one who has settled the question, "I think the conduct of Denis is very suspicious, and I would not be surprised if he turned out to be the guilty person."

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"But the acts of Hilliston?"

Tait rubbed his head and looked vexed, for he was unable to give a direct answer. "Let us leave the matter alone for the present," he said crossly. "I am getting bewildered with all this talk. Only one person can tell the truth, and that is Kerry, alias Denis Bantry."

CHAPTER XXV.

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THE RECLUSE.

MEANWHILE Jenny was proceeding homeward in a rather unhappy state of mind. The conversation had left an unpleasant impression, and she was by no means sure what it would lead to. A hundred times did she wish that she had not meddled with the matter; but it was now too late for regrets, and she recognized that she must bear the burden of her wrong-doing. Though, indeed, she could see no reason to characterize her action by so harsh a name.

"A bundle of old papers in a garret," she thought, walking quickly through the lane; "where was the harm in reading them? And, as they contained an interesting story, I fail to see where I acted wrongly in telling it to Frank. The Larcher affair can have nothing to do with papa, even though Kerry was so angry. I'll speak to Kerry, and ask him if I have done wrong."

According to her promise she was determined to say nothing to her father for at least twenty-four hours, for she was curious to see if Mr. Hilliston would call to speak of the matter. If he did so, then would be the time to exculpate herself; but, pending such visit, she saw no reason why she should not consult with Kerry. He had expressed anger at her possession of the papers, so he, if anyone, would be able to explain if she had been rash. On Kerry's answer would depend the explanation due to her father.

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Thus thinking, she speedily arrived in a deep lane, at the end of which she turned into a white gate set in a rugged stone wall. Nut trees bent over this wall, dropping their fruit into the ruts of the road, and on the opposite side rose a steep green bank topped by blackberry bushes. This byway was little frequented, and here quiet constantly reigned, unbroken save by the voices of birds. It was a great place for nightingales, and many a summer evening did Jenny stand under the bending boughs listening to the warblings of those night singers. So bird-haunted was the spot that here, if anywhere, Keats might have composed his famous ode. Indeed, the road was known as Nightingale Lane, for obvious reasons.

Passing through the gate, Jenny saw before her the little garden, odorous with homely cottage flowers—sweet-williams, delicate pea blossom, ruddy marigolds, and somber bushes of rosemary. A hawthorn hedge on the right divided the flowers from the kitchen garden; while to the left grew gnarled apple and pear trees, now white with bloom. A sprawling peach tree clung to the guarding wall of the lane, and beds of thyme and mignonette perfumed the still air. In the center of this sweetness was built the humble cottage of Ferdinand Paynton, a broad, low-roofed building, with whitewashed walls and quaint windows, diamond-paned and snowy curtained. Pots of flowers were set within, and under the eaves of the thatched roof twittered the darting swallows. One often sees such peaceful homesteads in the heart of England, breathing quiet and tranquillity. Rose Cottage, as it was called, from the prevailing flower in the garden, was worthy to be enshrined in a fairy tale.

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Here lived Ferdinand Paynton, with his only daughter, and two servants, male and female. The one was Kerry, a crabbed old Irishman, stanch as steel, and devoted to his master; the other a withered crone who was never seen without her bonnet, yet who bore the reputation of being an excellent cook, and an economical housekeeper. As Mr. Paynton was poor, and spent more than he could afford on books, Maria was very necessary to him, as she scraped and screwed with miserly care, yet withal gave him good meals, and kept the tiny house like a new pin. Kerry attended principally to the garden and the books; looked after Jenny, whom he was always scolding, and passed his leisure time in fishing in the Lax.

Hot or cold, wet or fine, summer or winter, nothing varied in the routine of Rose Cottage. Mr. Paynton rose at nine, took his breakfast, and read his paper till ten, then walked for an hour or so in the garden with Jenny. Till luncheon he wrote; after luncheon he slept, and then wrote again till dinner time. The evening in summer was spent in the garden, in winter within doors, before a roaring fire in the bookroom. For more than twenty years life had gone on in this peaceful fashion, and during that time Jenny could not remember the occurrence of a single episode worth recording. Rose Cottage might have been the palace of the Sleeping Beauty during the hundred years' spell.

The inhabitant of this hermitage was a puzzle to the gossips of Thorston, for, after the

industrious inquiries of twenty years, they were as wise as ever touching his antecedents. Then he had arrived with Kerry, and his daughter, a child of five, and, staying at the Inn of St. Elfrida, had looked about for a small place in the neighborhood. Rose Cottage, then empty and much neglected, appeared to be the most secluded spot procurable, so Mr. Paynton set it in order, patched the roof, cultivated the garden, and took up his abode therein. Here he had lived ever since, rarely leaving it, seeing few people, and accepting no invitations. The man was a recluse, and disliked his fellow-creatures, so when Thorston became aware of his peculiarities he was left alone to live as he chose. It may be guessed that his peculiar habits made him unpopular.

The vicar was friendly to the misanthrope, for in Paynton he found a kindred soul in the matter of books; and many a pleasant evening did they spend in discussing literary subjects. The bookroom was the pleasantest apartment in the house, cosy and warm, and lined throughout with volumes. In the deep window stood the desk, and here Ferdinand Paynton sat and wrote all day, save when he took his usual stroll in the garden. Jenny had also grown up in the bookroom, and, as her education had been conducted by her father, she was remarkably intelligent for a country maiden, and could talk excellently on literature, old and new. For the softer graces of womanhood she was indebted to the care of Mrs. Linton, who from the first had taken a great interest in the motherless girl.

Into this room came Jenny, with her mind full of the recent conversation with Tait. She threw down her music-book on the table and went to kiss her father. He was seated in his armchair, instead of at his desk as usual, and looked rather sternly at her as she bent over him. Tall and white-haired, with a sad face and a slim figure, the old man looked singularly interesting, his appearance being enhanced by his peculiar garb, a dressing gown and a black skullcap. Indeed, he was more like a mediæval magician than an aged gentleman of the nineteenth century. He looked like a man with a history, which was doubtless the reason Thorston gossips were so anxious concerning his past. In country towns curiosity is quite a disease.

In the hurry of her entrance Jenny had not noticed that a stranger was present, but on greeting her father with a fond kiss, she turned to see an elderly gentleman looking at her intently. Mr. Paynton explained the presence of the stranger with less than his usual suavity, but from the tone of his voice Jenny guessed that he was angry with her. As it afterward appeared he had good reason to be.

"Jenny, this is my friend, Mr. Hilliston."

Hilliston! Jenny could not suppress a start of surprise, even of alarm. The prophecy of Tait had been fulfilled sooner than she had expected. There was something uncanny in the speedy accomplishment of a prognostication in which, at the time, she had hardly believed.

"Hilliston! Mr. Hilliston!" she repeated, with a gasp of surprise, "already!"

This time it was Hilliston's turn to be surprised, and his face darkened with suspicion.

"What am I to understand by 'already,' Miss Paynton?" he said quickly.

"Why! That is—Mr. Tait——" began Jenny, in excuse, when her father cut her short. He rose from his chair, and exclaimed in a voice of alarm:

"Tait! Then you have seen him already?"

"Yes, father," said the girl, in some bewilderment at his tone.

"Where?"

"In the church, half an hour ago."

"Did he question you?"

"He did."

"And you replied?"

"I answered his questions," said Jenny quietly, "if you refer to the Larcher affair."

"I do refer to it," groaned her father, sinking back into his chair. "Unhappy girl! you know not what trouble you have caused."

Hilliston said nothing, but stood moodily considering what was best to be done. He saw that Tait had been too clever for him, and had anticipated his arrival. Yet he had come as speedily as

possible; not a moment had he lost since his arrival in Eastbourne to seek out Jenny and ask her to be silent. But it was too late; he had missed his opportunity by a few minutes, and it only remained for him to learn how much the girl had told his enemy. No wonder he hated Tait; the fellow was too dangerous a foeman to be despised.

"We may yet mend matters," he said judiciously, "if Miss Jenny will repeat so much of the conversation as she remembers."

"Why should I repeat it?" said Jenny, objecting to this interference, as Tait guessed she would. "There was nothing wrong in the conversation with Mr. Tait that I know of."

"There was nothing wrong in your telling Linton the story you found in *The Canterbury Observer*," replied Hilliston dryly; "yet it would have been as well had you not done so."

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"Father," cried Jenny, turning toward the old man with an appealing gesture, "have I done wrong?"

"Yes, child," he answered, with a sigh, "very wrong, but you sinned in ignorance. Kerry told me you had found the bundle and read about the trial, but I passed that over. Now it is different. You repeated it to young Linton, and Mr. Hilliston tells me that all London knows the story through his book."

"I am very sorry," said Jenny, after a pause, "but I really did not know that it was wrong of me to act as I have done. A bundle of old newspapers in a garret! Surely I was justified in reading them—in telling Frank what I conceived would be a good plot for a story."

"I don't blame you, Miss Paynton," said Hilliston kindly; "but it so happens that your father did not want that affair again brought before the public. After all, you have had less to do with it than Fate."

"Than Fate," interrupted Paynton, with a groan. "Good Heavens, am I to be——"

"Paynton!" said Hilliston, in a warning voice.

"I forgot," muttered the old man, with a shiver. "No more—no more. Jenny, tell us what you said to Mr. Tait."

Considerably astonished, the girl repeated the conversation as closely as she could remember. Both Hilliston and her father listened with the keenest interest, and seemed relieved when she finished.

"It is not so bad as I expected," said the former, with a nod. "All you have to do, Paynton, is to warn Kerry against gratifying the curiosity of these young men. They will be certain to ask him questions."

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"Kerry will baffle them; have no fear of that," said Paynton harshly, "and, Jenny, you are not to refer to this subject again with Mr. Tait."

"Am I not to speak to him?"

Her father interrogated Hilliston with a look, received a nod, and answered accordingly.

"You can speak to Mr. Tait, if you choose, and no doubt you will be introduced by the vicar to Mr. Larcher. I place no prohibition on your speaking to them, but only warn you to avoid the subject of the Larcher affair. Promise!"

"I promise. I am sorry I ever had anything to do with it."

"Say no more about it, my dear," said Hilliston, patting her shoulder. "How could you be expected to know? But now you have been warned, do not speak more of it. We do not wish the unjustifiable curiosity of these idle young men to be gratified."

"If you assist them to learn that which had better be hidden, you will ruin me," cried Paynton, with a passionate gesture.

"Father! Ruin you?"

"Yes! It means ruin, disgrace—perhaps death! Ah!"

He broke down with a cry, and Hilliston, taking Jenny by the hand, led her to the door.

"Go away, my dear. Your father is ill," he said, in a whisper, and pushing her outside the door, locked it forthwith. Jenny stood in the passage, in an agony of fear and surprise. Ruin! Disgrace! Death! What was the meaning of those terrible words?

CHAPTER XXVI.

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AN OLD SERVANT.

LEAVING the two men to talk over their dark secrets together, Jenny went into the garden. Her brow burned as with fever, and her understanding was confused by the thoughts which filled her mind. What was the meaning of her father's words? Why had Mr. Hilliston come over from Eastbourne to request her silence? And what was the connection between him and her sole surviving parent? She paced up and down the gravel walk vainly asking herself these questions, and racking her brain as to possible answers. Hitherto the sky of her young life had been pure and serene; but now, by her own act—as though she had unconsciously wrought a malignant spell—a sudden storm had arisen, which threatened to overturn the foundations of her small world. In the very unexpectedness of these events lay their terror.

As Tait shrewdly surmised, Jenny was by no means satisfied with the evidence of Hilliston at the trial of Mrs. Larcher. So far as she could judge from the unsatisfactory report in *The Canterbury Observer*, he had given his version of the affair glibly enough; yet there seemed to be something behind which he was anxious to suppress. Definitely enough he stated that he had not been at The Laurels on the fatal night; that he had not seen Captain Larcher since he left for London; that he had not noted whether Mrs. Larcher wore that all-important dagger when she left the ballroom. But, pressed by an evidently suspicious counsel, he accounted so minutely for every moment of his time, his evidence had about it such an air of frank falseness, that even unsophisticated Jenny saw that the man was acting a part. She did not believe him guilty of the crime, but she was certain in her own mind that he knew who had struck the fatal blow; nay more, Jenny thought it not impossible that he had been at The Laurels after three that morning, in spite of his denial, and had seen the tragedy take place. Tait's hints, confirming her own doubts, led her to gravely doubt the purity of Mr. Hilliston's motives then and now.

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But what most perplexed the girl was the reason why the lawyer called to see her father on the subject and requested her silence. She knew nothing of the tragedy save through the papers—those old, faded papers, dated 1866, which she had found in the garret. She was not born when the murder took place, so Hilliston could not possibly wish to close her mouth for her own sake. It was on her father's account that Jenny feared. What could he know of an obscure crime perpetrated in a country town so many years ago; she could recall no mention of his name in the report of the trial; yet his words led her to suspect that he was more closely connected with that tragic past than he chose to admit. Could it be that her father was a relative of Jeringham, and, knowing that Jeringham was still alive, wished to stop all inquiries made as to his whereabouts, lest he should be punished for his early sin? This was the only feasible suggestion she could make, and yet it failed to satisfy her too exacting mind.

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Again, there was Kerry. Kerry certainly had a personal interest in the case; else he could scarcely have related the episode of the scarfpin. Moreover, he had been very angry when he found her with the papers in her possession; and putting these two things together it would seem as if he knew more than he chose to tell. Jenny thought, for the gratification of her own curiosity, she would ask Kerry to explain these matters; and so went to the kitchen in search of him. Maria was there, cross and deaf as usual, and intimated that Kerry had been out some two hours on a message. This sounded extraordinary to Jenny, who knew that the old servant rarely left the house; but it argued that her father was anxious to have him out of the way during the visit of Hilliston. What did it all mean? A horrible fear seized the girl, lest she should have set some machinery in motion which would end in crushing her unhappy father. Unhappy he had always been, and given to seclusion. There must be some reason for this, and Jenny felt a vague alarm, which she could neither express nor display. Dearly enough had she paid for meddling with that old bundle of papers.

Again she returned to the garden, and went outside into the lane in order to see if Kerry was in sight. In a few minutes he came shuffling round the corner, and his withered face relaxed into a grin when he saw her standing by the gate. She was the apple of his eye, and though he scolded her often himself, yet he never let anyone say a word against her. To look askance at Jenny was to lose Kerry's favor and win his enmity forever.

"Ah! there ye are, me darling Miss Jenny," he said, with the familiarity of an old servant, "watching and waiting for poor old Kerry. Sure it is a sunbeam you are in this dark lane."

"Kerry! I want to speak to you."

The change in her tone struck him at once, and he peered sharply into her fresh face with his bleared eyes. A look of wonder stole into them at the sight of her white cheeks, and he crossed himself before replying so as to avert any evil that might befall. Kerry always lived in a state of suspense, waiting for a bolt from the blue. Jenny's scared face almost assured him that it had fallen.

"What is it, *alannah*?" he asked, pausing at the gate. "Is anything wrong?"

"Oh, no! nothing is wrong, Kerry! What could be wrong?" said Jenny nervously; "only papa has a visitor."

"Augh! His riverence?"

"No; not the vicar. A stranger—or at least almost a stranger," she said, half to herself. "It is many years since Mr. Hilliston came here."

"Mr. Hilliston!" cried Kerry, with an ashen face. "The black curse on him and his! What is he doing with the master?"

"I don't know, Kerry," replied Jenny, rather astonished at the old man's vehemence; "he has been with father over two hours."

"And I was sent away," muttered Kerry, under his breath. "Sorrow befall you, black attorney that you are. Never did you cross a threshold without bringing grief to all hearts. It was an evil day we saw you, and an evil day when we see you again."

He uplifted his hands as though about to invoke a curse on Hilliston, then, unexpectedly letting them fall, he turned sharply on Jenny.

"How did he come, miss?"

"By train from Eastbourne—no doubt he walked from the station."

"I'll drive him back," exclaimed Kerry, in quite an amiable voice. "Sure he'll be weary on his legs. Why not? I'll borrow his riverence's trap and the little mare with the white foreleg, but——"

"Kerry, father might not like it."

"Get along with ye," said Kerry cheerfully; "sure his riverence has offered the trap a hundred times. I'll take it on myself to explain to the master. Keep Mr. Hilliston here till he sees me arriving up this road—a dirty one it is, too, bad cess to it!"

He was hurrying off, when Jenny stopped him. She saw that his borrowing of the vicar's honey trap was a mere excuse to get Hilliston to himself for half an hour, and, rendered more curious than ever by Kerry's artful way of arranging matters, she ran after him and pulled his sleeve.

"Kerry! Kerry! Has Mr. Hilliston come over to see papa about the Larcher affair?"

"How should I know," retorted Kerry, relapsing into his crusty humor; "for shame, Miss Jenny! Is it your business or mine?"

"It is mine," said the girl, with a resolute look on her face. "Mr. Hilliston came over to ask me to be silent about what was contained in those papers you took from me."

"How does he know of that, miss?"

"Because all London now knows the story of the Larcher affair."

"Augh! Get away with ye. Sure it's a fool you're making of old Kerry," said the servant, in an incredulous and angry tone.

"Indeed, I am doing no such thing. I did not know there was any harm in reading those papers, and I did so. But I did more than that, Kerry. I told the story of the tragedy to Frank

Linton; and he has written a book on the trial."

"A book! With the real names?"

"No! The names are fictitious, and the scene is laid in a different place. But the whole story is told in the novel."

"Does the master know?" asked Kerry, muttering something between his teeth.

"He does now. Mr. Hilliston saw the book in London, and came over to tell him, and to ask me to say no more about it."

"What's that for, anyhow," demanded Kerry, who seemed to scent new danger.

"Because Mr. Larcher is here!"

Kerry flung up his hands with a cry of astonishment. "Mr. Larcher, miss! Who are you telling about?"

"Oh, Mr. Claude Larcher," said Jenny, rather alarmed, for he had gripped her arm, "the son of the deceased man. He is staying at the Manor House with Mr. Tait."

For a few minutes Kerry stood looking at the ground in silence. Up to the present he had succeeded in preserving his calm, but the last piece of news upset him altogether, and he burst into violent speech.

"Augh! it's sorrow that is coming to this house, and the black curse will be on the threshold. Cold will the hearth be soon, and the old master will be driven out. Ohone! and we and time will have sent him into the cold world. Whirra! whirra!"

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Jenny was so dumfounded by the unexpected eloquence of the old man that she could do nothing but stare at him. He caught her eye, and seeing that he had been indiscreet in so betraying himself, he cut short his lamentations, wiped his eyes, and relapsed once more into the crusty, faithful Kerry whom she knew. But he gave her a word of warning before he took his departure. "Say nothing of this, Miss Jenny," he remarked; "sure it's an old fool I am. Keep a silent tongue as the master and lawyer wishes you to do, and then, please the saints, things will go the better."

"But, Kerry, before you go, tell me. What is Mr. Hilliston to my father?"

"He is your father's best friend, miss," said Kerry, with emphasis; "his best and his worst," and with that enigmatic reply he hurried off down the lane in the direction of the vicarage, leaving Jenny in a state of bewilderment.

She could understand nothing, and at that moment sorely needed some friend with whom she could consult. Kerry gave her no satisfaction, and spoke so indefinitely that his conversation mystified in place of enlightening her; it was no use to make a confidant of Frank Linton, as notwithstanding his London reputation, which she had greatly contributed to, Jenny did not consider him sufficiently steady to be told of the commotion raised by his novel in her immediate circle. She could, therefore, discuss the matter with no one, and so annoyed was she by the whole affair that she by no means could bring herself to go back to the house while Hilliston was yet there. He would be gone, she trusted, in another half hour or so, and pending his departure she strolled along the lane in the hope of evading him.

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But she only escaped Scylla to fall into Charybdis, for, as she turned the corner, Tait and Claude met her almost face to face. Jenny would have given much to escape this awkward meeting, and intimated her wish for solitude by passing the young men with a curt bow. The sight of Claude, the memory of his father's death, coupled with the suspicions she entertained, wrought her up to a pitch of excitement which she had great difficulty in concealing. She was, therefore, greatly annoyed when Tait took off his hat, and placed himself directly in her path. The little man thought it was too favorable an opportunity for introduction to be overlooked.

"Don't go away, Miss Paynton," he said, smiling. "I wish to introduce you to my friend Mr. Larcher. Claude, this is Miss Paynton, of whom you have heard me speak."

"How do you do, Miss Paynton?" said Claude, with a suave bow. "I hope you will pardon the irregularity of this introduction."

This remark made Jenny laugh, and set her more at ease. She was not particular as to forms and ceremonies herself, and the idea that a young man should apologize for such a trifle struck

her as ridiculous. Moreover, a glance assured her that Mr. Larcher was by no means a formidable person. He was decidedly good-looking, and had pleasant blue eyes, with a kindly look, so speech and glance broke the ice at once between them.

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"Do you stay here long, Mr. Larcher?" she asked, pointedly ignoring her previous conversation with Tait.

"As long as I may," he replied, smiling. "London does not invite me at this time of the year. I prefer the fragrant country to the dusty town."

"He is a true lover of the fields, Miss Paynton," broke in Tait, admiring her self-possession, "and insisted that I should come out for a walk, so that he might lose no time in steeping himself in the sweetness of nature. Quite idyllic, isn't it?"

"Quite!" said Jenny lightly. "Good-by at present, Mr. Larcher! I am going to the vicarage, and have not a moment to spare. Mr. Tait, can I speak with you a minute?"

Tait obeyed with alacrity, and Claude was left to muse on the fresh charm of Jenny, and the sweetness of her voice. Her trim figure, her exquisite neatness, and springing gait made him admire her greatly, and when she tripped away with a smiling nod, he was so taken up in watching her that he failed to observe the grave face with which Tait joined him.

"As I thought," said the latter, when they resumed their walk.

"What is up now?"

"Oh, nothing more than usual! Hilliston has called on Paynton already. He is there now."

"You don't say so! I did not think he would have been so smart. However, you have stolen a march on him. Do you intend to see him now? To wait his coming out?"

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"Why, no," said Tait, after a moment's deliberation. "Rather let us go home again that Hilliston may not see us. I wish to wait and see what excuse he will make for not calling on you. You'll get a letter full of lies to-morrow, Claude."

CHAPTER XXVII.

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A GLIMPSE OF THE PAST.

HILLISTON remained a considerable time with his friend, and it was not until sunset that he left the house. He had a satisfied look on his face, as though the interview had answered his expectations; and so lifted up in spirit did he appear that he stepped out into the lane as jauntily as though he were quite a young man. It was over three miles to the railway station, and he would be obliged to walk back; but the prospect did not annoy him in the least; on the contrary so great a load had been removed from his mind by the late conversation that he felt fit to walk twice the distance. Yet such unusual light-heartedness might have recalled to his mind the Scotch superstition regarding its probable reason.

As he walked smartly to the end of the lane, the sun had just dropped behind the hills, leaving a trail of red glory behind him. Against the crimson background rose the gables and chimney of the Manor House, and the sight recalled to Hilliston the fact that young Larcher was staying in the mansion. He paused doubtfully, not certain whether to go in or pass on; for in his many schemes the least slip might prove prejudicial to their accomplishment.

"If I call in I can say my visit here was to do so," he thought; "but it is too late; and though Claude might believe me, the little man would certainly be suspicious. Besides they are sure to find out from Jenny Paynton that I have seen her father. No! I shan't go in, but to-night I will write a letter stating that Paynton is a client whom I called to see about business. I have made it all right there, and it will take a cleverer man than Tait to upset my plans this time."

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His meditations were interrupted by the rattle of wheels, and he turned to see Kerry driving a dappled pony in a small chaise. The old man distorted his withered face into a grotesque grin of welcome, and jumped out with extraordinary alacrity, when he came alongside Hilliston.

"Augh! augh, sir!" said Kerry, touching his hat in military fashion. "It's a sight for sore eyes to see ye. Miss Jenny told me you had walked over from the station, so I just borrowed the trap of his riverence, the vicar, to take you back."

"That is very kind of you, Kerry," replied Hilliston, in his most genial manner; "I am glad to accept your offer and escape the walk. You drive and I'll sit beside you."

Kerry did as he was told, and in a few minutes the trap containing the pair was rattling through the street at a good pace. Shortly they left the village behind and emerged into the open country. The road wound to right and left, past farmhouses, under bending trees, behind hedgerows, and occasionally passed over a stone bridge spanning a trickling brook matted with cresses. All this time neither of them had spoken, as each was seemingly wrapped up in his own thoughts, but as a matter of fact they were thinking of each other. Kerry wished to speak to Hilliston, but did not know how to begin; while Hilliston was in the same predicament regarding Kerry.

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It was the latter who finally began the conversation, and he did so in a way which would have startled a less brave man than the lawyer. At the moment they were crossing a rather broad stream with a swift current, and Kerry pulled up the pony midway between the parapets of stone which protected the sides of the rude bridge. Rather astonished at this stoppage, for which he could assign no reason, Hilliston roused himself from his musings and looked inquiringly at Kerry. The man's eyes, significant and angry, were fixed on him in anything but a friendly manner.

"Do you know what I'm thinking, sir?" he said, coolly flicking the pony's back with the whip.

"No, Kerry," replied Hilliston, with equal coolness. "Is it of anything important?"

"It might be to you, sir," replied Kerry dryly. "I was just thinking whether it wouldn't be a good thing to send horse and trap and you and I into the water. Then there would be an end to your black heart and your black schemes."

"That is very possible, Kerry," said Hilliston, who knew his man, "but before going to extremities you had better make certain that you are acting for the best. Without me your master is ruined."

"We'll talk it over, sir," answered Kerry, and with a smart flick of his whip sent the pony across the bridge. When they were over and were trotting between hedgerows he resumed the conversation. "Why have ye come here again, sir?" he asked abruptly. "We were quit of you five years ago, and now you come to harry the master once more."

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"I come for his own good, Kerry."

"Ah, now don't be after calling me Kerry. There's no one here, and it is Denis Bantry I am to you, Mr. Francis Hilliston."

The lawyer winced at the satirical emphasis placed on the name, but judged it wise to humor the old man. Kerry, as he called himself now, could be very obstinate and disagreeable when he chose, so knowing his powers in this respect Hilliston wisely conducted the conversation on as broad lines as was possible. Nevertheless, he carried the war into the enemy's camp by blaming Kerry for not taking better care of the bundle of papers which, through his negligence, had fallen into the hands of Jenny.

"And how was I to know, sir?" retorted Kerry querulously. "The papers were safely put away in the garret, and Miss Jenny had no call to go there."

"Well, Kerry, you see what it has led to. The account of the tragedy is all over London."

"And what of that, sir? Wasn't the account of it all over Horrison twenty-five years ago?"

"No doubt," said Hilliston coolly; "but that is all over and done with. It is useless to dwell on the past and its errors. But now Captain Larcher's son is bent on finding out the truth."

"And why shouldn't he, sir?"

"I don't think you need ask the question, Kerry," replied the lawyer, in so significant a tone that the old servant turned away his head. "It is not desirable that Claude Larcher should be enlightened. We know what took place on that night if no one else does, and for more reasons than one it is advisable that we should keep our knowledge to ourselves."

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"Augh," said Kerry gruffly, "you don't want it known that you were in the garden on that night, sir?"

"I do not," answered Hilliston, with hasty emphasis. "I spoke falsely at the trial to save Mrs. Larcher. I rather think you did so yourself, Kerry."

"For the master's sake—for the master's sake! As for the mistress she brought all the trouble on our heads. I lied, sir, and you lied, but she wasn't worth it. But is there to be trouble over it now, Mr. Hilliston?"

"No. Not if you baffle the inquiries of those young men at the Manor House. They will meet you and question you, and get the truth out of you if they can. Whether they do or not all depends upon yourself."

"You leave it to me, sir," said Kerry confidently. "I'll manage to send them away without being a bit the wiser. And now, Mr. Hilliston, that this is settled, I would speak to you about my sister Mona."

Hilliston changed color, but nevertheless retained sufficient composure to fix his eyes on the man's face with a sad smile. "What of her, Kerry?" he asked, in a melancholy tone; "you know she is dead and gone."

"Augh! Augh! But her grave, sir. You must tell me where it is, for I have it in my mind to go and see it."

"What would be the good of you doing that," said Hilliston disapprovingly.

"Because I was harsh with her, sir. If she did wrong, she suffered for it, and it was wicked of me to let her go as I did. Where is her grave, sir?"

"In Chiswick Cemetery," said Hilliston, as the chaise stopped at the railway station; "if you come up to London and call at my office I will tell you where to find it."

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Kerry was profuse in his thanks, and, touching his hat gratefully, accepted the shilling which Hilliston put into his hand; but when the train containing Hilliston started for Eastbourne, he threw away the money, and shook his fist after the retreating carriages. Not a word did he say, but the frown on his face grew deeper and deeper as he got into the trap again, and drove slowly back to Thorston. Evidently he trusted Hilliston no more than did Tait or Jenny.

It was now quite dark, for the daylight and afterglow had long since vanished from the western skies, and the moon was not yet up. Only the stars were visible here and there in the cloudy sky, and finding their light insufficient to drive by, Kerry got down and lighted the carriage lamp. Heaven only knows of what he was thinking as he drove along the dusky lanes. The past unrolled itself before his eyes, and what he saw there made him groan and heave deep sighs. But there was no use in so indulging his memories, and thinking of his master, Kerry braced himself up to see what could be done toward meeting the dangers which seemed to threaten on all sides. When he delivered the trap again to the groom of the vicar, he hit on an idea which he proceeded to carry out.

Instead of going back at once to Rose Cottage, he borrowed a piece of paper and a pencil from the groom, and laboriously traced a few lines by the light of the stable lantern. Putting this missive in his pocket, he went off in the direction of the Manor House; but leaving the public road he skirted the low stone wall which divided it from the adjacent fields. Kerry knew every inch of the ground, and even in the darkness had no difficulty in guiding himself to his destination. This was a vantage point at the end of the wall, whence he could see into a sitting room of the house. In a few minutes Kerry was perched on this wall, busily engaged in tying his letter to an ordinary sized stone.

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Almost immediately below him the mansion stretched in a kind of abrupt right angle, in which was set two wide windows overlooking a bed of flowers. These were open to the cool night air, and the blinds had been drawn down, so that Kerry from his lofty hiding-place could see right into the room. A tall brass lamp stood at one end, and under this sat Claude Larcher, smoking and thinking. The glare of the lamp fell full on his fresh-colored face and light hair, so that Kerry felt as though he were gazing at a phantom out of that dread past.

"He's as like his father as two peas," muttered Kerry, devouring the picture with his eyes; "a fine boy and an honest gentleman. Augh! augh! To think that I have nursed him on my knee when he was a bit of lad, and now I'm here telling him to go away. But it's better that than the other. A curse on those who brought him here and put sorrow into his heart."

Thus muttering, Kerry threw the stone lightly through the window. It fell heavily on the floor

within a few feet of Claude, who sprang to his feet with an exclamation. Not waiting to see the result, Kerry hastily tumbled off the wall, jumped the ditch, and made off in the darkness. By a circuitous route he regained Rose Cottage, and entered into the kitchen worn out in body and mind. He had done his duty so far as in him lay, and mentally prayed that the result might tend to remove the threatened danger.

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Meanwhile Claude had picked up the stone and ran to the window. He could see nothing, for Kerry was already halfway across the fields; he could not even guess whence the stone had been thrown. All was silent, and though he listened intently, he could not hear the sound of retreating footsteps. With some wonderment he untied the paper from the stone and smoothed it out. It was badly written and badly spelled, and ran as follows:

"Bewar of danger, Claude Larcher, tak a frind's advise and go quick away."

There was no signature, and the young man was looking at it in growing perplexity when Tait entered the room.

"What did you shout out about?" he asked carelessly. "I heard you in the next room."

"You would have shouted also," replied Larcher, holding out the paper. "This was flung into the room tied round a stone."

"You don't say so! Who threw it?"

"I can't say. I rushed to the window at once, but saw no sign of anyone. What do you think of the hint therein contained?"

Tait read the anonymous communication, pondered over it, and finally delivered his opinion by uttering a name. "Hilliston," he said confidently, "Hilliston."

"Nonsense!" said Claude sharply; "why should he deal in underhand ways of this sort. If he wanted me to go away, he could have called and urged me to do so. But this—I don't believe Hilliston would condescend to such trickery."

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"When a man is in a fix he will descend to anything to get himself out of it," replied Tait, placing the paper in his pocketbook. "I'll keep this, and, perhaps, before many days are over I'll have an opportunity of proving to you that I speak truly. Who else wants you to go away besides Hilliston."

"Kerry—Denis Bantry might!"

"I doubt whether Kerry knows that you are here. You must give matters time to develop themselves, as the inmates of Rose Cottage can't know all about us within twenty-four hours."

"What between your confessions to Jenny, and Hilliston's own knowledge, I think they'll know a good deal in one way or another."

"They can know as much as they like," said Tait quietly, "but we know more, and if it comes to a tug of war I think you and I can win against Hilliston and Co. But come outside and let us examine the top of the wall."

"Do you think the stone was thrown from there?" asked Claude, as they went out into the garden.

"I fancy so from your description. Light this candle."

The night was so still that the flame of the candle hardly wavered. Tait gave it to Claude to hold, and easily climbed up the wall by thrusting the toes of his boots in among the loose stones. He examined the top carefully, and then getting the light tied it to a piece of string and lowered it on the other side. In a few minutes he came down again with a satisfied look.

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"As I thought," he said, blowing out the candle. "Someone has been on that wall and thrown the stone from there. I saw the marks of feet on the other side. The man who delivered the letter jumped the ditch and made off across the fields."

"You don't think it is Hilliston?" said Claude doubtfully.

"No; but I think it is an emissary of Hilliston. Perhaps Denis Bantry."

"Tait!" said Larcher, after a pause, "from Hilliston's visit to Paynton, from the way in which Paynton persistently secludes himself from the world; and from the knowledge we possess that the information for Linton's book came out of that cottage, I have come to a conclusion."

"What is that?"

"I believe that Ferdinand Paynton is none other than Mark Jeringham, who killed my father."

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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PREPARING THE GROUND.

AWARE that Claude would hear sooner or later of his visit to Paynton, the lawyer wrote to forestall the information, skillfully alleging a business engagement as his excuse for the visit. "I would have called on you," he continued, "but that it was already late when I left my client, Mr. Paynton, and I had to return to Eastbourne in time for dinner. However, I hope to come over again shortly, and then you must tell me how you are getting on with your case. I am afraid you will learn nothing at Thorston."

"He knows better than that," said Tait, to whom the letter was shown; "he is aware that we have cut the ground from under his feet so far as Jenny is concerned. Moreover, I am certain that he is the author of that anonymous letter of a few days since."

"Do you really think he came here to ask Miss Paynton to keep silence?" asked Claude, returning the letter to his pocket.

"My dear fellow, I am certain of it. And he also wishes to show us that he knows Paynton, so as to warn us against asking questions in that quarter."

"Indeed, I think it is useless to do so," said Larcher doubtfully; "you know we called yesterday and were refused admittance."

"Oh, I spoke to Mr. Linton about that," replied Tait easily; "it seems that such is invariably the case, as this hermit will see no one."

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"Why? What can be his reason for such persistent seclusion?"

"I can't say, unless your surmise is correct, and he is Jeringham."

"I am sure he is," said Claude emphatically. "Why was the bundle of newspapers containing an account of the murder found in his house? What is Denis Bantry doing there if Paynton is not Jeringham?"

"The shoe is on the other foot," remarked Tait dryly. "What is Denis Bantry doing there if Paynton is Jeringham? You forget, Claude, that we suspect Jeringham as the criminal. If this were so, or if Paynton were Jeringham, I hardly think your father's devoted servant would be at his beck and call, unless," added Tait, as an after thought, "Denis Bantry is also implicated, as we imagine."

"I can't understand it," cried Claude, catching up his hat; "in place of growing clearer, the matter seems to become more involved. How do you intend to proceed? It seems to me that we are at a dead stop."

"By no means, my dear fellow. There is Kerry, alias Denis Bantry, to be examined. We must learn the truth from him."

"He won't tell it! Particularly if our suspicions are correct."

"Perhaps not, but I have provided against that failure. You must appeal to him as the son of his old master, while I am absent."

"Absent! Where are you going?"

"Can't you guess? To Horrison, of course, in order to pick up what information I can. There are sure to be people still alive who remember your father and mother; who recollect the trial, and are still acquainted with Mr. Hilliston. I expect to learn a good deal about that gentleman there; and perhaps something about Jeringham and his disappearance."

"Humph! I doubt if you will be successful," replied Claude gloomily; "however, there is no harm in trying. Where are we going now?"

"I told you before we set out. To call on the vicar. As we can't see Jenny at her father's house we must meet her in another person's. She is like a daughter to Mrs. Linton, and is constantly at the vicarage."

"And no doubt young Linton loves her."

"I'm sure he does. Have you any objection?" demanded Tait slyly.

"None! None!" said Claude hastily. "I have only met her for a few minutes, you know. But she is a remarkably pretty girl, and from what you say seems to be clever. Too good by half for that idiot."

"Idiot! John Parver, novelist, the lion of the season, an idiot? You forget he wrote the book of the year."

"So he says," responded Larcher dryly. "But for my part, I believe Jenny Paynton has more to do with it than he. I have no doubt she wrote it."

Further conversation was put an end to for the time being by their arrival at the vicarage. Mr. Linton, a stiff old gentleman with a severe face, received them very kindly, and unbent so far as in him lay. He had been acquainted with Tait for many years, and it was during a visit to him that the little man had seen and purchased Thorston Manor. Knowing him to be wealthy, and being well disposed toward him for his own sake, Mr. Linton was anxious to make the Lord of the Manor at home in his house. Vicars cannot afford to neglect opulent parishioners.

"I hope, Mr. Tait, that you will shortly take up your abode altogether at the Manor," said he pompously. "I am not in favor of an absentee landlord."

"Oh, you'll see a good deal of me, Mr. Linton, I assure you. I am too much in love with the beauties of the place to stay long away. Moreover, I am not a roamer like my friend Larcher here."

"It is necessary with me," said Claude, smiling; "I assure you, sir, I am not the wandering vagabond Tait would make me out to be."

"It is proper to see the world," said the vicar, with heavy playfulness, "and when you have made your fortune in far countries, Mr. Larcher, you may settle down in this favored spot."

"I could wish for nothing better, Mr. Linton. But the time is yet far off for that."

"My son is also fond of traveling," continued Mr. Linton. "Now that he is making a good income he tells me that it is his intention to go to Italy."

"You are proud of your son, Mr. Linton," said Tait genially.

"Without doubt! Without doubt! The book he wrote is clever, although I do not care for sensational writing myself."

"It pays. The taste of the age is in the direction of sensationalism."

"Certainly, certainly. And I suppose it is only natural that Francis should write some frivolity. He was never a deep scholar. What does astonish me," added the vicar, raising his eyebrows, "is that a student like Mr. Paynton should desire to read the book."

Tait and Claude glanced at one another with the same thought in their minds respecting this information. Informed by Hilliston of the use made by Linton of the Larcher affair, Paynton was anxious to see in what light the case had been placed. This curiosity argued that the recluse had been one of the actors in the tragedy; if so, he could only be Jeringham, since Captain Larcher was dead, and they knew both Denis Bantry and Francis Hilliston. The vicar, worthy man, was quite ignorant of the effect produced by this announcement; nor was he undecieved by the artful reply of Tait.

"Naturally Mr. Paynton wants to read the book," said the latter diplomatically. "If I mistake not, he has a great liking for Frank."

"Indeed, yes," responded Mr. Linton thankfully. "He taught Francis Latin along with Jenny. He would have made a scholar of him. I am indeed sorry that my son failed to profit by his association with so brilliant a student. He might have written a better book."

Clearly the vicar was by no means impressed with the sensationalism of "A Whim of Fate," and would rather his son had written an honest pamphlet or a grave tragedy than have produced so meretricious a piece of three-volume frivolity. However, he had no time to talk further on this matter, for as he ended his speech the subject of it entered the room with Jenny and Mrs. Linton. The former started and flushed as she saw Claude, and remembered his romantic history and their former meeting.

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"My wife, Mr. Larcher. You know Mr. Tait of course, my dear. Miss Paynton, Mr. Larcher, and my son."

"I have already had the pleasure of meeting Mr. Frank Linton in town," said Claude, holding out his hand. The young author took it willingly enough, and then the company resolved itself into two groups; the vicar and his wife conversing with Tait, while Claude, seconded by Frank, made himself agreeable to Jenny. Neither the lady nor the author were pleased with this arrangement, as the former felt uneasy when she remembered her father's position, while the latter felt jealous of Claude's superior good looks. Frank Linton was, of course, ignorant that he was in the company of the son of the Horrison victim; he did not even know the names of the people or that of the place, and had simply written the story on the meager information afforded by Jenny. He could not, therefore, understand the interest which those two displayed in one another, and so grew jealous on seeing it.

It would be useless to report this conversation, which in the main consisted of frivolities. Warned by her father, Jenny was on her guard, and carefully avoided any allusion to the Larcher affair. On his part, not knowing the reticence Jenny had practised with regard to Linton, Claude tried to lead the conversation into a grove likely to deal with the novel and case. At one point he did this so clumsily that Jenny spoke outright on the subject.

"Let us talk no more of that, Mr. Larcher," she said quietly. "I told Mr. Tait all I knew the other day."

"I have to thank you——" began Claude, when she cut him short, and turned the conversation into another channel. The young man was disappointed in this, but nevertheless fell in with her humor, and when, following Tait's example, he arose to go, he was quite charmed with this country girl.

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"I hope you will come soon again," said the vicar hospitably, as he shook hands. "We must have a party shortly. Our friends, Mr. and Mrs. Hilliston, have promised to come and stay the night during next week."

"Another move, and a foolish one," thought Tait, but said aloud: "We will be charmed, Mr. Linton, the more so as Mr. Hilliston is my friend's guardian—or rather was."

Jenny looked startled at this, and her rich color faded when she said good-by to Claude. The mystery of the affair was beginning to worry her, and she could by no means understand the relation of Hilliston to Larcher; Hilliston, who was the guardian and friend; Hilliston who, judging from the veto put on her speaking, was inimical to Claude. Untroubled by their conversation Claude held but one idea when he left the house with Tait.

"I'm afraid I am in love," said he, looking at his friend.

"What! at first sight? Impossible!"

"Shakspeare did not think so, or he would not have written 'Romeo and Juliet.' Yes, I believe I am in love. Jenny is as fresh and fair, and pure and sweet as a mountain daisy."

"You had better tell Linton so," said Tait dryly, whereat Larcher laughed. He was too confident in his own powers to be timorous of rivalry with the celebrated individual.

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"There is no need to tell him," he said lightly; "the poor man was eaten up with jealousy when I spoke to Miss Paynton. By the way, did you see that she changed color when you mentioned that Hilliston had been my guardian?"

"It was natural that she should. Hilliston is a suspicious person in her eyes, and this discovery

will perplex her still more regarding his relations with you. Jenny is a very clever young woman, but I wonder if she is clever enough to put this and that together."

"To arrive at what conclusion?"

"At the most logical conclusion. That her father is Jeringham, whom she suspects of the crime."

CHAPTER XXIX.

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KERRY.

HAVING, as he considered, prepared the ground by acquainting Claude with the notabilities of the neighborhood, Tait next proceeded to secure an interview with Kerry. This was by no means an easy matter, as, either by accident or design, Kerry eluded all the young men's attempts to interview him. Hitherto he had been accustomed to fish daily in the Lax, but now, doubtless by direction of his master, he forsook his customary sport for some considerable time. His absence speedily roused Tait's suspicions.

"Hilliston has succeeded well," said he, after one of these futile attempts to see the old servant. "He has put Jeringham on his guard."

"Paynton, you mean," observed Claude, looking up from his plate. They were at breakfast when this conversation took place.

"I thought you had determined in your own mind that he was Jeringham."

"No," said Claude, coloring a little; "I have come round to your opinion in the matter. If Paynton were Jeringham, I don't think Denis Bantry would be in his service."

"Ah!" remarked Tait sarcastically, "is that the result of reflection or of love?"

"Of love? I don't understand you."

"Yes, you do, Claude. You are in love with Jenny. The last week has only deepened your first impressions. I believe she likes you also, and so I foresee a marriage which will rob me of my friend."

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"I am not so certain of that as you are," said Larcher, after a pause. "Miss Paynton has given me no hint of her feelings, and our acquaintance is yet young. Even if I did design to make her my wife, I would have to gain her consent, and that of her father. Judging from Paynton's present attitude that consent would most probably be refused."

Tait did not immediately reply, but stared out of the window with an absent look in his eyes. The remark changed the current of his ideas.

"I wonder who Paynton can be?" he said at length, with some hesitation. "That he is connected with the case I am certain from the way in which he has profited by the warning of Hilliston. Like yourself, I have my doubts regarding his identity with Jeringham, because of Denis Bantry. Who is he? I must go to Horrison to-morrow and find out."

"And what am I to do in the meantime?"

"Hunt out Kerry and learn the truth," said Tait coolly. "I think, after all, it will be best for you to see him alone. I am a stranger, and he won't speak before me; but to you, the son of his old master, he may open his heart. Once he does that you may learn the truth."

"I doubt it."

"Well, there is a chance. Whatever tie binds Denis to Paynton, you must not forget that he is Irish. The Irish are an impulsive and excitable race, so it is just possible that his feelings may carry him away in your presence, and he may tell you all we wish to know."

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"Do you think he can solve the mystery?"

"Yes. He was in the house when Jeringham came home with your mother; he picked up the garnet pin, and, it may be, can tell us to whom it belongs. It may be the property of Hilliston, as is stated in the novel; on the other hand it may belong to your father or to Jeringham. Of one point I am sure, the person who owned the pin killed your father. Kerry, or rather Denis Bantry, knows the owner, and consequently the murderer."

"If so, why did he not denounce him?"

"There you puzzle me," said Tait, rising to his feet; "that is one of the many mysteries of this case. Only Denis can explain, and he may do so to you. I shall stay at home this morning, and prepare for my journey to Horrison; but you had better take your fishing rod and go to your post."

The post alluded to was on the banks of the Lax, where for the past week the young men had patiently waited for the appearance of Denis. On this morning Claude found himself alone for the first time; and sat down with a disconsolate air, for he had little hope that Denis would make his appearance. In this surmise he was wrong, for scarcely had he been seated half an hour when the Irishman came slowly along on the opposite bank of the river.

He was a little old man, gray as a badger, with stooped shoulders, and a cross-looking face. Without vouchsafing a look in Claude's direction, he prepared his fishing tackle and began industriously to whip the stream. Hardly knowing how to break the ice, Larcher silently continued his sport, and the two, divided by the water, stood like statues on opposite banks.

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After a time Denis, who had been cunningly taking stock of Claude, and wondering why his letter had not produced the effect intended, moved down to where the stream narrowed itself between large stones. Determined to invent some excuse for speaking, Larcher followed after a time, and stepped out on to a boulder, apparently to throw his line into a likely looking pool. Being within reach, he flung his line, and the next moment it was entangled in that of Kerry's.

"I'm sorry! Quite an accident," said Claude, noting the wrath on Kerry's face. "Let me disentangle it."

He jumped into the brown water and, before Kerry could make any objection, was across on the other side, gripping the lines. Without a word the Irishman let him separate the two lines, and then busied himself with fixing a fly. Nettled at this determined silence Claude spoke.

"I wish to speak with you," he said, tapping the other on the shoulder.

"Is it to me ye speak?" replied Kerry, with an admirable look of surprise; "and what has the like of you, sir, to say to me?"

"A great deal. Do you know who I am?"

"Sure, an' I do, sir. The friend of Mr. Tait, you are no less."

"But my name. Do you know it?"

"Bad luck to this stream, there's never a fish in it," grumbled Kerry, with a convenient attack of deafness.

Claude was in nowise angered.

"That is very clever, Kerry," he said; "but——"

"An' how do you know my name is Kerry?"

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"Are you surprised that I should know it?"

"I am that," replied Kerry sharply. "I never set eyes on you before."

"Oh, yes, you did—twenty-five years ago."

"Begorra, that's a lie, anyhow!" muttered Kerry, under his breath, with an uneasy wriggle.

"It is not a lie, and you know it, my man," said Larcher firmly; "it is no use your pretending ignorance. I know who you are."

"Devil a doubt of it! Kerry, you called me."

"Yes! Because you are known by that name here. But at Horriston——"

Claude stopped. He saw the hands of the old man grip the rod so tight that the knuckles whitened. The name had produced the effect he intended. So, almost without a pause, he continued, and aimed another blow at Kerry's imperturbability. "At Horriston," he resumed, "you were known as Denis Bantry."

"Was I, now?" said Kerry, prepared for the attack. "Augh, to think of it! And where might Horriston be, sir?"

"You ought to know that, Denis."

"Your honor will be after giving me the name of a friend of yours."

"Quite right," rejoined Claude, seizing the opportunity. "You were—nay, you are—a friend of mine. I am the little lad you carried in your arms—to whom you told stories, and sang songs. Children forget a great deal, but I have not forgotten you, Denis."

In dogged silence the old man turned his head away, intently bent on his sport, but suddenly he raised the cuff of his coat and wiped away a betraying tear. Seeing that he had touched the man's sympathy, Claude followed up his advantage. [pg 233]

"You are not going to deny me, Denis, are you?" he said entreatingly. "I am down here on an errand which you must guess. If Hilliston——"

"The curse of Cromwell on him!" said Kerry, under his breath.

"If Hilliston told you to keep silent," said Claude, affecting to take no notice of the interjection, which confirmed his suspicions, "I, the son of your dead master, want you to speak. I wish to find out who killed my father. I wish to punish him, for you know his name."

Kerry turned furiously on the young man, but it seemed to Claude that his anger was feigned to hide a deeper emotion.

"It is a dirty informer you'd have me be," he cried, with a stamp of his foot, "to betray him whose bread I eat. I'll tell you nothing, for it's that much I know."

"Denis——"

"I'm not Denis! It's Kerry I am. I know nothing of Horriston, or of you, sir. Go away with ye, young gentleman, and don't be after disgracing an old servant to play the spy and cheat."

Then, still breathing fury, he rushed away, but paused some distance off to raise his hands to the sky with an appealing gesture. The impulsive Irish nature had broken through diplomatic reserve, and, fearful of saying too much, Kerry saved himself by flight. Claude guessed this and forebore to follow him.

"I have broken the ice at all events," he said to himself, when returning to the Manor to tell Tait. "The next time I may be fortunate enough to force the truth out of him. He knows it, I am certain. He hates Hilliston and loves me. I can easily guess with whom he sympathizes, in spite of his master. He is Denis, sure enough, but who is Paynton?" [pg 234]

It was impossible to say.

CHAPTER XXX.

MRS. BEZEL AGAIN.

ON returning home Claude found that Tait, contrary to his expressed intention, had gone out. Dormer, who was packing a portmanteau for the Horriston journey, could not inform Larcher when his master would be back, but ventured an opinion that he would certainly return to [pg 235]

luncheon. Meanwhile, he handed to Claude some letters which had just arrived, and with these the young man managed to pass a fairly uncomfortable hour. Uncomfortable, because one of the letters was from Mrs. Bezel, and proved of so puzzling a character that Larcher was in a fever of impatience to discuss it with Tait.

The little man returned to luncheon, as was surmised by Dormer, and was met in the hall by Claude with the open letter of Mrs. Bezel in his hand.

"My dear fellow, why did you go out?" said Larcher complainingly. "I have so much to tell you. I have seen Kerry, and now here is a letter from Mrs. Bezel."

"What! is she on the stage again?" said Tait eagerly. "Let me see the letter."

"Not yet," replied Claude, putting it promptly behind his back. "You must first tell me why you left the house, when you ought to be packing up for Horrison."

Tait shrugged his shoulders, bowed to the inevitable, and went into the dining room. Here he sat at the table and began to carve some cold beef, thereby throwing Claude into a rage. [pg 236]

"You cold-blooded little monster," he cried, tapping on the table, "will you satisfy my curiosity?"

"Why should I?" said Tait, grinning. "You won't satisfy mine."

"Then read the letter," retorted Claude, throwing it across the table. To his surprise Tait placed it on one side.

"Not yet!" he said, resuming his carving. "We must have a talk first. Have some beef."

"I don't want beef, but information."

"You shall have both," said Tait calmly. "Do you prefer beer or claret?"

"Beer!" replied Larcher resignedly, falling in with the tricksey humor of his friend. Tait was a man with whom it was impossible to quarrel.

"Dormer, fill Mr. Larcher's glass; put the claret jug beside me, and leave the room. We will wait on ourselves."

As stolid as a wooden image Dormer obeyed these instructions, and wheeled out of the room. Tait ate a few mouthfuls of beef, drank a glass of claret, and prepared to talk. His first remark was a bombshell.

"I have seen Paynton," said he slowly.

"The deuce you have!" cried Claude, in surprise; "and how did you manage to take his castle by storm?"

"Easily enough, by the help of a lie and a little strategy. I went out to see if you were at your post, and caught sight of Kerry crossing the fields. As I knew Jenny would be at the Lintons',—for she goes there to see the old lady every morning,—I guessed that Rose Cottage would be undefended; so back I ran to the house, picked up a book which I had promised to lend the young lady, and went to pay my visit." [pg 237]

"How did you get inside the gate? It is generally locked."

"It wasn't on this occasion," replied Tait complacently. "I opened it and walked in, to find old Paynton strolling in the garden. Catching sight of me, he turned back to re-enter the house, but, luckily, I was between him and the door, so we met face to face."

"What kind of a man is he to look at?"

"Oh, a fine-looking old chap, with white hair and beard, a skullcap, and a dressing gown. Quite the get up of a necromancer."

"Did he speak to you," asked Claude, having considered this description.

"He asked me politely what my business was; whereupon I presented the book, and mentioned that it was for his daughter. He replied that she was at the Lintons', and would be

back soon, when he would give her the book himself. Then he asked me to excuse him, and bowed me out of the gate. But," added Tait, with emphasis, "not before I had mentioned that Mr. Claude Larcher was staying with me."

"Did my name produce any effect?"

"Rather! Paynton changed color, and mumbled something unintelligible. Then he turned his back and walked quickly into the house, leaving me to close the gate myself. Depend upon it, he knows something, Claude."

"But his name isn't mentioned in connection with the case."

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"Of course not. Paynton is a feigned one. And, as I have said before, there are, no doubt, actors in the tragedy of whom we know nothing."

"There is one of that sort mentioned here," said Larcher, picking up Mrs. Bezel's letter. "Read that, Tait, and see what you make of it."

It proved to be a short note, hastily written, and ran as follows:

"MY DEAR CLAUDE:

"If you are still in doubt as to who murdered your father, ask Mr. Hilliston to tell you about Louisa Sinclair, who lived at Horriston twenty-five years ago. She knows.

"Your affectionate mother,

"MARGARET BEZEL."

"Louisa Sinclair," repeated Tait slowly, having mastered the contents of this letter. "No, I never heard of her. It is strange that Hilliston has never mentioned her name."

"No doubt he had good reasons for not doing so," said Claude bitterly. "You need not look so astonished, Tait. I have long ago come round to your opinion of my old guardian. His intimacy with Paynton and the effect of his visit on Kerry would convince me—not to speak of that 'anonymous letter.'"

"Ah! Kerry refused to speak."

"He would not say a word, and, moreover, stated that he was not Denis Bantry; that he had never heard of Horriston. In fact, he acted his part excellently well till the last. Then he broke down, and, afraid of letting the cat out of the bag, he ran away."

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"Exactly what his master did," said Tait thoughtfully. "Depend upon it, Claude, we will learn the truth from one of those two."

"If you think so, why go to Horriston?"

"Because I want to learn the real name of Paynton, and, moreover, here is an additional reason. I must find out Louisa Sinclair."

"There is no mention of her in the case."

"Quite true. And there is no mention of Paynton; but for all that he knows about it. Oh, you may be sure there are circumstances to be discovered at Horriston which never came to light at the trial."

"My mother is anxious for the mystery to be cleared up."

"So I see, and I am glad of it," said Tait, with an affectation of carelessness. "I thought she was too ill to take an interest in the matter."

"Am I to ask Hilliston about this woman?" said Claude, looking up in some doubt.

"No," replied his friend, after a few moments' deliberation. "Our success in this depends on keeping Hilliston in the dark concerning our movements. If we tell him too much he may thwart us, as he has done already in this Paynton business. Say nothing about Louisa Sinclair, or about my visit to Horriston. Tell him I have gone to town, and let him figure out the reason for himself. By the way, when do you see him?"

"On Friday evening. Both he and his wife are coming to dine, and stop all night at the vicarage. You may be sure Hilliston will put me through a thorough cross-examination regarding your absence."

"Refer him to Mr. Linton," said Tait coolly. "I am writing to that gentleman, telling him I am unexpectedly called to town on particular business. What that business is Hilliston will be anxious to know. I don't think he'll enjoy his evening at all. A guilty conscience mars all pleasure."

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"When do you leave?"

"By the 4.20 train this afternoon. I'll write you about my discoveries as soon as I find out anything worth scribbling about."

"You'll find nothing," said Claude dolefully; "after five-and-twenty years."

"I'll find out who Louisa Sinclair is, and then astonish Hilliston with the extent of my information. Regarding Paynton, I am not so certain. That discovery rests between you and Denis Bantry."

"I'll do my best, but I am doubtful," replied Claude, and so the conversation terminated for the time being. It left a lasting impression on the two who took part in it.

Tait duly took his departure with Dormer, leaving Claude in possession of the house. As he leaned out of the window of the smoking carriage, he said a last word to his friend:

"Don't tell Hilliston about my going to Horrison," he said significantly; "but if you get a chance inform his wife of the fact."

"Why?"

"I'll tell you that when I come back," said Tait, as the train moved slowly off. "Give her the information, and observe the effect; it will astonish you."

But Tait counted without his host; he was ignorant of Mrs. Hilliston's powers of self-control.

CHAPTER XXXI.

[pg 241]

AN EVENING AT THE VICARAGE.

THE Vicar of Thorston was a severe man, a trifle narrow in his views, and imperious of temper; but he was also fond of good cheer and hospitality—virtues which cover a multitude of sins. Those who sat at his table were sure of a capital dinner and an excellent glass of wine; for his cook and cellar were both undeniable. Report said that Mr. Linton was afraid of his cook, for that good lady had a hot temper, and feared no man. Many were the battles between her and the vicar, but being a perfect mistress of the culinary art, she invariably came off victor. She had her faults, but she was a jewel of a cook, and was valued accordingly.

On this special evening the vicar had assembled ten people, including himself, round his hospitable board. Mr. and Mrs. Hilliston were the principal guests, and Claude was also honored with special attention. An old couple named Densham, garrulous and pleasant, had likewise been invited; and they, with their daughter and Jenny Paynton, completed the party. To Claude was assigned Miss Paynton, while to Frank Linton was given the Densham damsel, an arrangement which was anything but pleasing to that jealous young man, or indeed to Miss Densham, who thought the famous author a grumpy creature. He was too preoccupied to please her taste.

Claude thought he had never seen Mrs. Hilliston to such disadvantage. She appeared ill at ease, and was haggard and pale of face, looking every year of her age. Even the rich dress and splendid jewels she wore failed to conceal the ravages of time; and in the neighborhood of the fresh beauty of the two girls she seemed an old woman. She felt this herself, for Claude noted that she threw an envious glance at the blooming faces of her rivals, and surveyed her wan looks in the nearest glass with a sigh. To her the party was purgatory.

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Nor did the lawyer appear to enjoy himself. He was moody and fretful, though every now and then he forced himself to be merry, but his laugh was hollow, and the careworn expression of his

face belied his untimely mirth. Sometimes he stole a furtive look at Claude, and seemed to brood over the young man's changed manner; for, do what he could, Larcher, deeming his old friend an enemy, could not behave with his former cordiality. He was ill-suited for a diplomat.

The dinner passed off with moderate success. Frank was complimented on his book, and the prosy couple had to be told the main points of the story. This brief recital made at least three people uncomfortable; for Claude raised his eyes to encounter an angry glance from Hilliston, and a deprecating one from Jenny. They were relieved when the vicar, who by no means approved of such attention being bestowed on a trashy novel, even though his son was the author, turned the conversation into another channel. Mr. Linton liked to lead the conversation at his own table.

"I wish to speak to you particularly, Claude," whispered Mrs. Hilliston, as he held the door open for the ladies to retire; "do not be long over your wine." [pg 243]

"I will come as soon as I can," he replied, and returned to his seat, wondering what she could have to say to him. He was not left long in doubt, for Mr. Hilliston entered into conversation as soon as the glasses were filled and the cigars lighted. This was the moment for which he had longed for the whole evening.

"Why isn't your friend Tait here to-night?" he asked, in a casual tone, feigning a lightness he did not feel.

"Did not Mr. Linton tell you?" replied Claude, prepared for this query. "He had to go to town on business."

"On business," murmured Hilliston uneasily; "anything to do with this case you have taken up?"

"I can't say. Tait did not particularly state his errand."

The lawyer sipped his wine, looked thoughtfully at the end of the cigar, and pondered for a few minutes. He wished to speak of Claude's changed behavior toward himself, yet did not know how to begin. At length he bluntly blurted out a question, straightforward and to the point. This was undiplomatic, but at times human nature is too strong for training.

"We are not such good friends as of yore, Claude. How is that?"

"I think you can guess the reason," replied Larcher, not ill pleased to fight out the point, for he hated being forced into doubtful civility. "It is this case which has come between us. I do not think you are giving me what help you ought to, Mr. Hilliston."

"I can give you no help," said the lawyer, drawing his heavy brows together. "You know as much as I do. No doubt your meddlesome friend knows more." [pg 244]

"It is not improbable. But you can prove your honesty in the matter by doing me a favor."

"My honesty, sir, has never been called into question yet," said Hilliston, injudiciously losing his temper, always a prelude to defeat. "And I have no call to defend myself to one to whom I have been a father. Still I am willing to grant you what you wish, in reason."

"Very good! Then introduce me to Mr. Paynton."

"I'm afraid that is out of my power," replied Hilliston, shaking his head. "You know the man's ways, I think. He is a hermit, a misanthrope, and does not care for company. Why do you wish to know him?"

"For various reasons," answered Larcher, coloring with some embarrassment. He was by no means willing to take Mr. Hilliston into his confidence.

His old guardian looked at him shrewdly, and, remembering certain small circumstances connected with Jenny, guessed, with the skill of an experienced character reader, how the land lay. At once he formed a resolution to further Claude's interests in the matter, hoping, and not unjustly, that should the lad be taken in the toils of love, he might stop further investigation of the case, an end which Hilliston much desired to gain.

"Oh!" said he not unkindly, "sits the wind in that quarter? Well, I will aid you. In a few days I will try and induce Mr. Paynton to see you, and then perhaps you may succeed."

"Succeed in what?" demanded Claude sharply, hardly relishing this perspicuity. [pg 245]

"Why, in this love-suit of yours. Aye, aye, Claude, I can see what you aim at, old as I am. Well, she is a pretty girl, clever and worthy. I know of no woman who would make you a better wife. You have my best wishes for your success."

"And you will introduce me to her father?"

"I'll try to, but I won't promise confidently. Paynton is a strange creature and may refuse to see you. By the way," added Hilliston, as though struck with a sudden thought, "what was my wife saying to you at the door?"

"She was requesting me to speak to her in the drawing room. There is nothing wrong, I hope? She does not look well."

"Oh, nothing wrong, nothing wrong!" replied Hilliston easily, rising to his feet as the vicar moved toward the door. "She is fond of you, my dear boy, and is anxious about the case."

"Anxious about the case," thought Larcher, as he followed his host into the drawing room; "that is strange. She can have no interest in it. H'm! I'll try the effect of Tait's destination on her. He said I would be astonished at the result. I am beginning to be so already."

Perhaps Jenny had overheard the whisper in the dining room, and was sufficiently taken with Larcher to be jealous of his attentions to Mrs. Hilliston, old though she deemed her, for, before he could cross over to where the lawyer's wife was seated, Jenny beckoned to him with her imperious finger. He could do nothing but obey, despite the frown which darkened Mrs. Hilliston's face, as she saw, and, with womanly instinct, guessed the maneuver. [pg 246]

"Come and sit down here," whispered Jenny, under cover of the music, for Miss Densham was at the piano. "I have not seen you for several days."

"That is not my fault," said Claude, delighted at the interest thus displayed; "you stay so much indoors. I have been looking for you everywhere."

"Have you, indeed, Mr. Larcher?" said Jenny, with feigned surprise. "And why, may I ask?"

"Oh, for no particular purpose, unless, indeed, it was to ask you for further information concerning the novel."

"Hush. Not a word of that. I can't speak of it to you. I know who you are, Mr. Larcher, but I am ignorant of the tragedy save what I told to Frank, and later on to Mr. Tait."

"But you can guess——"

"I can guess nothing," interrupted the girl imperiously. "If you and I are to remain friends you must cease talking on that subject."

"I'll do anything to remain friends with you, Miss Paynton," was the significant reply.

"Then talk of anything save that terrible case. Oh, how I wish I had left it alone!"

"I'm glad you did not," said Claude bluntly. "If it had not been for that book——"

Before he could finish the sentence Jenny shot an indignant look at him, and deliberately rising from her seat crossed the room to where Frank Linton was frowning and tugging at his mustache. Claude was vexed at his folly in thus drawing down her anger on him, but accepted his beating like a man, and passed over to where Mrs. Hilliston waited with an expectant face. She remarked on his tardy coming with some bitterness. [pg 247]

"I see you prefer a younger face to mine," she said, drawing herself up. "Time was when I had no rival to fear."

"Dear Mrs. Hilliston, I could not disobey a lady. Besides—besides——"

"Besides you are in love with her. Oh, I can see that! Well, she is a pretty girl. So you intend to marry her?"

"It is early yet to talk of marriage. I don't even know if she likes me."

Mrs. Hilliston laughed, and looked at him smilingly. "Then you must be very ignorant of the way of women, my dear," she said meaningly. "A word in your ear, Claude. That girl loves you."

"In two weeks! Impossible!"

"I've known love to grow in two days," replied Mrs. Hilliston dryly. "Oh, yes, she loves you, and you love her, so you can marry as soon as you choose."

"First I must get Mr. Paynton's consent."

"I should not think that would be difficult," said the lady, looking at his eager face. "You are young, not ill-looking, not badly off, and so I should not think Mr. Paynton would desire anything better for his daughter. So much for the first obstacle, and the second?"

"I must solve the mystery of my father's death."

Mrs. Hilliston's manner changed on the instant, and from being gay she became severe and anxious-looking. Indeed, Claude thought that she paled under her rouge; but this might have been fancy.

"It is about that I wish to speak to you," she said hurriedly. "I want you to stop investigating this case. You will learn nothing; it would be of no use to anyone if you did solve the mystery. Stop troubling yourself with slander, Claude."

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"Why?" he asked, astonished at her earnest tone.

"Because your conduct vexes my husband. He has been a father to you in the place of the one you lost, so you ought to consider him a little. Pray leave that mystery unsolved."

"If I would, Tait would not. He is now even more eager than I to find out the truth."

"Horrid little man!" said the lady viciously. "Where is he now?"

The time had now come to try the effect of Tait's destination, and fixing his eyes on Mrs. Hilliston as she slowly fanned herself, Claude uttered the fatal words.

"He is at Horriston."

The fan stopped, Mrs. Hilliston paled, but, preserving her self-control with a strong effort, replied quietly:

"At Horriston. And why?"

"To find out a person not mentioned in the case."

"Man or woman?" asked Mrs. Hilliston in a low voice.

"Woman."

She said no more, but turned away her head to reply to her husband, who came up opportunely. He also had heard the last few words of the conversation, and, ignoring the presence of Claude, husband and wife looked at one another with pale faces.

The shot had struck home, and Larcher saw that it had.

CHAPTER XXXII.

[pg 249]

THE DISCOVERIES OF SPENSER TAIT.

HORRISTON might fitly be compared to Jonah's gourd; it sprang up in a night, so to speak, and withered in the space of a day. In the earlier part of the Victorian era a celebrated doctor recommended its mineral springs, and invalids flocked to be cured at this new pool of Bethesda. Whether the cures were not genuine, or insufficiently rapid to please the sick folk, it is hard to say, but after fifteen or twenty years of prosperity the crowd of fashionable valetudinarians ceased to occupy the commodious lodging houses and hotels in Horriston. Other places sprang up with greater attractions and more certain cures, so the erstwhile fashionable town relapsed

into its provincial dullness. No one lived there but a few retired army men, and no one came save a stray neurotic person in search of absolute quiet. Few failed to get that at Horrison, which was now as sleepy a place as could be found in all England. Even Thorston was more in touch with the nineteenth century than this deserted town.

As Tait drove through the streets on his way to the principal hotel, he could not help noticing the dreary look of the chief thoroughfare. Many of the shops were closed, some were unoccupied, and those still open displayed wares grimy and flyblown. The shopkeepers came to their doors in a dazed fashion to look at the new visitor in the single fly which plied between station and hotel, thereby showing that the event was one of rare occurrence. There were no vehicles in the street itself save a lumbering cart containing market produce, and the doctor's trap which stood at the doctor's door. A few people sauntered along the pavement in a listless fashion, and the whole aspect of the place was one of decay and desertion. But for the presence of shopkeepers and pedestrians, few though they were, Tait could almost have imagined himself in some deserted mining township on the Californian coast.

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The principal hotel faced one side of a melancholy square, and was called "The Royal Victoria," out of compliment to the reigning monarch. It was a large barrack, with staring windows, and a flight of white steps leading up to a deserted hall. No busy waiters, no genial landlord or buxom barmaid, not even the sound of cheerful voices. Cats slept on the steps and fowls clucked in the square, while a melancholy waiter, peering out of the window, put the finishing touch to the lamentable dreariness of the scene. The sign "Royal Victoria" should have been removed out of very shame, and the word "Ichabod" written up in its place. The landlord was lacking in humor to let things remain as they were.

However, Tait, being hungry and dusty and tired, consoled himself with the reflection that it was at all events an hotel, and speedily found himself the sole occupant of the dining room, attended to by the melancholy waiter. The viands provided were by no means bad, and the wine was undeniably good; and small wonder, seeing it had been in the cellars for a quarter of a century for want of someone to drink it. This fact was confided to Tait by his sad Ganymede.

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"We used to see a sight of company here," said this elderly person when he appeared with the claret, "but, bless you, it's like Babylon the fallen now, sir. You're the first gentleman as I have seen here for a week."

"Shouldn't think it would pay to keep the hotel open."

"It don't, sir," replied the waiter with conviction, "but master is well off—made his money in the days when Horrison was Horrison, and keeps this place as a sort of hobby. We have a club here in the evenings, sir, and that makes things a bit lively."

"Have you been here long?" asked Tait, noticing how gray and wrinkled was this despondent servitor.

"Over thirty years, sir," responded Ganymede, with a sigh as though the memory was too much for him; "man and boy I've been here thirty years."

"I'm glad of that. You're the man I want. Got a good memory?"

"Pretty good, sir. Not that there's much to remember," and he sighed again.

"H'm. Have you any recollection of a murder which took place at The Laurels twenty-five years ago?"

"That I have, sir," said the waiter, with faint animation, "it was the talk of the country. Captain Larcher, wasn't it, sir, and his wife, a sweetly pretty woman? She was accused of the murder, I think; but she didn't do it. No, nor Mr. Jeringham either, though some people think he did, 'cause he cleared out. And small blame to him when they were after him like roaring lions."

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"Do you remember Jeringham?"

"I should think so, sir. Why he stopped in this very hotel, he did. As kind and affable a gentleman as I ever met, sir. He kill Captain Larcher? Not he! no more than did the wife, poor thing! Now I have my own opinion," said this wise person significantly, "but I didn't take to it for five years after the murder. As you might say twenty years ago, sir."

"Who do you think committed the crime, then?" asked Tait, rather impressed by the man's manner.

The waiter looked around, with the enjoyable air of a man about to impart a piece of startling

information, and bent across the table to communicate it to Tait. "Denis Bantry was the man, sir," he said solemnly; "Captain Larcher's valet."

"Nonsense! What makes you think that?"

"I don't think it, sir. I know it. If you don't believe me, go to The Laurels and ask the old gardener, Dick Pental. He saw it," finished the waiter, in a tragic whisper.

"Saw what? The murder?" said Tait, with a startled look.

"Yes, sir. He saw the murder. I heard it all from him, I did; I forget the exact story he told me. But Denis Bantry should have been hanged, sir. Oh, there isn't the least doubt about it, sir."

"But if this Dick Pental saw the crime committed, why didn't he come forward and tell about it?"

"Well, sir, it was this way," said Ganymede, dusting the table with his napkin, "Dick aint all there. Not to be too delicate, sir, Dick's mad. He was always a softy from a boy, not that he's old now, sir. Forty-five, I believe, and he was twenty years of age when he was in Captain Larcher's service."

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"And is he at The Laurels still?"

"Why, yes, sir. You see, after the murder, no one would take the house. They thought it haunted maybe, so Dick was put in as caretaker. He looked after it for twenty years, and then it was taken by a gentleman who didn't care for murders or ghosts. He's there now, sir, and so is Dick, who still looks after the garden."

"But why didn't Dick relate what he saw?"

"Because of his softness, sir," said the waiter deliberately. "You see Dick had been put into a lunatic asylum, he had, just before he came of age. Captain Larcher—a kind gentleman, sir—took him out, and made him gardener at The Laurels, so when Dick saw the murder done, he was afraid to speak, in case he should be locked up again. No head, you see, sir. So he held his tongue, he did, and only told me five years after the murder. Then it was too late, for all those who were at The Laurels on that night had disappeared. You don't happen to know where Denis Bantry is, sir, do you? For he ought to hang, sir; indeed he ought."

Tait did not think it wise to take this bloodthirsty waiter into his confidence, but rewarded him with half a sovereign for his information, and retired to bed to think the matter over. He was startled by this new discovery, which seemed to indicate Denis Bantry, alias Kerry, as the assassin, and wondered if he had been wrong all through in suspecting Hilliston. Yet if Kerry had committed the crime, Tait saw no reason why Hilliston should protect him, as he was evidently doing. Assuming that the waiter had spoken correctly, the only ground on which Tait could explain Hilliston's conduct was that Mrs. Larcher was implicated with the old servant in the murder. If Kerry were arrested he might confess sufficient to entangle Mrs. Larcher; and as Hilliston loved the woman, a fact of which Tait was certain, he would not like to run so great a risk to her liberty. But this reasoning was upset by the remembrance that Mrs. Larcher had already been tried and acquitted of the crime; and as according to law she could not be tried twice on the same charge, she was safe in any case. Tait was bewildered by his own thoughts. The kaleidoscope had shifted again; the combinations were different, but the component parts were the same; and argue as he might there seemed no solution of the mystery. Mrs. Larcher, Denis Bantry, his sister, Hilliston, and Mark Jeringham; who had killed the unfortunate husband? Tait could find no answer to this perplexing question.

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In the morning he walked to The Laurels, which he had no difficulty in finding, owing to the explicit directions of his friend the waiter. It was a pretty, low-roofed house on a slight rise near the river, and built somewhat after the fashion of a bungalow. The gardens sloped to the river bank on one side, and on the other were sheltered from inland winds by a belt of sycamore trees; in front a light iron railing divided them from the road, which ran past the house on its way to the ferry. The gardens were some three acres in extent, very pretty and picturesque, showing at every turn that whatever might be the mental state of Dick Pental, he was thorough master of his business. Tait came into contact with him in a short space of time through the medium of the housekeeper.

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This individual was a sour old maid, who informed him with some acerbity that Mr. Deemer, the present occupant of The Laurels, was away from home, and without his permission she could not show him the house. Perhaps she suspected Tait's errand, for she looked suspiciously at him, and resolutely refused to let him cross the threshold. However, as a concession she said he could inspect the grounds, which were well worth seeing; and called Dick Pental to show him round. As Tait had really no great desire to see the interior of the house, where he would learn nothing

likely to be of service, and a great desire to speak alone with the mad gardener, he thankfully accepted the offer, and was then thrown into the company of the very man whom he most desired to see.

Dick Pental was a slender, bright-eyed man, with a dreamy-looking face; alert in his movements, and restless with his hands and feet. He did not seem unintelligent; but the germs of madness were plainly discernible, and Tait guessed that only his constant life in the open air kept him from returning to the asylum whence he had been taken by Captain Larcher. With justifiable pride this queer creature showed Tait over the grounds, but never by word or deed did he hint at the story which he had told the waiter. Still hopeful, Tait led the conversation on that direction, and finally succeeded in touching the spring in the man's brain which made him relate the whole matter. The opportunity occurred when the two men were standing on a slight rise overlooking the river. Here Tait made a remark concerning the view. [pg 256]

"What a peaceful scene," he said, waving his stick toward the prospect. "Corn lands, farmhouses, the square-towered church, and the ferry crossing the placid river. I can imagine nothing more homely, or so charged with pleasant memories. Here all is peace and quiet, no trouble, no danger, no crimes."

Dick thoughtfully rubbed the half crown given him by Tait, and looked dreamily at river and sky and opposite shore. To his abnormally active brain the scene looked different to what it did to this stranger; and he could not forbear alluding to the fact. Moreover, the gentleman had given him money, and Dick was greedy, so in the expectation of extracting another coin, he hinted that he could tell a startling story about this very place.

"Aint you fond of murders, sir?" he asked abruptly, turning his bright eyes on Tait.

"No, I don't think I am," replied the other, delighted to think he had succeeded in rousing the man's dormant intelligence. "Why do you ask? Murder is an ugly word, and can have nothing to do with so peaceful a scene as this."

"That's all you know, sir," said Dick eagerly. "Why, I could tell you of a murder as I seed myself in this very spot where we are now—or only a few yards from it, sir."

Tait glanced at his watch with an affectation of hurry, and shook his head. "I am afraid I can't wait," he said artfully. "I must return to Horrison in a few minutes."

"It won't take longer nor that to tell. Why, I've told it in ten minutes, I have. It's freezer to the blood. A murder at night, too," added Dick, in an agony lest Tait should go away, "with a lantern and a corpse—just like you read in novels." [pg 257]

"Hm!" observed Tait skeptically, not yet being sure of the man. "Is it true?"

"True as gospel, sir. I wouldn't tell a lie, I wouldn't. I've been brought up Methody, you know, sir, and scorn a falsehood as a snare of the Old 'Un. You make it worth Dicky's while, sir, and he'll give you goose flesh. Oh, that he will."

"Very good," said Tait, throwing himself on the sward. "I don't mind hearing the legend of this place. If it is as good as you say I'll give you half a sovereign."

"In gold?" asked Dick, with a grasping eagerness.

"In bright gold. See! here is the half sovereign. You tell the story and it is yours. Now, then, what is it all about?"

Dick Pental sat down beside Tait, but at some distance away, and chuckled as he rubbed his hands. He had a chance of making twelve-and-sixpence that morning, and was overjoyed at his good fortune. Resolved to begin with a startling remark, he glanced down to see that they were alone, and then brought it out.

"I could hang a man, I could," he said cheerfully. "I could hang him till he was a deader."

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE STORY OF THE MAD GARDENER.

HAVING made this startling announcement, Dick Pental drew back to observe the effect on his hearer. Humoring the man's vanity, Tait expressed due surprise, and requested him to narrate the circumstance to which he referred.

"It is about twenty-five years ago, it is," said Dick, commencing his tale in a great hurry; "and I was the gardener here to Captain Larcher. You don't know him, sir; it aint to be expected as you should. He was a grown gentleman before you were, and a kind 'un he was; took me out of the asylum, he did. They said I was mad, you know, and put me into a strait waistcoat; but I wasn't a bit wrong in my head, sir, not I. Captain Larcher he saw that, so he took me out and made me his gardener. And aint I done a lot for the place? just you look round and see."

"Your work is admirable, Dick."

"It is that," replied the man with *naïve* vanity, "and you aint the first as has said that, sir. Oh, I'm fond of the garden, I am; flowers are much nicer company than human beings, I think. Not so cross with Dicky, you know, sir."

"No doubt," said Tait, seeing that the creature was following the wanderings of his poor wits. "But about this murder you——"

"I didn't know anything was wrong," interrupted the gardener earnestly; "I'd have kept out of the way if I'd known that; but I came here one night when I shouldn't have been here." [pg 259]

"How was that?"

"Hot rum and water," confessed Dick, with great simplicity. "I drank it—too much of it, and it went to my head. It isn't a strong head, so I came here to sleep it clear again. That was about twelve o'clock as near as I can tell, but, Lord bless you, my head made no account of time, when the hot rum and water was in it. I woke up and I was frightened finding myself in the dark,—I hate the dark, don't you, sir?—so I finished some rum that I had with me and went to sleep again. Then I woke up sudden, I did, and I saw it."

"The murder being committed?"

"No, not quite that! But I saw a man lying on the ground just over there, and he didn't move a bit. Another man was holding him in his arms, and Denis Bantry was standing by with a lantern."

"Who was the other man?"

"It was a gentleman called Mr. Jeringham. Oh, yes! My head was queer, but I knew him by his clothes, I did. I was at the grand ball of the gentry, you know; it was there I got drunk—and I saw Mr. Jeringham there in black clothes with gold trimmings. He had them on when he bent over Captain Larcher."

"How did you know the man on the ground was Captain Larcher?"

"I didn't, then," confessed Dick ingenuously; "but when I heard as they found him in the river, I knew it was him, I did. I saw them drop him in!"

"Denis Bantry and Mr. Jeringham?" exclaimed Tait, astonished at the minuteness of these details. [pg 260]

"Yes. They talked together for a bit, but my head was so queer that I couldn't make out what they said. But they picked up Captain Larcher, one at the head and the other at the heels, and they dropped him in—Splash! he went, he did. I was behind a tree and they couldn't see me. Ugh!" said the man, with a shiver, "how I did feel afraid when he went splash into the cold water. Then I went away and held my tongue."

"Why did you do that? It was your duty to have come forward and told the truth."

Dick Pental put on a cunning look, and shook his head. "Not me, sir," he said artfully. "They'd have said my head was queer and put me in an asylum again. No, no, Dicky was too clever for them, he was."

"But you say it was Denis Bantry who killed Captain Larcher," said Tait, after a moment's reflection. "How do you know that, when you did not see the blow struck? It might have been Mr. Jeringham."

Looking lovingly at the piece of gold which was now in his possession, Dick shook his head with great vigor.

"It wasn't Mr. Jeringham," he protested. "He was a good, kind gentleman. He gave Dicky half a crown the day before. He was fond of Captain Larcher's wife, so he couldn't have killed Captain Larcher."

Against this insane reasoning Tait had nothing to urge, as Dicky was evidently convinced that Denis Bantry was guilty, to the exclusion of Jeringham. Had the former given him money instead of the latter he would doubtless have accused Jeringham and sworn to the innocence of Denis. The man's brain was too weak to be depended upon; but Tait recognized that the report he gave of the occurrence of that fatal night was true and faithful in all respects. Dicky was not sufficiently imaginative to invent such a story.

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Satisfied from the importance of the knowledge he had gained that his time had not been wasted, Tait wished to be alone to think out the matter. There was some difficulty in getting rid of Dicky, who was still greedily expectant of further tips, but in the end he induced the man to return to his work, and set out for Horriston at a brisk walk. He always thought better when exercising his limbs, and before he reached the town he had arrived at several conclusions respecting the case as seen under the new light thrown on it by the gardener.

For one thing, he concluded that Paynton was Jeringham. The reason for Denis being in his service had been explained by Dick Pental, as the two men were bound together by a common bond of guilt. Tait was inclined to think that Jeringham was innocent, for if he had killed Larcher there would have been no need for Denis to have screened him. On the other hand, circumstantial evidence was so strong against Jeringham that, if Denis had struck the blow, he would be forced to acquiesce in the silence of the real criminal—to become, as it were, an accessory to the crime. Denis could have sworn that Jeringham was guilty, and so placed him in danger of his life. Thus the two men had a hold on one another; Jeringham because circumstances were against him, Denis because he had killed Larcher. The motive for the crime was not difficult to discover after the story told by Mrs. Bezel. Bantry had killed his master as the destroyer of his sister's honor. Under the names of Paynton and Kerry the two men were dwelling together at Thorston in loathed companionship, each afraid to let the other out of his sight. Tait could imagine no more terrible punishment than that enforced comradeship. It reminded him of a similar situation in a novel of Zola's, where husband and wife were equally culpable, equally afraid, and filled with equal hatred the one toward the other.

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Still this conclusion, supported as it was by facts, did not explain the attitude of Hilliston. Assuming the guilt of Denis Bantry, the complicity of Jeringham, there appeared to be no reason why Hilliston should protect them at Thorston, and throw obstacles in the way of the truth's discovery. Tait was completely nonplussed and could think of no explanation. And then he remembered Mrs. Bezel's letter, and the mention of Louisa Sinclair. Hilliston, according to Mrs. Bezel, knew this woman, and she knew who had committed the crime. But how could she know unless she had been concealed, like Dick Pental, in the garden on that night? Tait was quite certain that Denis Bantry was guilty, but the hint of Mrs. Bezel threatened to disturb this view; and yet what better evidence was obtainable than that of an eye-witness. Still Tait remembered that Dicky confessed he had not seen the blow struck. What if Louisa Sinclair had? That was the question he asked himself.

Under the circumstances it was necessary to find out who this woman was. Tait did not judge it wise to ask Hilliston, for the simple reason that the lawyer would not admit the truth. There was no obvious reason why he should not, but Tait had sufficient experience of Hilliston's trickery and evasion in the past to know that his admissions were untrustworthy. There only remained for him to search for Louisa Sinclair in Horriston, question her if she were alive, or learn all that he could if she were dead.

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And now occurred a coincidence which unwittingly put Tait on the right track. When within half a mile of Horriston he met a clergyman swinging along at a good pace, and in him recognized a former college companion. The recognition and the delight were mutual.

"My dear Brandon, this is indeed a surprise!" exclaimed Tait, holding out his hand. "I had no idea that you were in these parts."

"I have only been vicar here for a year," answered Brandon cordially; "but what are you doing at Horriston, my friend?"

"Oh, I have come down partly on business and partly on pleasure."

"Then dismiss business for the moment, and come to luncheon with me. I am just going to my house. Where are you staying?"

"At the Royal Victoria."

"A dismal place. You must come frequently to see us while you stay here, and we will do what we can to cheer you up. Mrs. Brandon will be delighted to see you."

"Oh! So you are married?"

"For the last five years. Two children. Well, I am glad to see you again. Do you stay here long?"

"A few days only," replied Tait carelessly; "but it entirely depends on my business."

"Anything important?"

"Yes and no. By the way, you may be able to help me, Brandon. Do you know anyone in this parish called Miss Louisa Sinclair?"

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The vicar reflected for a few moments, and shook his head. "No, I never heard the name. She must have been here before my time. Have you any reason for wanting to see her?"

"Naturally, or I should not have asked," said Tait, with faint sarcasm. "However, I must make a confidant of you, as I wish for your advice and assistance."

"I shall be delighted to give both," said his friend briskly. "But here we are at my house, and there is my wife in the porch. My dear, this is an old college friend of mine, Spenser Tait. We must make him welcome, for the days that have been."

Mrs. Brandon, a comfortable, rosy-cheeked matron, with two tiny Brandons clinging to her skirts, heartily welcomed Tait, and led the way to the dining room. Here an extra knife and fork were hastily produced for the guest, and they all sat down to luncheon in the best of spirits. For the moment Tait banished all thought of the case from his mind, and laid himself out to be agreeable to the vicar's wife. In this he succeeded, as she subsequently pronounced him to be a singularly charming man; while he pronounced her to be one of the most intelligent women it had been his fortune to meet.

After luncheon Brandon conducted Tait to his study, and there, over an excellent cigar, the little man related the story of the Larcher affair from the time that Claude became possessed of the papers. Needless to say the clergyman was much astonished by the recital, and agreed with Tait that it was difficult to know which way to turn in the present dilemma. He thought that Denis was guilty and Jeringham an accomplice by force of circumstances; but doubted whether the existence of Louisa Sinclair might not altogether alter the complexion of the case.

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"Of course, the difficulty will be to find Louisa Sinclair," he said thoughtfully; "five-and-twenty years is a long time to go back to. She may be dead."

"So she may," rejoined Tait a trifle tartly; "on the other hand she may be alive. I found that waiter and that gardener who were at Horrison then. Both remember the case, so it is probable that I shall find this woman, or at least gain sufficient information to trace her whereabouts."

"I cannot recall her name, Tait. She has not been here in my time. Fortunately I can help you in this much; that an old parishioner of mine is calling to-day, and, as she has lived here for the last forty years and more, it is likely she will remember if such a person dwelt here."

"Who is this old lady?"

"My dear fellow, you must not call her an old lady. It is true she is over forty, but—well she is always young and charming in her own eyes. Miss Belinda Pike is her name, and I shouldn't like to come under the lash of her tongue."

"Is she such a Tartar?"

"She is—My dear fellow, you must not ask me to talk scandal about my parishioners; moreover, I see the lady in question is coming up the garden path. Once set her tongue going, and you will learn all the history of Horrison for the last hundred years."

"I only want to go back twenty-five," rejoined Tait, smiling; and at that moment Miss Belinda Pike was announced.

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She was a tall, bony female with a hook nose, a false front, and an artificial smile. Dressed in

voluminous raiment, she bore down on Brandon like a frigate in full sail; and proceeded to talk. All the time she remained in the study she talked, of herself, of parish work, of Dorcas meetings, of scandals new and old; and so astonished Tait by the extent of her petty information and the volubility of her tongue that he could only stare and wonder. Introduced to him she was graciously pleased to observe that she had heard of him and his inquiries.

"The waiter, you know, Mr. Tait," she said, smiling at his astonishment. "Sugden is his name; he told me all about you. Now, why do you wish to learn all about that Larcher crime?"

"For amusement merely," replied Tait, rather scandalizing the vicar by this answer. "The waiter began to speak of it, and I encouraged him; later on I heard the story from a gardener."

"From Dicky Pental," interrupted Miss Pike vivaciously. "Oh, he can tell you nothing—he is mad!"

"Mad or not, he told me a great deal."

"All false, no doubt. My dear Mr. Tait," continued the lady impressively, "only one person can tell you the truth of that case. Myself!"

"Or Louisa Sinclair."

"Louisa Sinclair! What do you know about her?"

"Nothing, save her name," replied Tait; "but I want to know more. Can you give me the required information?"

"Yes. Come and have afternoon tea with me to-day, and I'll tell you all. Oh, yes," said Miss Pike, with a self-satisfied nod, "I know who killed Captain Larcher."

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"Jeringham—Denis, the valet—Hilliston?"

"No. Those three people are innocent. I can swear to it. I know it."

"Then who is guilty?"

"Why," said Miss Pike quietly, "Mrs. Larcher's maid—Mona Bantry."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

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A LETTER FROM HORRISTON.

"MY DEAR CLAUDE:

"In my last letter I informed you of my various discoveries with regard to the case. I deem myself singularly fortunate in finding those who could afford me the necessary information. Five-and-twenty years is a wide gap of time, and, to tell the honest truth, I scarcely expected to be successful in my mission. Death, absence, old age, might have put an end to all who knew about the case, but, as you are already advised, I unexpectedly met with three people who gave me three different versions of the murder from their various points of view. First, the waiter Sugden, who merely reflected the opinion of Dick Pental; second, the gardener himself, with his first-hand story; and third, Miss Belinda Pike, whose ideas are quite at variance with the other two.

"I mentioned to you that I had met Miss Pike at my friend Brandon's, and that she had invited me to visit her the next day to hear her story of the case. Of course, I went, and found the lady an excellent character for my purpose. She has a truly wonderful memory for the small beer of life. She is a born gossip, and is one of the most spiteful women it has ever been my fortune to meet. Her invitation was more to satisfy her own vanity and curiosity than because she wished to do me a service; but if she is gratified in the one she is balked in the other. With some difficulty—for she is a most persistent creature—I managed to evade her inquiries as to my reason for wishing to know about 'The Larcher Affair'; and extracted from her all information likely to be of service to us in discovering the truth. What she told me leaves me more in the dark than ever; and I shall doubtless return to Thorston no whit nearer the truth than I was when I set out.

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"But before narrating her story, as imparted to me in strict secrecy, you must not be offended if certain reflections are cast by this busybody on your mother. To get at the truth of this complication you must view it from a disinterested standpoint and throw aside all prejudice. I do not for a moment believe that Mrs. Larcher intended to willfully deceive her husband, as is implied by Miss Pike, but I must confess I think her conduct was highly reprehensible. Still I pass no judgment, as it is not my place to do so; and you must clearly understand that the remarks herein contained about her are those of Miss Pike. You can guess from their tenor what a very spiteful old lady she is. I promised to report my doings and hearings faithfully to you, and I hereby keep my promise, and at the cost of your losing your temper.

"The cause of Miss Pike's malignity is jealousy—a passion which is as active now with her as it was twenty-five years ago. Then the fair Belinda, according to her own account, was the belle of Horrison, and shared that enviable position with two rivals—the one being your mother, the other Miss Louisa Sinclair. I fancy I hear you exclaim at the mention of this name. But Mrs. Bezel is right; such a person does exist. She was a passably pretty girl,—according to Miss Pike,—and rather popular,—again Miss Pike,—but cared for no one so much as Mr. Francis Hilliston, then a handsome young lawyer of great promise and good family. This is evidently the romance of Hilliston's life, and accounts for his silence about Louisa Sinclair. He did not wish to speak of one who had disappeared under somewhat discreditable circumstances; yet who truly loved him. Whether he returned her love I cannot say. Suspend your judgment till you hear the story of this maiden lady. Of course, it is quite different to that of Dick Pental, and, I think, less easy to believe. The gardener spoke of what he saw; Miss Pike speaks of what she thinks. Judge for yourself which is right.

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"As I have said, Miss Pike was a belle in her younger days. She was also well off, and could have made a good match. Unfortunately, she was in love with Hilliston; I say unfortunately, because he happened to be in love with Mrs. Larcher. I again apologize for putting the matter so plainly, but Miss Pike insisted that it was so. In those days Hilliston must have been a handsome and fascinating man, for Louisa Sinclair also loved him—with a like result. He had no eyes for these two damsels, but quietly devoted himself to Mrs. Larcher. I do not mean to say that he roused the suspicions of your father, for his devotion was perfectly respectful. The desire of the moth for the star, I may say—for Hilliston knew well enough that he had no chances in that quarter for two reasons. First, Mrs. Larcher was a married woman; second, she was in love with Jeringham.

"At the time of that notable dress ball matters stood thus:

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"Miss Belinda Pike in love with Hilliston.

"Miss Louisa Sinclair in love with Hilliston.

"Hilliston in love with Mrs. Larcher.

"Mrs. Larcher in love with Jeringham.

"Can you imagine anything more complicated; and to make confusion still worse, Miss Pike solemnly asserted that Jeringham was not in love with Mrs. Larcher, but with her maid, Mona Bantry. Therefore, all round, each of these five people was in love with the wrong person. It was a modern 'Comedy of Errors,' with a tragic ending.

"Miss Pike went to the ball in the character of a flower girl, and there was astonished to find two Mary, Queen of Scots, and two Darnleys. During the night she learned that out of jealousy Louisa Sinclair had adopted the same fancy dress as your mother. She was the second Queen of Scots, and was attired precisely the same in all respects, save that Mrs. Larcher wore a small dagger, and Miss Sinclair did not. On making this discovery Miss Pike naturally thought—as a jealous woman would—that the second Darnley was Hilliston. She knew that the first was Jeringham, and did not trouble herself about him, but maneuvered to get speech with the second. To her astonishment she found out—how I cannot say—that it was Captain Larcher, who was supposed to be in London. He confessed that he was jealous of his wife, and had returned in disguise to learn the truth. Miss Pike was not clear whether he was suspicious of Jeringham or of Hilliston, and she had no opportunity of learning the truth as Larcher, seeing his wife leave the ballroom, followed her at once. The next day Miss Pike was informed of the disappearance of Jeringham, and later on she learned of the death of Captain Larcher.

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"Now, you will ask whom she suspected. A woman with so unhappy a temper would not be long in forming an opinion about a matter connected with a lady of whom she was jealous. I allude to your mother. Miss Pike had a theory, and ever since, declining to accept the evidence given at the trial, has held firmly to it. She suspected Mona Bantry to be guilty. I give her reason in her own words.

"'Of course it is only theory,' she said, when I asked her pointblank who she thought was guilty, 'but my suspicions point to Mrs. Larcher's maid.'

"To Mona Bantry?' I asked, rather astonished.

"Yes! She was in love with Mr. Jeringham, and he was at the ball dressed as Darnley; Captain Larcher wore the same dress. As I told you he left the ballroom when he saw his wife go out with Mr. Jeringham. I fancy he followed them home, and caught them as they parted in the garden of The Laurels. Very likely he ordered Mr. Jeringham off the premises, and insisted on his wife going into the house. Mona, who was sitting up for her mistress, would open the door, and seeing by the dress, as she thought, Mr. Jeringham with Mrs. Larcher, I believe she lost her head and killed him.'

"Killed him; but how?'

"With the dagger worn by Mrs. Larcher,' responded Miss Pike triumphantly. 'She snatched it from the sheath as it hung at the girdle of Mrs. Larcher, and killed the poor man—thinking he was her lover. Then, finding out her mistake, she fled.

"But so did Jeringham,' I said.

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"Yes. He also saw the murder, and naturally enough thought he might be suspected. I think he took Mona away with him on the very night, and they fled together. As to the body, Denis, the brother, to save his sister and possibly his mistress from being suspected, threw it into the river. That is my theory, Mr. Tait, and I believe it to be the true one.'

"I need not repeat more of our conversation, as it was merely argument on both sides, but you now know sufficient to see in what direction Miss Pike's suspicions are directed. Her story is quite at variance with that of your mother, who plainly stated that she found Mona in the sitting room with your father. It is not strange that the two narrations should be contradictory, for we must remember that Mrs. Larcher spoke from facts while Miss Pike only speaks from hearsay.

"Again, from the statement of Dick Pental, it would appear that the murder took place in the garden; your mother says it was committed in the sitting room, so here is another contradiction. But you must not forget that only one person has sworn to the identity of those he saw with the body. Miss Pike can prove nothing from facts, and only evolves accusations out of her own malignant nature. Your mother accuses no one, alleging that she fainted in the sitting room. Therefore, taking all facts into consideration, I believe the gardener's story to be true, and that Denis Bantry killed your father; Jeringham, through force of circumstances, being an accessory to the deed. This view accounts for the identity of Paynton with Jeringham, of Kerry with Denis—and fully accounts for their living in seclusion at Thorston. This is my opinion. Do you think you can give a better?'

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"Regarding your mother's hint about Louisa Sinclair, I confess I cannot understand it. Miss Pike was perfectly frank about that person; and stated that shortly after the murder she went to America and had not been heard of for years. Hilliston may know of her whereabouts, but under the circumstances I do not think he is likely to speak. At all events we are certain of two things: that Louisa Sinclair did not marry Hilliston; that she had nothing to do with the tragedy at The Laurels. Miss Pike intends to show me a portrait of the lady on the occasion of my next visit. A knowledge of her looks may lead to something; but honestly speaking I do not see how she can possibly be implicated in the matter.

"But I must bring this long letter to a close. I have found out sufficient at Horrison to justify our suspicions of the *ménage* at Rose Cottage, and when I return we must set our wits to work to see Paynton and Kerry. They must be forced into plain speaking, then we may solve the mystery of your father's death—not before. Expect me in two days, and think over what I have written so that we may discuss the matter thoroughly when we come together. And so no more at present from your friend,

"SPENSER TAIT."

CHAPTER XXXV.

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THE ORIGINAL OF THE PORTRAIT.

CLAUDE LARCHER was blessed with the best of tempers, and strongly gifted with self-control. He found these virtues very necessary in his profession, especially when in command of a body of men in the wilds. There no trouble ruffled him, no disappointment depressed his spirits; he was

always serene and amiable, so that among his comrades his good temper had become proverbial. Had they seen him at this moment they would have found reason to alter their opinion.

The case wore out his patience; he saw no end to the complications arising therefrom. No sooner was one obstacle surmounted than another blocked up the path. But for Tait he would have taken Hilliston's advice long ago, and let the matter lie; but the little man was bent on solving this particularly tantalizing mystery, and so urged his friend to persevere in what seemed to be futile attempts. So far Claude had held to his resolve, but this last letter of Tait's with its budget of new complications threw him into a rage. He vowed that he would throw up the matter as soon as Tait returned. His father was dead, and there was an end of it; after five-and-twenty years nothing whatever could be discovered; and above all there was Jenny.

Claude was too clear-sighted to disguise from himself the fact that he was in love; and now enlightened by Mrs. Hilliston regarding the feelings of the young lady, he was doubly anxious to make her his wife. Before he could do so he had to remove an obstacle in the shape of her father, and that was no easy matter. Who Mr. Paynton was he did not know; whether he was implicated in the Larcher affair he could not guess; but of one thing he was certain: that Mr. Paynton resented his prosecution of the case. While he continued to investigate the mystery the recluse would continue inimical, and would therefore refuse to permit him to pay attentions to his daughter.

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Regarding Linton and his love, Claude had no fears. He had been assured by Mrs. Hilliston that Jenny liked him best, and taking advantage of the hint he had thrown himself as frequently as possible into the society of his beloved. Did Jenny go to the vicarage, Claude was there under the pretense of questioning the clergyman concerning the architecture of the church; did she practice on the organ, Claude was always waiting at the door to carry her music-book to Rose Cottage. A walk in the morning, he was in the vicinity; a stroll in the evening, and he appeared unexpectedly round the nearest corner. In driving, riding, walking, visiting, this persistent young man was constantly to be found near Miss Jenny Paynton. All this meant infatuation.

Availing himself of the opportunities thus afforded, he learned her secret, and betrayed his own. Without a word being said on either side—with the shadow of the case between them—these two young people fell in love with one another. When Tait returned two days after his last letter, he was confronted by Claude with the intimation that he wished to stop further investigations. Tait, who was devoured by an unappeasable curiosity to find out the truth, resented this backsliding, and told Claude his opinion very plainly. But for their long friendship they would have quarreled over the matter; as it was Tait argued out the question, and induced Claude to come round to his way of thinking. But it was a hard task.

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"You are not going to turn back after putting your hand to the plow?" he said, when Claude first broached the subject of abandoning the case.

"Why not, if the plow won't move?" returned the young man flippantly.

"The plow will move," returned Tait vehemently. "You got my last letter?"

"I did. But I don't see that it contains anything likely to elucidate the mystery. Your Dick Pental is a madman; your Miss Pike an untrustworthy gossip."

"That is your opinion, not mine. I have made a discovery since writing my last letter, of which I have not yet had time to inform you."

"What is it?"

"I'll tell you later on. Meanwhile is it on account of this girl that you have decided to abandon the case?"

"Partly, and partly because I think we are wasting time. Our investigation can lead to no result."

"We may find out who killed your father."

"I doubt that," replied Larcher coolly. "You suspect Hilliston; you suspect Jeringham; you suspect Mona Bantry. Why, in your last letter you hinted at the guilt of Denis, simply because a drunken lunatic told you a wild story; yet, so far as I can see, you have not a morsel of evidence against any one of the four."

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"You are wrong," said Tait, in an argumentative manner. "The misfortune is that there is too much evidence against them all. I could furnish you with a case against each which—so far as circumstantial evidence is concerned—would convince you of their individual guilt."

"Theory, Tait, theory!"

"We'll prove that soon, my boy," said Tait, with exasperating coolness, "if you back out of the case, I at least am determined to see it through. I suppose you are bent on marrying the young lady."

"If she'll have me—yes."

"Humph! There's another obstacle which you have overlooked. The consent of her father—our mysterious friend, Paynton."

"I have not overlooked the obstacle. I will obtain his consent from his own lips."

"And how do you intend to see him?"

"Through the agency of Mr. Hilliston," replied Larcher calmly. "He has agreed to introduce me to Paynton to-morrow. Here is his letter."

The little man fairly bounded from his chair, and he took the letter from his friend's hand with an air of bewilderment. After mastering the contents he returned it with a satisfied nod.

"I congratulate you, Claude," he said, with a good-humored air. "Though you failed with the man, you may succeed with the matter. But how in the name of Olympian Jove did you induce Hilliston to do this?"

"Why, he saw that I was in love with Jenny, and for some inexplicable reason has agreed to forward my suit, by introducing me to plead my cause with the father."

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"Not so inexplicable as you think," said Tait sagaciously. "I see his idea. He thinks you will be so occupied with love-making as to abandon the case."

"I don't know that he isn't right."

"Oh, I see you are bent on getting quit of the matter, Claude. But," and Tait shook a reproving forefinger, "you will change your mind after this interview with our hermit friend."

"Why so?"

"You will learn something which will astonish you. I only wish I could be present with you to see what occurs."

"But if I make no reference to the case," said Larcher seriously.

Tait waxed indignant on the instant, and spoke his mind freely. "Claude, my friend, I went into this matter solely on your account, and you owe it to me to see it through. If you find further investigation a bar to your marriage I will agree to let the matter drop. But first," added Tait, with emphasis, "you must make an effort to get the truth out of this man. Swear to him that you are resolved to push the matter to the end. Tell him that I have learned something new at Horrison. Mention the name of Louisa Sinclair. Then see the result. After hearing the story of Dicky Pental I am convinced that this man is Jeringham."

"I will do all you say," replied Claude, after some hesitation, "but I am afraid that my pertinacity in this matter will prejudice my wooing."

"If, at the end of the interview, you see that, withdraw your intention to go on with the case. Then out of gratitude he may give you his daughter. Bluff him first—yield afterward. In that way we may discover who Paynton is—what he has to do with the case, and why he is connected with Hilliston. Do you agree? Good! Give me your hand on that."

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The two men shook hands, though it was not without a secret qualm that Claude thus sealed the compact. After a pause he said:

"And who is this Louisa Sinclair you make such a point of my mentioning to Paynton?"

"Ah! That is my discovery," said Tait, rubbing his hands. "When I interviewed Mrs. Bezel I showed her a portrait of Mrs. Hilliston, whom curiously enough she had never seen—no doubt Hilliston has his reasons therefor. She seemed startled, but said nothing. Then she wrote to you about Louisa Sinclair."

"But what has Louisa Sinclair to do with Mrs. Hilliston?"

"Can't you guess? Miss Pike showed me a portrait of Louisa Sinclair taken twenty-five years ago. I did not then wonder at Mrs. Bezel's start, or that Hilliston had refrained from letting her see the picture of his wife. In a word, Louisa Sinclair and Mrs. Hilliston are one and the same woman."

"Ah!" cried Claude, with a sudden recollection, "it was for that she was so afraid of your going to Horrison."

"Yes. She thought I might learn too much. This is the beginning of the end, Claude."

"What! Do you think Mrs. Hilliston knows anything of the case?"

"According to your mother she knows a good deal. According to Miss Pike she is in possession of certain facts. Yes, I think Mrs. Hilliston can help us if she will."

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"But, my dear Tait," said Claude quietly, "Mrs. Hilliston is an American."

"Ah! Louisa Sinclair went to America, and probably became a naturalized subject of the Stars and Stripes."

"But," objected Larcher, "she was a widow when she married Hilliston."

"So I believe. A Mrs. Derrick. No doubt she came by all her money through that first marriage. Oh, I can put the puzzle easily together. No wonder Hilliston wanted the case dropped, both on his own account and on that of his wife."

"What do you mean, Tait? Do you suspect that——"

"Say no more," said Tait, rising, "I will tell you what I mean after you have seen Paynton. But then," added he significantly, "I don't think you will need any explanation."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

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A STRANGE THING HAPPENS.

THE next morning Claude received a second letter from Hilliston, stating that as his wife was ill he would be unable to come over to Thorston, but directing the young man to go to Rose Cottage at noon, when Mr. Paynton would be ready to receive him. Tait regretted that he had not been included in the invitation, and carefully instructed Claude how to act during the interview.

"I believe Paynton can settle the matter," were his parting words, "so put love out of your head for the time being, and do your best to extract the truth."

Anxious to oblige one who took so much interest in his private affairs, Larcher promised to do what he could, and shortly after eleven started for Rose Cottage. As a matter of fact, he need not have gone so soon, but he did so in the hope of meeting with Jenny. Well acquainted as he was with her movements, his surmise proved correct, for he met the young lady at the end of Nightingale Lane. She blushed, and expressed surprise at the meeting. But such feigning is part of love's comedy.

"I did not expect to see you here, Mr. Larcher," she said, after the first greetings had passed between them. "Where are you going?"

"I am about to call on your father."

"Really!" said Jenny, with some perplexity and more doubt. "I am afraid you go on a useless errand. My father sees no one."

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"He will see me," replied Claude quietly. "I come by appointment. Mr. Hilliston spoke to your father, with the result that he has agreed to see me."

"Has your visit anything to do with—with that novel?"

"It has everything to do with it. I wish to ask Mr. Paynton some questions in connection with my father's death."

"But he knows nothing—nothing!" cried Jenny vehemently; "he can tell you nothing! It is worse than useless for you to speak to him on the subject. You will only make him ill."

"But I have to speak to him on another subject," said Claude artfully.

Jenny looked up inquiringly, remarked the passion in his gaze, and turned away her face with a blush. Much as she would have liked to, she found it impossible to appear ignorant of his meaning.

"It seems to me that I am the person to be first consulted," she said, with a pout.

"Jenny, I—"

"Hush! Here is Kerry. See my father first, and then see me. Till then good-by."

She flitted rapidly away, and turned the corner of the lane as Kerry, more crabbed-looking than ever, came up to where Claude was standing. It was then that Larcher saw that the old servant was suffering under some strong emotion. His eyes were brighter than usual, his lips quivered, and he was so nervous that he could keep neither limbs nor body at rest. Rightly connecting this agitation with his visit, Claude wisely held his peace, and waited to hear what Kerry had to say.

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"You'll be after seeing the master, sir," said Kerry, in breathless anxiety. "He is waiting for you, sir, in the garden."

"I was just on my way there, Kerry, and stopped to speak for a few minutes to Miss Jenny. I am very glad that Mr. Paynton has consented to see me."

"And you may well be glad, Master Claude."

"Master Claude!" echoed the young man, stopping short.

"Oh, blazes! 'twas a slip of the tongue, sir," cried Kerry anxiously. "Don't notice it, sir. Sure, it's old I am, and my mind wanders."

"Then you deny that you are Denis Bantry?"

"Say nothing of that, sir. Let the master speak his own mind to you. You'll know soon enough who I am, and that's a fact, anyhow."

"I am convinced in my own mind that you are my father's old servant," said Larcher, as he resumed his walk, "but who your master is I am not so clear."

Kerry shook his head, and pursed up his lips, as though determined to let no information escape him. They walked along in silence, and it was only when he unlocked the gate in the red brick wall that Kerry again opened his mouth.

"Keep silent, sir, if you love me," he said, in a low tone. "Don't agitate the master. He'll do the speaking, and tell ye all ye wish to know. Begad, and more too."

Larcher nodded, and passed into the garden. The morning was warm and sunny, and the colors of the flowers were dazzling in the warm glow, against the white walls of the cottage. With his hands clasped behind his back, Paynton paced meditatively up and down the path before the house, but stopped as he caught sight of his visitor. Taking off his hat in tribute to the venerable looks of the old gentleman, Claude bowed, and waited to be addressed. For some moments Paynton looked at him in silence, with much emotion, then controlling himself with some difficulty held out his hand.

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"I am glad to see you, Mr.—Mr.—"

"Larcher," suggested Claude, seeing his host at a loss for the name.

"Larcher!" gasped Paynton, with an effort, "yes—yes! My friend, Mr. Hilliston, advised me of your coming. Let us enter the house. We will have more privacy there."

As Claude knew no one was about in that walled place but Kerry and the deaf old housekeeper, he wondered what further privacy was necessary; but considering that Paynton had doubtless good reason for his action, he bowed silently and followed him within, as requested.

In a few minutes they were in the bookroom. Paynton seated himself in such a position as to place his back to the strong light shining through the window, and asked Claude to be seated in a chair which lacked this advantage. In this way Paynton could observe every change in the face of his visitor, while his own, being in the shadow, was more difficult to read. Larcher saw the maneuver, but did not think it necessary to make any objection. In his place Tait would have acted differently.

"I am greatly obliged that you have consented to see me," said Claude, breaking the silence, "for I am informed that you live a very secluded life."

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"That is true. I accord you this interview at the request of my friend, Mr. Hilliston, but at the same time I may tell you that I have my own reasons for granting it."

"I think I can guess your reasons, Mr. Paynton."

"No doubt," replied Paynton, touching a book on the table; "they are not unconnected with this novel. You know, of course, that my daughter—that Jenny supplied young Linton with the material for his plot."

"I do. She found the report of my father's murder in some old newspapers in this house."

"Did you not think it strange that I should be in possession of such a report?"

"Naturally I did," answered Claude, replying to this direct question with marked embarrassment, "and it is on that account that I ask you to help me."

"Do you think I can do so?"

"I am sure of it."

"Why?" asked Paynton, in an unsteady voice.

"Because you know about the matter. You retained the report of the trial. Denis Bantry is in your service under the name of Kerry, and——"

"How do you know that?"

"Why, in the third volume of that book there is an episode of a scarfpin which is not mentioned in the report of the trial, but which was told to Miss Paynton by the man you call Kerry. Now, only two persons knew that a scarfpin was picked up in the grounds of The Laurels after the murder. One was Hilliston, the other Denis Bantry. You must see, Mr. Paynton, that I can only come to one conclusion."

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"I presume you got this information from Hilliston," said Paynton, in an altered voice.

"Mr. Hilliston spoke of it," replied Claude cautiously.

He did not intend to reveal that he had heard it from his mother, or indeed to reveal the existence of Mrs. Larcher until he was sure of his ground, and positive of Paynton's identity. Accepting his diplomatic answer in the affirmative, Paynton nodded, and went on with his questioning.

"You spoke to Kerry on the subject?"

"I did. But, as you may guess, I failed."

"Naturally. Kerry is a faithful servant. I owe more to him than I can ever repay. But here we are talking about the murder," added Paynton irrelevantly, "when you wish to speak about Jenny, at least so Hilliston informed me."

"I do wish to speak of your daughter later on," said Claude, with a flushed cheek; "but in the meantime I am anxious to come to an understanding about this crime."

"Why?" said Paynton, rather disconcerted at his failure to turn the conversation.

"Because I have sworn to avenge the death of my father."

"That is what a good son should do," said Paynton thoughtfully. "But after twenty-five years the chances are small. You wish to find the murderer—so do I."

"You!"

"Yes. I am more deeply interested in this matter than you suppose. Who do you think I am?" he asked. [pg 288]

"I cannot say, unless you are Jeringham."

"Jeringham?" said Paynton in a faltering tone. "No, I am not Jeringham, poor soul! Do you think him guilty of the crime?"

"I do and I don't. Sometimes it seems so, at others I fancy Hilliston to be guilty."

"Hilliston guilty!" said Paynton, rising. "What do you mean?"

"Oh, it is only a theory," said Claude hastily. "But my friend Tait, who was at Horrison a few days ago, found out all kinds of things which implicated one person and another. He found——"

"Don't tell me—don't tell me," said Paynton hastily. "I cannot talk to you longer or else I shall be ill. This interview has already tried me too much. Here," he added, unlocking a drawer in his desk, "take these papers. You will find in them a full account of all I know of the matter."

"You were, then, an eye-witness?" said Claude, joyfully slipping the roll of manuscript into his pocket. He had been more successful than he had hoped to be.

Paynton pressed his hands together, and looked eagerly at Claude. "I can bear it no longer," he said impatiently, laying his hands on the shoulders of the astonished young man. "Boy—boy, can you not guess who I am?"

"No," replied Larcher, rising to his feet in some wonder, "I do not know who you can be, unless you are Jeringham."

"I am not Jeringham. He is dead."

"Dead!" [pg 289]

"Aye, murdered. Can you not see—can you not guess? Claude, the man who was killed at Horrison was not George Larcher, it was Mark Jeringham!"

"But you—you——"

"I am your father!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

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A VOICE FROM THE GRAVE.

It was close on two o'clock, and, weary of waiting for Claude, the master of the Manor House had seated himself at the luncheon table. He was curious to know what had taken place between his friend and Mr. Paynton, as he judged from the length of time the interview had lasted that some important communication must have been made. Had Claude discovered the identity of Paynton with Jeringham? If so, had Jeringham confessed to the crime? These questions so annoyed and perplexed Tait that he could not swallow a mouthful of food. Throwing aside his napkin he rose from the table to see if Larcher had returned.

As he pushed back his chair the door opened and Claude, with a roll of papers in his hand, made his appearance. Tait turned to greet him with a smile, but it disappeared from his face and the words died on his lips when he saw the white and haggard countenance of his friend.

"Good Heavens, man!" he cried, hastening toward him; "what is the matter? Here, sit down! Drink this glass of wine!"

Claude did as he was bidden; then waved his hand in the direction of Dormer, who, stolid as ever, stood waiting orders.

"You can go, Dormer," said Tait hastily. Then, when the man leaving the room closed the door after him, and they found themselves alone, he continued: "Is anything wrong, Claude? Did Paynton tell——"

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"Not Paynton," said Larcher, finishing his wine and setting down the glass; "there is not such a person!"

"Aha!" remarked Tait, rubbing his hands. "I thought the name was a feigned one. And who is our friend, Mr. Paynton?"

"My father!"

Tait opened his mouth to utter an ejaculation, shut it without doing so, and looked dumfounded at his friend.

"What—what—what do you mean? Are you mad?" he stammered, sitting down limply.

"No, I am not mad," groaned Claude, "though I have suffered enough to make me so. I mean what I say. It was Jeringham who was murdered. Jeringham, who was dressed as Darnley on that night, as was my father. Jeringham, whose corpse was so unrecognizable by decomposition that it was thought to be that of George Larcher. My father is alive! My father is hiding here as Ferdinand Paynton. This is his story of the tragedy."

He placed the roll of paper in Tait's hands, and poured himself out another glass of wine. Overcome with amazement the little man looked first at the paper, then at his friend. It was some minutes before he could collect his wits together and speak coherently.

"What an extraordinary thing," he said at length. "You thought both your parents dead, but now it seems they are alive. Your mother at Clarence Cottage, Hampstead; your father at Rose Cottage, Thorston. Did you tell your father that Mrs. Larcher was still in existence?" he asked sharply.

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"I had no time to do so," said Claude, with an effort. "My father placed those papers in my hand, and then confessed who he was. I wished to speak further to him, but he pushed me out of the room, saying, 'Read that confession, and form your judgment before you accept me as your father.' I hardly knew what I was doing till I found myself in the lane outside. Then I came on here. I still feel quite bewildered."

"I don't wonder at it! Take another glass of wine. Did your——"

"Don't ask any questions, Tait," said Claude, rising impatiently. "Read me the confession at once. I can't do it myself."

"Won't you have some luncheon?"

"No! Every mouthful would choke me. I'll lie down on the sofa, and you bring your chair close to me to read."

Tait nodded, and unrolled the papers, while Claude, filling himself another glass of claret, crossed over to the sofa and lay down thereon. With the glass of wine on the carpet beside him; with the untasted luncheon on the table, he closed his eyes with a weary sigh, and compelled himself to listen. Tait glanced sympathetically at him, then without remark, though he was burning to speak, smoothed out the paper and began to read slowly. The writing was clear and legible, the matter interesting, so there was no difficulty in deciphering the story of the tragedy, as narrated by the man, who, for twenty-two years, had been supposed to be the victim. The confession (so-called) was in the form of a letter from father to son:

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"DEAR CLAUDE:

"At length I have made up my mind to reveal myself to you, and to set out at length the circumstances which placed me in this position. I am led to do so by three things. Firstly, your presence in this neighborhood with the avowed intention of avenging my death. Secondly, the publication of the novel entitled 'A Whim of Fate,' which sets out the particulars of what happened at Horrison in 1866, more or less perverted for

fictional purposes. Thirdly, the advice of Francis Hilliston, an old and valued friend, who points out that the only way to stop you in the investigation is to admit my identity, and so do away with your motive, viz., the avenging of my death. On reading this I leave it to yourself whether you will still consider me your father, and visit me accordingly, or whether you will look on me as a guilty man. Till you are acquainted with the truth, so far as I am aware of it, I swear that I will not approach you or open my mouth in your presence. On this understanding I set forth the following facts as shortly as is consistent with clearness. Judge me as you please, but I declare before God that I am innocent of Jeringham's death, and that I know not who killed him. This for the prologue; and now for the story.

"You will understand that I wish to cast no aspersions on the memory of your mother; but in the present case, it is necessary that I should speak plainly. Your mother and I were ill suited to one another, and lived unhappily together. Even when in the army I was addicted to literary pursuits, and, when I sent in my papers, I devoted myself almost entirely to study. Your mother was gay and social. Being a beautiful woman she liked admiration, and was never so happy as when out at balls, at the theater, or at garden parties. She lived in a whirl of excitement, and she quarreled bitterly with me because I preferred a quieter life. I accompanied her sometimes, but not often enough to please her, and when we came to reside at The Laurels after my leaving the army, she frequently declared that she regretted having given up Mark Jeringham for me. Naturally enough I resented this plain speaking, and we were estranged. Not even your birth could bridge over the abyss between us, and, while we lived at The Laurels at Horrison, I believe we were as unhappy and ill-matched a couple as existed in England. It was the quick coupled with the dead, and we both suffered accordingly.

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"The first cause of our unhappiness was, as you see, incompatibility of temper; the second was the presence of Jeringham, who came to Horrison ostensibly on a visit, in reality to stay near my wife.

"You can easily understand that I resented the presence of this young man. He was remarkably like me in height, figure, and looks, and my wife had a fancy for him before her marriage with me. That she became my wife, she laughingly avowed, was because of my uniform. So far as looks were concerned there was nothing to choose between Jeringham and myself, but the glitter of the military trappings (so she declared) turned the balance in my favor. You may be sure I liked Jeringham none the more after such a declaration of lukewarm affection from your mother; and when he came to reside at Horrison, four years after our marriage, I resented his continued presence about the house. Your mother was angry at my expostulations, and the introduction of this second element of discord into the house estranged us more widely than ever. It was a miserable and most unhappy time.

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"It was my friend Hilliston who pointed out the real reason for Jeringham's visits. This latter was not in love with my wife, but with her maid, Mona Bantry. As Denis, the brother of Mona, was an old servant of mine, I did not care to speak to my wife on the matter, but to keep the affair quiet, and to save the girl from the anger of her brother, I discouraged the visits of Jeringham on all possible occasions. We had a quarrel in public, and, as all the gossips of Horrison knew that he had been fond of my wife before her marriage to me, the quarrel was set down to jealousy on my part. All the neighborhood knew there was bad blood between Jeringham and myself, and (foolishly enough, I admit) I made use of several expressions calculated to show my hatred. These heated speeches were afterward remembered and commented upon.

"Things were in this position when the fancy dress ball took place at Horrison. Hearing that it was to be a masked ball, I resolved to assume a similar dress to that of Jeringham, and learn from my wife's own lips if she still cared for me. You may think I acted in an unworthy manner, but as a matter of fact I was nearly out of my mind with anger and jealousy, and hardly knew what I was doing. My wife was going to the ball as Mary, Queen of Scots, accompanied by Jeringham as Darnley. This was sufficiently pointed to show in what direction her affections leaned, and I took advantage of the opportunity. Feigning an excuse, I ostensibly went to London, but in reality remained at Horrison, where I obtained from the costumer a similar dress to that worn by Jeringham.

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"Thus masked and disguised I repaired to the ball. There I was recognized by a Miss Belinda Pike, but she kindly consented to keep my secret. You can guess what happened. Deceived by the dress my wife took me for Jeringham, and I learned sufficient to know that she loved him and hated me. I did not reveal myself, but went away mad with wrath. My sole idea was to unmask Jeringham, and show my wife how unworthy he was of her love. To this end I sought out Hilliston, and, learning that my wife was shortly returning home, Hilliston and I went to The Laurels together, as I intended to make Mona confess that Jeringham was her lover. I left Hilliston outside in the garden to watch for the coming of my wife, and entered the house to see Mona. She

was waiting in the sitting room for her mistress, and I then and there forced her to admit the truth. She declared that Jeringham was the father of her unborn child, and implored me not to tell her brother. Fortunately, I had directed Denis to stay in the entrance hall, so he did not hear his sister's confession, and she was safe for the time being.

"While I was talking with Mona, my wife entered. She immediately accused me of having feigned a visit to London in order to stay at home with Mona. The girl slipped out of the room, and my wife continued her ravings. She said that Jeringham had come home with her and was at that moment in the garden; there she swore to join him. I prevented her leaving the room, and ultimately she fainted. I ran out to call Mona, and found that she had left the house, no doubt to join Jeringham in the garden, to tell him that the secret was known. I also went into the garden to seek for Jeringham. To my horror I stumbled over a dead body, and hastily ran back for a light to see whose it was. Denis came with the lantern, and we found it was the corpse of Jeringham. He had been stabbed to the heart.

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"I would have given the alarm, but that Denis, quicker-witted than I at the moment, prevented me. He pointed out that it was well-known that I was on bad terms with Jeringham; that the unhappy man had been murdered in my garden; that my hands were red with the blood, and my clothes stained owing to handling the corpse; and said that I would be accused of the murder. I saw in a flash the peril in which I stood. I don't know if Denis suspected me of the crime, as he was not present when I first found the body, but he acted the part of a friend. We threw the body into the river and I made my preparations for flight. No one but Hilliston and Miss Pike knew that I had returned from London on that night, for my wife would keep silence, as I thought, for her own sake, and Mona had disappeared. I left the house in charge of Denis, and without a word to my wife, who had brought about this catastrophe, I sought safety in flight. It was cowardly, if you like, but I had no other resource. I would have been accused of the murder had I stayed, for the evidence was strong against me. I fled and trusted to chance to hide the crime.

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"The rest you know. My wife was accused and tried for my murder, as Jeringham's corpse was so disfigured that it was thought to be mine. I have mentioned the strong resemblance between us, and this helped the deception. I was compelled to keep in hiding as Jeringham, but I declare, had the case gone against my wife, I should have come forward and told all. As it was I went abroad, aided by Hilliston, who acted as my friend all through. He looked after my unhappy wife till she died in London; he took charge of you and brought you up like a son. He also secured me sufficient of my own property to live quietly, so I came to Thorston under the name of Paynton, and here I have lived ever since. I thought to die in peace, but you, Claude, have reopened the case. I tell you this to show you the futility of trying to find the real murderer. I do not know who killed Jeringham, nor do I think you will ever find out. If, after reading this, you still consider me your father, come at once to a most unhappy man. Be just, be lenient, my son, and forgive your unhappy father,

"GEORGE LARCHER."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

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A NEW ASPECT OF THINGS.

TAIT folded over the last sheet of this long letter with a sigh. Although he was pleased for Claude's sake that George Larcher was still in the land of the living, yet he was distinctly disappointed that no communication had been made likely to elucidate the mystery. Yet the result of this confession was an entire displacement of the point whence it was necessary to survey the case. The motives which had caused the supposed death of Larcher would not suffice to explain the death of Jeringham. The case had assumed a new aspect, but nevertheless it was as complex and inexplicable as ever. Tait thought of all this with inconceivable rapidity, but did not give utterance to his opinion in the presence of his friend.

"The letter is wonderful, so far," was his sole remark, "but it is a great pity that it ends so abruptly. I suppose your father will personally relate all other details, Claude, when you see him again."

The young man assumed a sitting position, and deliberately finished his wine before replying

to this remark. He looked anxious and disturbed, and, now that he had recovered from the overwhelming surprise at finding his father alive, seemed less delighted than he should have been. A miracle had been wrought in his behalf; the dead had been restored to life; but he was by no means gratified by the occurrence.

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"I don't know whether I shall see my father again," he said shortly.

"But, my dear friend——"

"Oh, I know all you would say," interrupted Claude hastily, with a frown; "but I am not prepared to admit your arguments. My mother is alive, my father is in existence, yet for twenty-five years I have looked on them as dead. Can you, then, wonder that I feel awkward toward them both; that I am by no means disposed to render them that filial affection which, you must admit, they but ill deserve?"

"The question is so delicate that I can only hold my peace," said Tait, after a pause. "I admit what you say. Still they are your own flesh and blood."

"I might answer you as *Hamlet* did on a like occasion," replied Claude, with a bitter smile; "but a quotation will not mend matters. What I have to consider is the advisability of seeing my father again."

"You must certainly see him again," said the other promptly.

"Why?"

"In the first place he is your father, whatever you may say, and in the second you had better tell him personally that you abandon further investigation of the case. After all, your object is gone; for though you might want to avenge the death of a parent, the murder of a scamp like Jeringham can matter nothing to you."

"Oh, that I abandon the case goes without speaking," said Claude quickly, "and you——"

"I act in the same way. The further we go into the case the more perplexing does it become. It is beyond me. Only at the Last Day will the mystery be solved. Still," added Tait meditatively, "I must admit a curiosity yet exists on my part to know who struck the blow. Of course your father's story corroborates Dicky Pental's, but the gardener mistook him for Jeringham by reason of the fancy dress."

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"Does this letter suggest anything to you?"

"It narrows the field of inquiry, that is all. Your mother, your father, and Denis Bantry must necessarily be innocent, as they were in the house when the murder took place in the garden."

"If they are innocent, who is guilty?"

"We have a choice of two who were outside at the time. You can choose between Hilliston and Mona Bantry."

"Mona Bantry kill her lover! How do you make that out?"

"You forget your father's account of the scene in the sitting room," said Tait significantly; "then Mrs. Larcher asserted in the presence of Mona that she had come with Jeringham, furthermore, that he was in the garden. Mona, also jealous, acts as any other woman would have done in such a position. She goes into the garden to demand an explanation; there is a quarrel between her and Jeringham, and she kills him, then flies, not to hide her disgrace, but to evade the consequences of her act. That is a feasible theory, I think."

Claude shook his head. "I don't agree with you," he said emphatically. "You forget that we have my mother's account of the matter to place against that of my father's. If you recollect she also admitted finding my father and Mona in the sitting room; she also admits fainting, but there all resemblance between the accounts ceases. My mother distinctly says that she threatened her husband with the dagger, that it fell on the floor when she lost her senses. When she recovered them the dagger was gone. Now," continued Claude slowly, "if you remember, the crime was committed by means of the dagger, for it was found red with blood in the grounds, and then was taken possession of by the police. If my mother's account is the true one, Mona Bantry may certainly have picked up the dagger and have murdered Jeringham, as you suggest. But if my father's story is to be believed, Mona left the room before my mother fainted, and consequently could not have gained possession of the dagger. It follows as a natural consequence that she could not have committed the murder."

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Tait nodded several times during this explanation, to show that he agreed with the points raised; but when Claude concluded he rubbed his chin in some perplexity.

"Here we come to a dead stop," said he impatiently. "It was asserted by the police that the murder was committed with the dagger worn by your mother as part of the fancy dress."

"Yes! If you remember, it was on that evidence she was arrested."

"Well, if she wore that dagger in the sitting room, Jeringham could not have been killed with it, because the murder must have taken place while your father was trying to pacify your mother."

Claude glanced at the letter again. "My father makes no mention of the dagger in this," he said, with a puzzled look.

"No. I should like to hear what he has to say on the subject, the more so as I incline to his story rather than to your mother's."

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"For what reason?"

"In her conversation with you, Mrs. Bezel—or rather your mother—said that she had threatened your father with the dagger in the sitting room of The Laurels."

"Yes. Well?"

"If you remember the evidence given by her to the police at the time of the arrest was that she had lost the dagger at the ball, and knew not into whose hands it had fallen."

Claude looked nonplussed, and knew not what answer to make. That his mother had made two different statements he was compelled to admit. He further remembered that his father had made no statement whatsoever about the dagger. Yet on the possession of that dagger turned the whole of the case. Whoever picked it up, whether at the ball or in the sitting room, must have killed Jeringham. Assuming his father's account to be true, and Claude saw no reason to doubt its accuracy, Mona could not have committed the murder, nor could Mr. or Mrs. Larcher be guilty. It therefore followed that his mother had spoken truly to the police, and for some inexplicable reason falsely to him. The dagger must have been lost at the ball, and picked up by—whom?

"I can make nothing of it," he said, after due consideration. "The only way to get at the truth is to tell my father that his wife still lives, and bring them together. Out of their meeting good may come."

"You will then call and see your father," said Tait encouragingly.

"Yes. I must. I see no way out of it. He must be informed that my mother lives, and I am the proper person to tell him so. Though it is strange," added Claude suddenly, "that Hilliston never told him."

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"Humph! That gentleman seems to serve both sides," said Tait gruffly. "Your mother speaks well of him, your father thinks no end of him, and both trust him, yet for what I can see he has deceived both."

"How?"

"Why, by keeping back the truth from each. He has let your father think your mother dead, and *vice versa*. What do you make of that?"

"I tell you I can make nothing of the whole confusion," said Claude crossly. "I will see my father and abandon the case, for I am sick of the affair. It is maddening. What a pity your lunatic did not wake up a few minutes earlier so as to see who struck the blow and thus have settled the matter? But it is not that which troubles me."

"No? What else disturbs your mind?"

"Jenny."

"Jenny?" echoed Tait, with feigned simplicity. "I am afraid I am dull. I don't see."

"You must be blind, then," retorted Claude, in an exasperated tone. "You know I love Jenny."

"Well?"

"Well, I can't love her. She is my half sister."

"Indeed!" said Tait, in nowise astonished at this announcement. "How do you make that out?"

"Why, isn't Jenny the daughter of Paynton, and isn't he my father?"

"He is your father, certainly, but I assure you Jenny is not his daughter. She is no relation to him."

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"Tait! what do you mean?"

"Can't you guess?"

"No. Out with it, man! Don't keep me in suspense."

"Why," drawled Tait, enjoying the situation. "Jenny is the niece of Denis—in other words, she is the child of Mona Bantry and Jeringham."

CHAPTER XXXIX.

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THE GARNET SCARFPIN.

THAT same evening Claude called to see his father. He decided to go alone, but asked Tait to repair to Rose Cottage within the hour, so that, the meeting with his newly found parent having taken place, a consultation could be held by the three regarding the proceeding with, or withdrawing, of the case. Tait especially stipulated that this arrangement should be come to, as he was desirous of seeing Mr. Larcher, senior, in order to disabuse his mind of the straightforwardness of Hilliston. Privately, Tait believed that the lawyer would yet be found guilty of the crime. On no other grounds could he explain the attitude taken up by Hilliston since the papers had been placed in Claude's hands. The evidence of Miss Pike and Dick Pental failed to alter his idea on this point.

Tait himself was beginning to feel weary of the investigation. At every turn it took he was baffled by some fresh obstacle, and he was not ill-pleased to find that the matter was at an end so far as Claude was concerned. That young man had sworn to avenge the death of his father; but now that his father proved to be still in existence, the oath was null and void. So that, Claude married to Jenny, he would be quite willing to leave the solution of the mystery surrounding the death of Jeringham to Tait; but Tait himself determined to have nothing further to do with so wearisome a problem.

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He waited considerably beyond the hour before leaving for the cottage, as he rightly considered the father and son would have much to say to one another. Moreover it was necessary to give Larcher time to overcome his emotion on learning that his wife was still in existence. Tait was by no means sure that the old gentleman would be pleased with this revelation. According to his own showing his relations with his wife had been none of the best; and to renew those relations after twenty-five years could hardly fail to be most unpleasant.

During this time Tait gave no thought to Jenny or Denis. As to the former, he was so satisfied that she was the daughter of Jeringham by Mona Bantry that he did not think it worth while to give the matter the benefit of the doubt. What he was curious to know was how Paynton, or rather Captain Larcher, came to stand in the position of an adopted father. Information on this point was conveyed to him before he reached the cottage by Denis himself.

The old servant walked briskly along the road, looking quite rejuvenated. He had heard the good news, and it had transformed his life. In place of a crabbed expression, his face appeared wonderfully cheerful, and he saluted Tait with a grin of pleasure. The other could not forbear commenting on his changed appearance, so clearly apparent even in the waning light of evening.

"Why, Kerry, you look ten years younger," he said, stopping short in his amazement, with an afterthought of Dick Pental's accusation.

"Ah, and I do that same, sir," said Denis, saluting in military fashion, "and you know why, sir."

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"Are they reconciled?" asked Tait, guessing what was in the mind of the old servant.

"Begad, they are! Chattering together like two love birds, and my old master looking on with pride."

"Why, Kerry, I spoke of Captain Larcher."

"Augh, did you now, sir? I spoke of Master Claude, God bless him, and Miss Jenny, God bless her! God bless them both!" cried Kerry, taking off his hat, with a burst of affection, "and his honor along with them. Oh, glory be to the saints for this blessed day. But sure, I am forgetting my service, sir. The master is waiting to see you this very minute."

"I was just on my way," said Tait, signing to Kerry to go on. "We will walk there together. By the way, does Miss Jenny know she is not the daughter of your master?"

"She knew it all along, sir. Ah, and why should you look surprised at that, Mr. Tait? Is it because she is the niece of an old soldier like me?"

"No, no, Kerry! But, as you are aware, Miss Jenny knows the case from those newspapers she found; and in that report Jeringham——"

"I see what you mean, sir," said Kerry, touching his hat in a deprecating manner; "but sure she doesn't know all. She believes herself to be the child of my sister, Mona—who is dead, rest her soul, and of a Mr. Kennedy. We've invented a father for her, sir. 'Twould never do for her to know she was the daughter of the poor man who was killed."

"It is just as well, Kerry. Do you know who killed him?" Tait asked this question with a keen glance at the man.

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"No, sir. How should I know. I ran out with the light when the captain called, but I don't know who struck him the cruel blow. He was a bad man, sir, deceiving my sister, and disgracing the Bantry family, but he is dead, and she is dead, so we'll let them rest, and the heavens be their bed!"

By this time they were at the garden door, and striking his hand over these sad memories Kerry led the visitor into the house, and showed him into the bookroom. Here were assembled Claude, his father, and Jenny, all looking supremely happy, though the old gentleman appeared to be rather shaken. He rose when Tait entered and held out his hand.

"I am glad to see you, Mr. Tait," said he, in an unsteady voice, "and I thank you for the way in which you have aided my son. I feel that an apology is due to you for my behavior on your last visit."

"Don't mention it," replied Tait cordially, shaking the extended hand. "Under the circumstances you could not act otherwise. Well, Miss Paynton, am I to——"

"Don't call me Miss Paynton now, Mr. Tait," she said, smiling; "there can be no need for further concealment. I can take my own name, that of——"

"Miss Kennedy," said Tait quickly. "Do not look so surprised. Kerry told me all about it as I came along. I am at once astonished and delighted."

"I don't wonder at it," said Captain Larcher, patting Claude's hand. "You see I have found a son."

"And soon, sir, you will lose a daughter," observed Tait significantly.

"Oh, no," observed Claude, with a laugh; "when I marry Jenny we will all live together as a happy family."

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"Marriage! Has it come to that?"

"You are astonished, I see, Mr. Tait," said the old gentleman, shaking his head. "I am myself. It is too soon—too sudden. They have only known each other a few weeks, and it is impossible that a union on so short an acquaintance can prove happy."

"We will have a long engagement," said Claude, "in order to prove if we truly love one another. But I am not afraid of the result."

"Neither am I," remarked Jenny, slipping her arm within that of her lover. "I am sure nothing will come between us. But come, Claude, and we will see my uncle, for I notice that Mr. Tait is anxious to speak to your father about that horrid case."

Captain Larcher nodded his approval of this, so Claude and Jenny left the room to seek Kerry, and he wept over by the old servant. Left alone with his host, Tait took a chair by the table, and they looked at one another in silence. The captain was the first to break it.

"There is no need for me to recapitulate the events of the day," he said, with a weary sigh, "as Claude told me you read my letter, and are in possession of all the facts. You may believe, Mr. Tait, that I feel considerably shaken. My interview with Claude has been rather trying. He has behaved in the most affectionate manner."

"Well, now your troubles are all at an end, Captain Larcher, and——"

"At an end, sir!" he interrupted sharply. "No, they will continue. My innocence is not yet proved, and I must still remain here under a feigned name, unless you agree to help me."

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"Certainly I agree. Is it your intention and Claude's to go on with the case?"

"We have come to that decision, but I wanted to consult you before finally making up my mind. Do you think we ought to proceed?"

"I certainly do," said Tait promptly. "It is true that the police think that you are the victim. But if you want to assume your own name, inquiries would certainly be made. One is never safe in these criminal matters, even after the lapse of years. If you did declare yourself to be Captain Larcher, then it would come out that Jeringham is dead, and you would have to clear yourself. Besides, the evidence of Dicky Pental would implicate you, seeing that he mistook you in that fancy dress for Jeringham."

"True enough," replied Larcher, nodding. "And there is another reason. I have just learned that my wife is still alive, and is protected by Hilliston at Hampstead. I sent Claude out of the room so that I could ask you a plain question. Give me a plain answer, and tell me what are the relations between them."

"I don't care to answer that plainly," said Tait, with some hesitation; "but I think you can guess."

"Does Hilliston love my wife?"

"On the authority of Miss Belinda Pike, whom I saw at Horrison, I believe he does."

"And for her sake he had deceived me all these years?"

"It seems so. In fact, Captain Larcher, Hilliston has been playing a double game. He kept you and your wife apart by assuring each that the other was dead. That conduct alone stamps him as a villain. Then, again, he threw all kinds of obstacles in the way while we were investigating this case."

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"What for?"

"My own opinion is that Hilliston committed the murder."

Captain Larcher clenched his hand, and thought for a few moments.

"It might be so," he muttered, more to himself than to Tait. "Hilliston was in the garden. If he loved my wife—a fact which I never suspected—he might have killed Jeringham out of jealousy."

"But the dagger! How did he obtain that?"

"No doubt at the ball. I assure you, Mr. Tait, that my wife had not the dagger when in the sitting room."

"She declares that she threatened you with it."

"Then she either forgets or speaks falsely. She wore it at the ball when I spoke to her there, but when she returned it was missing. Hilliston came with me, knowing Jeringham was with my wife. He might have picked up the dagger with the fullest intention of committing the crime. Now that I know he loved my wife I am not prepared to say how he acted in the garden while I was in

the house."

"And the garnet scarfpin mentioned in the novel?"

"That belonged to Hilliston," said Larcher quickly. "I gave it to him myself. Denis picked it up in the garden, but I thought nothing of that, as I was aware Hilliston was in the grounds on that night. But now I believe—Oh, I am afraid to say what I believe. I may be wrong."

"There is one way of finding out the truth, Captain Larcher. Come up to town this week and see your wife. Then we may learn all." [pg 313]

The old gentleman leaned his head on his hand in deep thought for a few minutes.

"I will come," he said at length. "At whatever cost, I will force the guilty woman to own the truth."

CHAPTER XL.

 [pg 314]

FACE TO FACE.

THE conversation between Tait and Captain Larcher was not finished that evening, as the old gentleman, worn out by the excitement of the day, early retired to bed. However, he declared that he would be shortly ready to journey to London; and Claude left the Cottage with Tait on the understanding that his father was to be called for next day. Before they parted for the night Claude made a remark about Hilliston.

"I hope he won't get wind of this," he said dubiously; "or he may get Mrs. Bezel—I can't call her mother—out of the way."

"Have no fear," replied Tait calmly. "Hilliston's hands are too full at present."

"What do you mean?"

"Why," said Tait, lighting his candle; "your father showed me a letter from Hilliston, apologizing for not coming over, as his wife was lying dangerously ill at the Connaught Hotel, at Eastbourne."

"He said something of that in his note to me. What is the matter with Mrs. Hilliston?"

"She has the smallpox."

"The smallpox!" echoed Claude, in a tone of horror. "Poor creature, she is a dead woman!"

"I don't know so much about that. She may recover."

"She may recover from the disease," said the young man gloomily; "but not from the blow to her vanity. Many a time has she told me that if she lost her looks she would kill herself. You mark my words, Tait, within the week we will hear of her death." [pg 315]

And with these prophetic words Claude retired to his room.

Tait had no time to think of this conversation, being occupied with anticipation regarding the meeting of Captain Larcher and his wife; but it so happened that Claude's prognostications occurred to him when the truth of the Horrison tragedy was discovered, and that was not long afterward. Perhaps, like the young men, Fate herself grew weary of an affair which had dragged on for twenty-five years. At all events she brought matters to a conclusion with almost inconceivable rapidity.

The first step toward the end was the meeting of husband and wife, which took place at Clarence Cottage, Hampstead, during the afternoon of the next day. In company with his son and Tait, the old gentleman drove to the railway station, some three miles distant, and took the up express. When established comfortably in a first-class smoking carriage—for Captain Larcher was fond of a pipe—he resumed the conversation with Tait which had been broken off on the previous

night. This time the subject was Hilliston and his doings.

"I have been thinking over your suspicions regarding Hilliston," he said, addressing himself more directly to Tait, "and I confess that it is difficult to reconcile some of his actions with your view that he is guilty. Claude, as you know, was ignorant of the Horrison tragedy until enlightened by Hilliston."

"I know that, my dear sir," said Tait quietly, "Hilliston certainly placed the papers containing the account of the matter in Claude's hands, but he was forced to do so by the action of Mrs. Bezel—I beg pardon, Mrs. Larcher."

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"Continue to call her Mrs. Bezel, if you please. I prefer it so. How did she force Hilliston to confide in Claude."

"Because she read the book 'A Whim of Fate,' and seeing the tragedy therein described, she wrote asking Claude to see her with the intention of telling him all. As you may guess, her story differs materially from that of Hilliston's, so of two evils, choosing the least, he determined to forestall her and inform Claude of the matter."

"And he did so by means of the press," said Claude eagerly. "In place of telling me the story himself he allowed me to gather what information I could from the scanty report of the *Canterbury Observer*. My dear father, the Genesis of the whole matter springs from the finding of those papers by Jenny. Had she not read them and told Linton the story he would not have written the book; had he not done so Mrs. Bezel would not have determined to tell me her version; and but for her threat to do so Hilliston would not have produced the papers."

"Humph! The action was compulsory on the part of Hilliston?"

"I think so, sir," said Tait complacently; "therefore it is quite in keeping with his usual character. The rat did not fight till it was driven into a corner."

"It is not in the corner," remarked Captain Larcher significantly, "but we'll drive it there and see if it will face our accusation. But what about Hilliston's introduction of Claude to me? Would it not have been to his interest to keep us apart?"

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"Oh!" said Tait, with some contempt for Hilliston's diplomacy, "that was another case of necessity. He knew that Claude and I were bent on discovering the truth, so, fearing that we should do so by further investigation, he thought to stop the whole matter by bringing you face to face with your son."

"I don't see how that would accomplish his aim."

"Hilliston hoped it would do so in two ways," explained Tait glibly. "First, he hoped that you would give your consent to Claude marrying Jenny, and so lead his mind away from the case, and second, he trusted that when Claude found you alive he would no longer desire to pursue the investigation."

"He was right so far," said Claude seriously.

"If that was Hilliston's calculation, he made one great mistake," said Captain Larcher scornfully. "He did not think that I should wish to see my wife."

"He must have been satisfied that Claude would tell you she was alive."

"That, of course. But he thought I would stay at Thorston as Ferdinand Paynton, and be afraid to admit my identity even to my wife. I might have done so but for Claude. But I owe it to him to clear myself, and this meeting with my wife will be the first step toward doing so. Between us we must solve the mystery."

"It is none, so far as I am concerned," said Tait grimly. "I am sure as I am sitting here that Hilliston murdered Jeringham. The gardener was just too late to see him do the deed."

"But his motive?" asked Claude curiously.

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His father and Tait stole a glance at one another. They neither of them wished to make any remarks about Mrs. Larcher and Hilliston's passion, preferring that Claude should be ignorant of that episode. Still when he asked so direct a question it was difficult to avoid a direct answer, but Larcher gave him one which was sufficiently evasive to stop further inquiries.

"We must try and find out his motive," he said quietly. "Depend upon it, Claude, there is a

good deal of underhand work in this of which we know nothing."

"Do you think Mona committed the crime?"

"No, I do not. In no way could she have gained possession of the dagger with which it was committed."

"My mother says she had a dagger in the sitting room."

"That is a mistake," said Captain Larcher, using as delicate a word as he could think of. "She threatened me with the sheath of the dagger, and no doubt, being agitated at the time, she thought it was the weapon itself. But I noticed when she entered the room that the sheath was empty. Her story to the police at the time of the trial is more likely. She lost it in the ballroom. The question is, who picked it up? Judging from the knowledge I now have of his character I believe it was Hilliston who did so."

"Or Jeringham," said Tait suddenly.

"Impossible! How could Jeringham have found it?"

"He was with Mrs. Larcher all the evening, and may have seen the dagger fall. Or again, he may have taken it out of the sheath to examine it and have forgotten to return it. It is not improbable that in such a case he might have recollected it when he was in the garden, and offered it to Mona to return to her mistress."

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"Oh!" said Claude with contempt. "And on that slight ground you suppose that Mona killed him?"

"It is not beyond the bounds of probability."

"Nonsense!" said Captain Larcher angrily. "I don't believe it. Mona was a good girl, fully deceived by Jeringham. She fled from the house to hide her disgrace, thinking my wife would tell her brother. Hilliston afterward met her in London, where she died in giving birth to Jenny."

"Then it was Hilliston who brought Jenny to you?"

"Yes. Because her Uncle Denis was in my service. I adopted Jenny, but told her that she was the child of a Mr. Kennedy and Mona Bantry. She believed her father and mother were married, so do not disturb that view of the case."

"Certainly not," said Tait emphatically. "It would be cruel to do so. But here we are at Victoria. After seeing Mrs. Bezel at Hampstead we can resume our conversation."

"If we do it will be from a different standpoint, I fancy," said Larcher significantly, as the train stopped.

Tait's brougham was waiting for them at the station, and in this they drove up to Hampstead. Leaving it in Fitzjohn's Avenue they walked down Hunt Lane to Clarence Cottage. Mrs. Bezel occupied her usual seat in the window, and caught sight of Claude as he preceded his father and Tait up the path. A terrified expression crossed her face, but she made no motion to forbid their entrance. Yet a sense of coming evil struck at her heart, and it needed all her self-control to prevent herself from fainting when they were shown into the room.

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"My dear mother," said Claude, kissing her, "you must be prepared for unexpected news. I beg of you to control yourself for—"

He stopped short in astonishment. Mrs. Bezel was looking at Captain Larcher with a bewildered air, and he gazed at her face with an expression of amazement. She shrank back as he crossed the room with rapidity, and bent over her.

"Mona Bantry!" he cried, "is it possible that you still live?"

AN EXPLANATION.

ON hearing his father's exclamation Claude turned round with a look of supreme astonishment. He could not understand the meaning of that sudden exclamation.

"Father, you do not understand. This is your wife—my mother."

"Is it, indeed?" sneered Captain Larcher, who had recovered from his momentary emotion. "Nothing of the sort, sir. This woman is Mona Bantry, who was my wife's maid."

"Are you sure?" cried Tait, who was beginning to be bewildered by these successive revelations.

"Sure, sir! as sure as I am of my own innocence. As sure as I am George Larcher, this is the sister of Denis Bantry, who——"

"Denis!"

The interruption came from Mrs. Bezel. She had sat dumfounded at the unexpected appearance of the man whom she had thought dead, and she had said nothing while assertion and denial were going on, but the mention of her brother's name stirred her dormant faculties, and she sat up looking wildly around.

"Denis!" she cried, in a terrified tone. "Is Denis here?"

"Denis is down at Thorston," said Captain Larcher gruffly, "as you no doubt knew well enough."

"I swear I did not. Francis told me Denis was in America."

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"Francis?" exclaimed Claude, forgetting to whom the name belonged.

"Francis Hilliston."

"Ah!" said Captain Larcher, with a disdainful look round. "I might have guessed as much. Off with the dead love, on with the living. You have amended the proverb."

"I did not know Mark was dead, sir," exclaimed Mrs. Bezel passionately. "Francis said that he had gone to America with Denis. I thought he had done so to escape the consequences of his crime, but——"

"Of his crime!" cried Claude. "He was the victim, poor soul, not the murderer. It was Jeringham who was killed, not my father."

"Your father?" said Mrs. Bezel, looking steadily at Captain Larcher. "Yes; it is my old master. So you are alive and he is dead. Why did you kill him, sir?"

"I did not kill him," replied the captain quietly, "and as a counter question, may I ask why you passed yourself off to Claude as my wife?"

Mrs. Bezel burst into a wild laugh, and clapped her hands together. Then she covered her face and commenced to weep, but in a few moments the fit of hysteria passed away, and she became cool and composed. Thrown off her balance for the time being, she had now gathered her wits together, and was ready to fight. Her folly and impulse had brought about this catastrophe, and it was her duty to set it right again—if she could. But the upshot of the matter was extremely doubtful.

On his part, Captain Larcher was relieved to find that Mrs. Bezel proved to be Mona Bantry instead of his wife. Ever since the communication made by Claude, he had suffered agonies at the thought that his wife had been living all these years under the protection of his false friend. Now that fear was set at rest once and forever. Julia Larcher had really died, as Hilliston had asserted, and the woman in Clarence Cottage, who had taken her name, was the maid in place of the mistress. Out of all the trouble Larcher extracted this morsel of comfort, his honor was unstained.

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Meanwhile the three visitors sat waiting to hear what Mrs. Bezel had to say. She saw that they expected a confession, and resolved to disappoint them. Leaning backward among her cushions, she closed her eyes, and played a waiting game. It proved successful, for in two minutes or thereabouts Captain Larcher broke out. His temper was none of the best, and recent

events had not tended to improve it."

"Well, madam," he said sharply, rapping his stick on the ground, "I am waiting to hear what you have to say."

"I have nothing to say," said Mrs. Bezel quietly.

"Oh, yes, you have," began Tait. "As you set the ball——"

But at this moment he was interrupted by Larcher.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Tait, but I will question this woman myself. Pray do not speak, nor you, Claude, till I have done."

Both young men bowed their heads and acquiesced in silence. After all, the captain was the proper person to examine Mona Bantry. He knew more of the case than anyone else, and conversant as he was with the events of that fatal night, he would know whether she spoke truly or falsely. Mrs. Bezel looked uneasy on hearing his resolution, but only compressed her lips tighter as though resolved to let nothing escape her. But he was a match for her in obstinacy.

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"Now then," said Larcher, turning to her, "relate your history from the moment you left me alone with my wife twenty-five years ago at The Laurels."

"It would not help you if I did."

"I'm not so sure of that. But I understand. You are afraid of incriminating yourself."

"I!" exclaimed Mrs. Bezel indignantly. "What have I to do with the matter. I know nothing of it. I left the house then and there, and only heard of the tragedy while I was concealed at Horrison, more than a week afterward."

"Why did you state to my son that Mrs. Larcher threatened me with the dagger?"

"So she did," said Mrs. Bezel coolly. "I saw her hand raised, I saw the dagger in it."

"You saw the sheath of the dagger, you mean," retorted Larcher; "it fell on the floor and was found there next day. But the weapon with which the crime was committed was lost by my wife at the ball."

"It may have been," said the woman indifferently. "I don't know anything about it."

"Did not Jeringham show it to you when you joined him in the garden?"

"I tell you I did not see him on that night. When you found out my secret, I was afraid that you and the mistress would betray it to my brother Denis, so I left the room and fled. I thought Jeringham would join me at Horrison next day, but then I heard of your supposed death, and that he had fled. Until this hour I did not know that it was the other way round."

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"Did not Hilliston tell you? He knew."

"No, Captain Larcher, he did not," said Mrs. Bezel emphatically. "He said that Jeringham had gone to America with my brother."

"Where did you go after leaving Horrison?"

"I came to London, and remained there till my baby was born."

"And then?"

"I found that my money had come to an end, and called at Mr. Hilliston's office to ask him to help me."

"What right had you to expect help from him."

"I had no right, but that I knew he would assist me because of his love."

"His love!" exclaimed Larcher sharply. "Did Hilliston love you?"

"Yes; I refused to have anything to do with him on account of Jeringham. But he did love me. Oh, yes, I know you thought he was in love with your wife, but such was not the case. He loved me, and me only."

Larcher drew a long breath, and looked puzzled. He was relieved to find that he had not been mistaken in Hilliston, after all, yet the assertion of Mrs. Bezel only seemed to further complicate the case. If Hilliston did not love Mrs. Larcher, what possible motive could he have to kill Jeringham? The looks of Claude and Tait reflected his perplexity; but dismissing this special point for the moment, he pursued his examination.

"How did Hilliston receive you?"

Mrs. Bezel looked around with a bitter smile. Her meaning was clear from the contemptuous expression on her face. [pg 326]

"Can you not guess from what you see here?" she said quietly. "Francis Hilliston bought me. He loved me well enough, but not sufficiently to marry me. He did not ruin me, for I was already ruined. I accepted his offer to come here and be his mistress. What else could I do? I was alone in London. I was friendless. I believed that my lover and my brother had fled to America. I could not return to Horrison lest I might be involved in the tragedy at The Laurels. I did what any other woman would have done, and made the best of a bad business. I accepted the love and protection of Francis Hilliston. The protection still continues, as you see—the love, that is dead and done with."

"I see you are thinking of Louisa Sinclair," interposed Tait quietly.

"What do you know of Louisa Sinclair?" asked Mrs. Bezel, with a violent start.

"Everything, thanks to you," answered Tait. "Your letter put the clew into my head. I went to Horrison; I saw a portrait of Miss Sinclair. I know that she went to America after the tragedy, and returned as Mrs. Derrick, rich and beautiful, to marry Hilliston."

"Ah, you know that much. Yes! Louisa Sinclair is my rival! Ten years ago she came back to England and wanted Francis to marry her. I fell ill—I became paralyzed. He forgot me, he forgot my love, and she became his wife. Oh, how I hate her! I hate him. It was on that account that I wrote to you, Claude, to reveal all."

"You then acted out of revenge!" [pg 327]

"Yes, I did!" said Mrs. Bezel sullenly. "Look at me, a wreck; look at her, his wife, rich and handsome and healthy."

"Not healthy, poor soul," said Claude. "She is ill with the smallpox."

"With the smallpox," echoed Mrs. Bezel joyfully. "I'm glad of it! I'm glad of it! Her beauty will depart, as mine has done. Then Francis may come back to me."

"You love him still?" asked Captain Larcher, in wonderment.

"Too well to ruin him. You want me to accuse him of the crime, but I tell you he is innocent; he knows nothing."

"He was in the garden alone on that night. None other but he——"

"He was not alone," cried Mrs. Bezel sharply. "Louisa Sinclair was with him. Yes, she followed him from the ball because she was jealous of me. In my flight I passed her at the gate. She had a cloak over her dress, but I saw that it was the costume of Mary, Queen of Scots."

"And you knew her by that?"

"Partly. My mistress told me that Miss Sinclair had a similar costume to her own, for she was very angry about it. But I saw her face as I fled. She may know who killed Jeringham. I do not. Hilliston does not. Now, I have told you all. Go away and leave me. I speak no more."

"First tell us why you declared yourself to be my mother?" said Claude sharply.

"For safety. I regretted that I had told you; that I had forced Hilliston into defending himself. I was afraid lest you should learn too much and denounce me as the criminal. So long as you thought I was your mother you would not dare to do so, and therefore I told you I was Mrs. [pg 328]

Larcher."

"One last word," said Captain Larcher, rising to his feet. "Your child. What became of it?"

"Hilliston took it away," said Mrs. Bezel, in a melancholy tone. "I was ill at the time and he overcame my scruples. I don't know where my child is. Often and often have I wanted to see her again, but Francis has always refused. Oh, where can she be?"

"I can tell you."

"You?" cried Mrs. Bezel, starting up in amazement.

"Yes. Your daughter Jenny was brought by Hilliston to me. I adopted her as my child, and she is now at Thorston with her Uncle Denis—your brother."

Mrs. Bezel tried to speak, but could not. With a wild glance around she heaved a long sigh and fainted. The joy of hearing that her child was alive proved too much for her enfeebled frame.

CHAPTER XLII.

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THE TRAGEDY OF A WOMAN'S VANITY.

MEANTIME Hilliston, unaware of that fatal meeting with Mona Bantry, which threatened to demoralize his plans, was devoting himself to his unfortunate wife. She was very ill, and not expected to recover, so feeling that he would soon lose her, the lawyer stayed constantly by her side, and strove, though unsuccessfully, to ameliorate her cruel sufferings. It was all the more credit to him that he did so, as he had married her mainly for her money, and was still in love with Mrs. Bezel. No doubt, remorse had something to do with his present attitude.

The landlord of the Connaught Hotel had insisted upon Mrs. Hilliston being removed when the first symptoms of disease showed themselves. He declared that were it known that he had a smallpox patient in his house, he would be ruined for the season, so Hilliston, recognizing the truth of this assertion, took steps to isolate his wife, as was necessary from the nature of her illness. Assisted by the doctor, who attended to all details relative to the municipal authorities, he hired a small house on the outskirts of Eastbourne, and thither the wreck of what had once been a beautiful woman was removed one evening. Nurses were hired from London, Hilliston sent word to his partner that he would not return to business for some weeks; and then began the slow martyrdom of the sickroom.

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It was a fortnight since Mrs. Hilliston had been seized with the disease, and now it had taken so favorable a turn that the doctor held out great hopes that she would recover. But the beauty of which she had been so proud was gone, and with it went the hopes that she could still retain her husband by her side. Mrs. Hilliston knew well enough that it was only her persistence which had made Hilliston marry her, and now that she had lost her good looks—the one hold she had on his lukewarm affection—she foresaw only too clearly that he would neglect her in the future. Moreover, the woman's vanity was so powerful that she could not accept calmly the possibility of surviving, a scarred and maimed object, to face looks of pity and of horror. She felt that she would rather die, and in fact resolved to do so. Meanwhile she tossed and turned, and moaned and wept on her sick bed; crying out against the stern Fate which had dealt her such hard measure. Yet in her secret soul she admitted that the punishment was just.

Hilliston was scarcely less unhappy than his wife. While her illness was serious, he had thought of nothing but how to save her, but now that a chance of recovery offered a respite from his arduous attendance by the sick bed, he had time to turn his thoughts toward the Horrison tragedy. He wondered that he had not heard from Paynton relative to the interview with Claude, and, fearful lest some untoward event had occurred to upset his plans, he wrote to Rose Cottage asking for information. To-day he had received a reply, and on reading it saw his worst fears realized.

"I know you now [wrote Captain Larcher briefly]. I have seen Claude; I have seen Mona. Henceforth I look upon you as an enemy, and I intend to take immediate steps to clear my name at your expense."

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There was no signature, but Hilliston was too well acquainted with his friend's writing to have any doubt as to the genuineness of the letter. The blow had fallen; Mona had betrayed him, and he sat there helpless, with the letter in his hand, a spectacle of baffled scheming, of unmasked villainy.

"To clear his name at my expense," muttered Hilliston to himself. "What does he mean by that? He cannot have discovered—but no, that is impossible. When they find out who picked up that dagger at the ball, they may learn the truth, but not till then. I defy them all. Larcher will remain Paynton till the end of his life. Mona! Ah, I shall punish her when I return to town for her cruel treachery."

While he was thus thinking, a nurse entered the room to intimate that Mrs. Hilliston would like to see him. The lawyer obeyed the summons at once, placed Larcher's letter in his pocket, smoothed his brow, and entered the sickroom. Signing to the nurse to go away, Mrs. Hilliston waited till she was alone with her husband.

"Francis," she said in a low voice, stretching out her hand, "I wish to speak to you—on that subject."

"I think it would be wise if you refrained from doing so," replied Hilliston, knowing to what she alluded. "We understand one another on that point; you can do no good by bringing it up again. Why should you?"

"For Claude's sake," said Mrs. Hilliston feverishly. "You owe him some reparation."

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"I owe him none, Louisa. I have acted like a father to him, and he has turned on me. I helped Larcher to hide himself when it was dangerous for him to become known, and he tells me that I am his enemy."

"Have you heard from him?"

"I received a curt note of three lines intimating that he was about to assert his innocence, and clear his name at my expense."

"Francis," cried Mrs. Hilliston, in a tone of terror, "you are lost! If all is known——"

"All will not be known," replied Hilliston, patting her hand; "only two people know the truth—you and I. We can keep our own counsel."

"But that little man, Tait, is at Horrison."

"What of that?"

"He will see Belinda Pike there. You know how she hated me because I loved you. She wanted to marry you herself. If he meets Miss Pike she will speak against me."

"What of that?" said Hilliston soothingly. "You forget, my dear, that your life is different now. No one can find Louisa Sinclair in Louisa Hilliston. When you went to America you vanished and returned as Mrs. Derrick, the rich widow. Belinda Pike can never learn that. My dear, you distress yourself suddenly. We are perfectly safe."

"But the garnet scarfpin," questioned Mrs. Hilliston feverishly.

"I am secure on that point. Larcher knew that I was in the garden on that night, and may have thought I dropped it. He will not dare to accuse me of the crime. If he did," continued Hilliston, his brow growing black, "I could turn the tables on him in a manner he little expects. There is more evidence against him than against me."

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"But if they learn that I was with you on that night?"

"They will never learn. No one saw you there. If they did, what does it matter? Louisa Sinclair is dead. You need have no fear of being recognized. I'll answer for that."

"It does not matter to me if I am known or not," said Mrs. Hilliston gloomily; "I have done with life."

"My dear, the doctor says you will recover."

"I shall not recover," said the sick woman, with emphasis. "Oh, do not deceive yourself, Francis! I shall never rise from this sick bed to be an object of horror and pity to you."

"My dear——"

"You never loved me. You only married me out of pity. At Horriston you refused to make me your wife, and it was only when I returned from America a rich woman that you did so. Pity," she said, with a scornful laugh, "no, not pity, but necessity. You would have been ruined but for my money."

"I admit it, Louisa, and I am deeply grateful to you for the way in which you have helped me. I can never repay you for saving my name and credit."

"You can, Francis. Get me my dressing case."

"Louisa, you cannot——"

"I insist upon being obeyed," she said imperiously. "Get me my dressing case."

With great reluctance he brought it from a distant table and placed it on a chair by the bedside. In obedience to her directions he opened it, and took therefrom a sealed envelope. [pg 334]

"In there," she said, as he held it in his hand, "is an account of all I saw on that fatal night. You must send that letter to Captain Larcher when I am dead."

"Louisa, do you wish to ruin me?"

"I wish to save you, Francis. Do not deceive yourself into a belief that the investigation is at an end. Claude may cease to meddle with the matter, for he is in love with Jenny, and will probably marry her, for by this time, according to you, he knows who she is. But I am afraid of Spenser Tait. He will hunt you down; he will urge Larcher to find out the truth. If it comes to that, send them my account of the matter."

"It will ruin me," he said again.

"It will save you," she repeated. "Do not be foolish, Francis. You can read it before sending it away."

"But you?"

"I shall be dead. I feel sure I shall not live. Promise me that if the worst comes you will send that letter."

"I promise," he said, sorely against his will, "but it will not be sent: you will live."

"I don't think so, Francis. I know better than the doctor. Now kiss me, my husband, and leave me to myself."

He did so in silence, and took up the dressing-case, whereupon she stopped him. "Let it be," she said quietly: "some of your letters are in it, and I wish to read them. Kiss me again."

Again he kissed her, and reluctantly left the room. So quiet and self contained was she that he had no inkling of her intention. Had he guessed her fatal resolve, little as was the love he bore her, he would surely have striven to turn her from her purpose. But he guessed nothing, and left her alone, with the devil tempting her. [pg 335]

Good-by, my husband!" she murmured, as the door closed, and then burst into tears. He had gone, she would never see him again, and she moaned over her lost beauty which failed to retain him by her side. He was coldly polite; he was affectionate out of pity, but he had no love for her, and she hungered for the want of it. Her life passed before her, episode after episode, till it stopped short at the spectacle of a closed door, and herself lying alone and deserted in that sickroom.

She wept and prayed, and then, with a firm hand, took out of her dressing case a small vial filled with a dark brown liquid. Twice she put it to her lips, and twice she hesitated; the third time she accomplished her purpose. The thought of her lost beauty, of her husband's neglect, of her childless home and wretched future, all these nerved her, and she drank off the contents,

then quickly replaced the bottle in the dressing case.

When the nurse came in to see her patient, Mrs. Hilliston was lying back with a quiet smile on her pale lips. She had found peace at last.

CHAPTER XLIII.

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THE LAST APPEARANCE OF FRANCIS HILLISTON.

UNAWARE of the tragedy which had taken place at Eastbourne, Captain Larcher was in London brooding over his wrongs, and weaving schemes how to avenge himself on Hilliston. His eyes had been opened by Tait with regard to the conduct of that gentleman, and he now saw plainly that he had been Hilliston's dupe for all these years. Indeed, he began to share Tait's opinion that the lawyer was guilty, and was casting about in his own mind how to prove this, when an announcement in the papers informed him of the death of Mrs. Hilliston.

"The smallpox killed her, no doubt," said Tait, when he had expressed his regrets.

"No!" remarked Claude, who had been looking over the general news. "It was a case of suicide."

"Suicide!" exclaimed the hearers, in one breath.

"Yes, according to this paragraph. It appears that in some way or another she became possessed of a bottle of laudanum while the nurse was absent. The woman returned to find her patient dead. Poor Mrs. Hilliston!" added Claude, folding up the paper with a sigh. "How sorry I am to hear this."

"I wonder why she committed suicide?" said Tait meditatively. "She looked too determined a woman to yield to such a weakness."

"No doubt she found out that her husband was guilty of the crime," said Larcher grimly, "and so did not care to live longer with a murderer."

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"You are wrong, father," observed Claude, looking up; "it was the knowledge that she had lost her looks which killed her. Depend upon it, she took the poison so as to avoid dragging out her days a scarred and miserable object."

"How do you know that, Claude?" asked his father, with a curious look on his face.

"Because not once, but twice, or thrice, Mrs. Hilliston told me she would kill herself rather than grow old and ugly. The loss of beauty came with the smallpox; and so she has carried out her resolve."

"It will be a blow to Hilliston."

"I don't think so," said Captain Larcher rather cynically. "From what I remember of Louisa Sinclair, the love was all on her side. No doubt he married her when she was Mrs. Derrick purely for her money. No! No! I quite believe the story of Mona Bantry. She was and is the woman of his love. Now the wife is dead he can console himself with the mistress."

"That reminds me," observed Claude suddenly. "What are we to do about Jenny? Is she to be informed that her mother is yet alive?"

Captain Larcher shook his head. "Set your mind at rest on that point," he said with a nod. "I told Mrs. Bezel that Jenny was about to become your wife; that she thinks her parents are dead; and I pointed out that it would be unwise to mar the happiness of the girl by letting her know the truth. Mrs. Bezel agrees with me, and she has consented that things shall remain as they are."

"Does she not want to see Jenny, father?"

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"Of course she does. It is only natural, poor soul, but she loves her child sufficiently to avoid casting a shadow on her life. Jenny will never know that Jeringham was her father or that her

mother is still alive. She will marry you, Claude, as Miss Kennedy, and know no more of her connection with the matter than she does at present."

"And Denis?"

"Denis has been told. I wrote him two days ago, and I have no doubt he will come up to town to see the last of his wretched sister."

"The last of her?"

"Can you doubt it? Mrs. Bezel has death written on her face."

"Another blow for Hilliston," said Tait, in a rather regretful tone. Villain as he knew the lawyer to be, he could not help feeling sorry for his troubles. Fate had held her hand a long time, but now she was dealing a full measure, and pouring the vials of her wrath on the head of the sinner.

"It will be a heavier blow than the last," said Larcher, in a severe tone, "for there is no doubt Hilliston truly loves Mona."

"I suppose Denis will object to his going near her again."

"It is impossible to say. We must leave that to the man himself."

This conversation took place in Tait's rooms one morning some three weeks after the momentous interview with Mrs. Bezel. It had been Captain Larcher's intention to return at once to Thorston, but he had been dissuaded from this by his son, who thought a few weeks in town would do his father good. There was no doubt on this point, for Captain Larcher brisked up wonderfully in the exhilarating atmosphere of the West End. But for the unexplained mystery of Jeringham's death, he would have been quite happy in the recovered society of his son, and even while the future was still black enjoyed himself in no small degree. It did Claude good to see that his father was at length getting some pleasure out of life, after his years of incessant trouble and wearing anxiety.

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The next day Denis, looking older and grayer than ever, came up to see his sister. He saw his master for a few minutes, and then went on to Hampstead.

"I have told Denis how ill she is," explained Captain Larcher, as the man took his departure, "and he has promised to be as lenient as possible toward her wrong-doing. By the way, Hilliston is in town."

"Hilliston!"

"Yes. He came up in the same train as Denis, and had the impudence to speak to him. Asked him where I was, as he wanted to see me."

"To see you, father?" cried Claude, in astonishment. "What for?"

"I think I can guess," interposed Tait quietly, "Hilliston has been stricken by his wife's death, and wants to atone for his sins by confessing the truth. I would not be surprised if he called here this afternoon."

Captain Larcher looked skeptical, but said nothing, and the matter dropped for the time being. As it happened Denis was still ignorant that his sister had been the mistress of the lawyer, else there might have been trouble. He had but a confused idea of Hilliston's connection with the case, and, beyond knowing that he was the owner of the garnet scarfpin, could not conceive that he had been actually present in the garden when the murder was committed. True it was that the scarfpin had been found on the spot where the corpse of Jeringham had lain, but assured by his master that Hilliston was innocent, as Captain Larcher had truly believed these many years, Denis never gave the matter a second thought. Now he would learn the truth from Mrs. Bezel.

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Denis only came back in the afternoon, looking much put out. The ruin of his much loved sister by Jeringham had been a great blow to him, but the discovery that she was alive and had been living in sin with Hilliston startled him considerably. He could hardly reply to the questions of his master, but ultimately related that they had parted friends. Mrs. Bezel had told him that the doctor assured her she could not live much longer; and in the shadow of death Denis had freely forgiven her all her sins and follies.

"And, indeed, sir, what else could I do," said Denis, wiping the tears from his eyes, "when I saw the poor thing lying there like a corpse? It's a bitter time she's had of it, these last ten years,

in that death-in-life state. Oh yes, captain, I forgave her freely, poor soul!"

"And Hilliston?" asked Larcher inquiringly.

"May his black soul burn," cried Denis, with a scowl. "Were I or he younger I'd leave my mark on him. Mona had a letter from him saying he was calling to see her this evening, but that he had an appointment with you, sir."

"With me, Denis! It is the first I have heard of it. Where is he?"

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At this moment, as if in response to his question, the door opened and Tait appeared, looking very disturbed.

"Mr. Hilliston is here, Captain Larcher, and wishes to speak with you."

Claude had entered the room by another door, and, on hearing this, stepped forward looking slightly pale. He slipped his arm within that of his father, as though to protect the elder man. Then they all waited to hear what Captain Larcher had to say. The permission for the interview must come from the man who had been most deeply wronged. He thought for a moment or so with a frown on his face, then sank into a chair with a deep sigh.

"Denis, stand behind me," he said, in a peremptory tone. "Claude, sit down yonder. Now, Mr. Tait, we are ready to see our friend."

Tait anticipated this permission, and was already prepared for it. Without a word he threw open the door, and Hilliston, dressed in deep mourning, entered the room with a paper in his hand. He looked pale and worn, his fresh color was gone, and as he spoke he kept his eyes persistently on the ground. It could be easily seen that the man had received a shock from which he would not easily recover.

"I have called to see you and deliver this," he said, in a low tone, placing the paper he carried on the table. "I do not ask your forgiveness, Larcher, for I do not consider I have done anything to justify your anger against me."

"You could have saved me all these years of anguish by telling me the truth," said Larcher indignantly.

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"Perhaps! But it was not to my interest to tell you the truth."

"I don't wonder at that," said Claude bitterly. "You were afraid of the law."

"Perhaps," said Hilliston again. "On the other hand I may not be so guilty as you think me. You will find the truth in that paper."

He pointed toward the table, and the eyes of all immediately turned in that direction, while Hilliston moved toward the door.

"Having fulfilled the promise I made to my dead wife, I now take my leave," he said quietly. "I will never see any of you again, and some day you may learn that you have misjudged me. Good-by."

He opened the door, but before he could pass through Denis sprang forward.

"My sister?" he said, with an indignant look in his eyes.

"I am about to repair the wrong I did her," replied the lawyer gravely. "By to-morrow she will be my wife."

CHAPTER XLIV.

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THE TRUTH.

HILLISTON came and went in the space of a few minutes. None of those present made any

attempt to stay his exit, but as the door closed after him they looked at one another in silence. Thinking of Hilliston's last speech, Denis was the first to speak.

"What does that mean, sir?" he asked his master, with an air of helpless bewilderment.

"I think it can only mean one thing, Denis," replied Larcher, rousing himself. "Mr. Hilliston has at length awakened to the fact of his dastardly treatment of your sister, and is about to make reparation for the past. He intends to marry her."

"But his wife only died a few days ago, master."

"I know that. But Mrs. Bezel will also die shortly, and if Hilliston desires to atone for the past he has no time to lose. He can marry her at once, but he will again be a widower within the month."

Denis lifted a pair of shaking hands, and slowly left the room, followed by the sympathetic looks of the others. He did not even pause to learn the contents of the sealed envelope left by Mr. Hilliston. Great as was his curiosity to learn all that had taken place on that fatal night, his love and grief for his sister were greater still. Bowed and gray and older-looking than ever, he departed; but in his heart there was one comfortable thought—Mona would die an honest woman, if Mr. Hilliston was to be believed.

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When the three found themselves alone, Captain Larcher picked up the sealed letter with some reluctance.

"Strange," he said, balancing it in his hand. "For years I have been eager to know the truth. Now that I have only to open this envelope to learn it, I feel half afraid."

"Nevertheless, it will be as well to lose no time in making ourselves acquainted with the contents," said Tait eagerly, for he was in a fever of impatience to know all. "It may be a confession by Hilliston."

"I think not. It is directed to me in the handwriting of Mrs. Hilliston."

"To Ferdinand Paynton?"

"No. To Captain Larcher."

"H'm!" said Tait, with a start. "How did Mrs. Hilliston know you were Captain Larcher? Did she see you at Thorston?"

"No. But her husband doubtless informed her of my real name. However, we will learn all from this," said Larcher, breaking the seal. "I believe this is a confession by Mrs. Hilliston."

"But what can she have to confess?" cried Claude, as his father smoothed out a closely written letter. "She can know nothing of the tragedy."

"You forget," said Tait, with a sudden recollection, "Louisa Sinclair; she was at Horrison, and, according to Mona Bantry, was in the garden of The Laurels on that night. I would not be surprised if she saw the committal of the crime."

"What! Do you think she is about to betray her husband?"

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"Oh," said Tait significantly, "we are by no means sure of Hilliston's guilt!"

Larcher found that the writing was too small for him to read comfortably, so handed the letter to Claude, with a request that he should read it out aloud. Excusing himself on the plea of the illegibility of the writing, Claude passed it to Tait, who accepted the office with avidity. The letter was without date or direction, and began in an abrupt manner, highly suggestive of the agitation under which it had been written. Tait mentally noted these points, and began.

"This confession is to be read after my death by Captain George Larcher, and, if he sees fit, he has my free permission to make it public. Still I trust out of regret for the memory of an unhappy woman that he will not do so save in the arising of two contingencies. First, should he

be still alive, and accused of murdering Mr. Jeringham. Second, should my dear husband be accused of the crime. In the event of the occurrence of either of these contingencies, I authorize him to make these pages public.

"To explain myself I must go back twenty-six years, when I was residing at Horrison. You, Captain Larcher, will remember me well as Louisa Sinclair, for at that time I saw a great deal of yourself and your wife. I saw too much of her, for my eyes were sharp, and, but for a natural reluctance to disturb your domestic peace, I could have enlightened you as to her conduct. She was never worthy of a good man like you. She was as bad as I afterward became, and that is saying a great deal, as you will see by reading on.

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"I loved Francis Hilliston, your intimate friend. Belinda Pike loved him also, but there was no need for either of us to be jealous of the other, for Mr. Hilliston loved a third person; none other than your wife. No doubt you will be angry when you read this, but your anger cannot alter facts. Yes, your dearest friend loved your wife. Let him deny that if he can."

At this point there was a marginal note by Hilliston: "I do deny it, and but that I am not in a position to do so I would not let George Larcher's eyes rest on this confession. My poor wife was insanely jealous of Mrs. Larcher, but I swear that she had no grounds to be so. I admired Mrs. Larcher as a friend, nothing more, and I loved Mona Bantry. She is the only woman who has ever attracted me, and, notwithstanding my marriage, now dissolved by death, she attracts me still."

This note was hastily scribbled in pencil, and after Tait had read it, without interruption from Captain Larcher, he continued the confession:

"I admit that I was jealous of his attentions to your wife," continued Mrs. Hilliston, "for though I did all in my power I could not win him to my side. Regarding the efforts of Belinda Pike, I say nothing. She tried to gain his love, and she failed. I was more successful in the end, but not till the lapse of many years. Here I may say that I have gypsy blood in my veins, which at times renders me insanely jealous, and in such a state I am capable of all things. A recollection of this may enlighten you as to my acting as I did in the garden of The Laurels.

"I knew that your wife loved Jeringham, and could have told you of it. I am sorry I did not now, as she would have been disgraced, and then Francis might have turned to me for consolation. But I held my peace, and paid the cost of doing so. I am doing so now; you also; for if you had been forewarned you would never have had to conceal yourself under a feigned name on account of Jeringham's death.

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"At the fancy dress ball held at the Town Hall, matters came to a climax. My gypsy blood made me mad on that night, owing to the way in which I was neglected by Francis Hilliston. With some difficulty I learned that your wife was to be dressed as Mary, Queen of Scots, and, with a view to making myself attractive in Hilliston's eyes, I chose the same dress. With the assistance of the dressmaker who worked for us both, I obtained a dress similar in all respects to that of Mrs. Larcher, hoping that by doing so he would speak to me under the impression that I was your wife. My stratagem was successful. I was masked and dressed as she was; he spoke to me, thinking I was she, and I learned then how he loved her. At that moment I could have killed her. I could have killed him."

Here there was another note in Hilliston's handwriting: "Again I say that the poor creature was mistaken. I did speak to her under the impression that she was Mrs. Larcher, but I said nothing that she could construe into a declaration of love. Her jealousy rendered her mad, and she distorted the idle words I spoke. She took them up in the wrong sense."

"My suspicions were confirmed later on," continued the confession, "for I overheard them talking together; yes, Francis Hilliston and your wife were in a corner together, talking of love. I listened. It was mean to do so; but then, I was in love and would have stooped to any degradation to have rescued him from her clutches. They talked about a dagger which he had given her to complete her dress. Aha! he did not think to complete my costume with such a gift. Mrs. Larcher took the dagger out of its sheath and together they examined it. She blamed him for putting an inscription on it, saying it would make her husband jealous. Francis laughed, and said that you would never suspect him. Then Mrs. Larcher slipped the dagger back in the sheath, as she thought; but in reality it slipped down among the folds of her dress, and when she arose to go it fell on the ground. They departed, and I picked up the dagger.

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"At once I looked at the inscription, and there it was on the gold handle—"To J. L., from F. H." I was so enraged that I could have broken the dagger. I tried to, but it was too strong for me. Therefore I thrust it into my waistband and went in search of Hilliston to return it to him, and reproach him for giving it to Mrs. Larcher. I saw him, wrapped in his cloak, go out with Mrs. Larcher. He was seeing her home, and in a frenzy of jealous rage I resolved to follow."

Margin note by Hilliston: "It was not I who went home with Mrs. Larcher, but Jeringham. I was dressed that evening as a Venetian senator, and wore a long black cloak. This Jeringham

borrowed from me to conceal his fancy dress when he left the Town Hall. My wife thought it was me, but she was mistaken. I went home with George Larcher, as he knows."

The confession continues: "They left in Mrs. Larcher's carriage, and I, hastily wrapping a cloak round me, followed in a fly. When I got to The Laurels they were talking together at the door, and the carriage had driven round to the stables. I sat back in my fly, for the driver did not know who I was, and watched. I saw Mrs. Larcher kiss Hilliston and run inside. Then I went out of my mind—I was possessed by a devil. He came down the path and turned midway to look back at the house. I had my hand on the dagger—it tempted me, and I sprang out on him. He turned sharply round, and had I not been blinded with rage I would have then recognized him. But I hardly knew what I was doing, and, before he could utter a word, I buried the dagger in his heart, when he fell with a choking cry. I knelt down beside him, and withdrew the dagger. Then I heard a sound, dropped the weapon, and fled.

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"Some little distance off I ran into the arms of Francis Hilliston. I shrieked as though I had seen a ghost, and told him I had killed a man—that I had intended to kill him. He explained the mistake of the cloak, and said I must have murdered Jeringham. Then he saved my life. No one had seen me come to The Laurels, no one had seen me in the garden; so Francis took me back to Horrison, and I returned to the ball without anyone having suspected my absence.

"The next day the news of the disappearance of Jeringham was all over the town; afterward the body was discovered down the river, and mistaken for that of Mr. Larcher. Francis advised me for my own sake to hold my tongue. I did so, and shortly afterward I went on a visit to a sister of mine in America. Francis refused to marry me on account of my crime. In America I married Derrick, the millionaire; he died, and I returned to London. I found Francis greatly in want of money, and as I still loved him, I married him. No one but us two knew who really killed Jeringham, but for your sake, Captain Larcher, I acknowledge my guilt lest you should be found out and accused of the crime. I could say much more, but this is enough. When you read this I will be dead, and my last words I swear are true. I and none other killed Mark Jeringham in mistake for Francis Hilliston."

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Note by Hilliston: "It will be seen that my wife was actuated all through by jealousy, but I swear she had no reason. I loved Mona, not Mrs. Larcher, nor her. I saved her life because she committed the crime for my sake; I married her because I was on the verge of pecuniary ruin. I have nothing more to add. You can blame me if you like, but I consider I have acted all through as I was forced by circumstances."

CHAPTER XLV.

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A FEW WORDS BY SPENSER TAIT.

WHEN the case has been stated, when the witnesses for and against have given their evidence, when the counsel on both sides have delivered their speeches, it is then customary for the judge to sum up the entire matter for the direction of the jury. In this instance I am the judge, and here is the Larcher affair summed up for the understanding of the public. It has fallen to my share to wind up the story, so here I set down such results as happened from the confession of Mrs. Hilliston.

The immediate result of her death was the marriage of the widower to Mrs. Bezel, which took place, so to speak, when the latter was on her deathbed. She lingered out another two months, and died in the arms of her husband, at peace with all the world. Denis heartily forgave her, and the only bitter drop in her cup was the absence of her child. Yet when Captain Larcher suggested that Jenny should be told the truth, and brought to say good-by to her mother, Mrs. Bezel, with a self-denial for which I hardly gave her credit, refused to permit such a thing. She thought that Jenny would be happier if she was ignorant of the truth, and moreover, Mrs. Bezel shrank from letting her child know how she had lived during these many years. At all events Jenny never learned the truth, and Mrs. Bezel died without seeing her daughter. That she forgave Hilliston for having deprived her of the child is, I think, a proof of her goodness of heart, for there is no doubt that he acted selfishly and cruelly in doing so. But enough of Mrs. Bezel, her faults and virtues. She lies in Hampstead Cemetery under a plain stone of rose-colored granite, inscribed "To the memory of Mona Hilliston." So she had her wish at last, and died an honest woman.

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Captain Larcher returned with Kerry to the cottage in Nightingale Lane, as he could not make up his mind to resume his own name, or tear himself away from the bookworm life of twenty-five years. No one knew the truth save Claude, Jenny, and myself, for Hilliston being absent from England does not count. The vicar was also enlightened on the subject, and

expressed much astonishment at the strange series of events which had culminated in the death and confession of Mrs. Hilliston. Unwilling to lose his old crony he heartily approved of Larcher's determination to resume his usual life, and so the matter was settled. Captain Larcher will remain Mr. Ferdinand Paynton to the end of his days, and will still be a mystery to the gossips of Thorston; how great a one they can never guess.

But a notable change has taken place in his habits. He is no longer a recluse, a misanthrope. When I am at the Manor House he visits me there; he is a constant guest at the vicarage, and may be seen frequently fishing beside Kerry on the banks of the Lax. Following the example of his master, Denis Bantry also renounced his name, which he superstitiously regarded as one of ill-omen, and called himself Kerry for the rest of his life. If he was grieved for his unhappy sister, her life and her death, he finds consolation in the society of Mrs. Claude Larcher, who conducts herself toward him as a niece should do. But the relationship is not known beyond the walls of Rose Cottage, lest it might lead to inquiries, and Jenny is still known as the daughter of Mr. Paynton.

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That Claude should call Mr. Paynton "father" is of course only regarded as natural by the village. Has he not married Jenny, and does he not stand in the relation of a son to the old man? Thorston gossips think he is a most perfect son-in-law, and never guess that any nearer relationship exists between them.

Of course Jenny and Claude were married as speedily as possible, and I do not know a happier couple. Mrs. Larcher has quite converted me with regard to the fair sex, and plumes herself on her victory. She has the audacity to say that she will yet succeed in getting me married, but I think that is beyond her powers. Mr. Linton married them, and they spent their honeymoon at the Manor House, which I lent them for the occasion. Indeed, while at Thorston they invariably live with me, and I should be offended did they take up their quarters anywhere else. Not that they have any desire to do so, for Rose Cottage is rather small, and, besides, the Manor is within easy distance of it, so that Jenny can see her father—or, rather, her father-in-law—as often as she chooses.

Claude still goes to different parts of the world to build bridges and construct railways. Sometimes his wife goes with him, but she does not like to be so long away from Thorston. Paynton is now an old man, and cannot live long, so Mrs. Larcher wishes to be near him as much as possible. Besides, the cares of the nursery take up her attention, so I think that in a few months Claude will settle down to business in London, and make his home at Thorston, as he always intended to do. There is a pleasant little place not far from the Manor which I have been commissioned to buy for him, so I really think that next year Claude and Jenny will take up their residence among us.

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The only person who disapproved of the marriage was Frank Linton, who accused Jenny of jilting him. This was utter nonsense, as she never had any intention of becoming his wife. However, the author considers himself badly treated, and has taken up his quarters in London, where he writes books, and poses in Chelsea circles. But I do not think he will ever write so excellent a book as "A Whim of Fate," perhaps because Mrs. Claude Larcher refuses to tell him any more plots. She has a good reason for so doing, as the troubles which arose out of her finding the murder papers in the garret of Rose Cottage have startled her in no small degree. Still, as I tell her, she must look on such troubles as a blessing in disguise, for, after all, they led to her marriage and present happiness. But Mrs. Claude does not see the matter in so amiable a light.

Finally, Hilliston! It is hard to say what has become of that gentleman. After the death of his second wife, he withdrew from business and went abroad. There I believe he is still, and from what I hear of him at odd times he seems to have developed into a kind of Wandering Jew. France, Italy, Austria, Germany, Russia, he has seen all these places, and is constantly traveling about, no doubt trying to live down the past. Whether he will succeed in doing so it is hard to say.

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After some consideration I have come to the conclusion that we have been rather hard on Hilliston. He did not love Mrs. Larcher, in spite of his wife's insane jealousy on the point, and I believe he was sincerely attached to Mona Bantry. The blot on his character is that he did not marry her when she first came to London, and seeing that he was in love with her, I profess my inability to explain why he did not do so. Perhaps it was on account of her low birth, or the circumstances which connected her with Jeringham, but at all events he did not marry her till it was too late for the poor creature's happiness. Otherwise I do not see how he could have acted differently. Louisa Sinclair was guilty of the murder, but as she did it on his account, and was wildly in love with him, it was to his honor that he protected her as he did. Whether he would have told the truth had Mrs. Larcher been convicted I do not know, but as Louisa Sinclair did not leave for America till Mrs. Larcher was released, I think Hilliston would have persuaded her to confess openly in the event of a conviction.

It is true that he married her for her money, but I think he was touched by her devotion, and gave her some love. No doubt it was Mrs. Hilliston's remorse for condemning his father to lifelong seclusion that made her so kind to Claude when he was a lad. Now it is easy to see why

Hilliston was reluctant that Claude and I should investigate the case. He was afraid lest the truth should be found out, and his wife arrested. I was wrong in my surmise. Hilliston was not afraid for himself, but for the unhappy woman who had killed Jeringham in mistake for him. The whole mystery would have been solved years ago had Dicky Pental spoken out as he should have done. But the fear of being shut up in an asylum closed his mouth, and so the case was at a standstill for five-and-twenty long years.

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It was strange that Jenny, who set the ball rolling, should have been the indirect means of avenging her father's murder—or rather of solving the mystery which concealed it. Had she not discovered those papers in the garret, she would not have been able to give Frank Linton the plot of "A Whim of Fate." Had that novel not been written and published, Mrs. Bezel would not have read it, and thereby have been induced to write to Claude. Had she not done so, Hilliston would not have told Claude the truth, thence we would not have taken up the investigation and solved the mystery. It was Jenny who was responsible for the whole. After five-and-twenty years the child of the murdered man unconsciously enlightened us as to the person who had slain him. Fate works in strange ways.

But I do not wish to figure further as a detective. This one experience has been quite enough for me. The thought, the anguish, the trouble is too worrying. The next criminal case in the Larcher family can look after itself. I abandon the rôle of detective, and thus put the last word to my only criminal case.

THE END.

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POTAPEEKO, N. E. A Russian Priest 75 75

" The General's Daughter 75 75

QUILLER-COUCH, A. T. ("Q"). A Blot of Ink 75 75

" " Blue Pavilions 75 75

QUILLER-COUCH, A. T. ("Q"). Dead Man's Rock \$0 75 \$0 50

" " I Saw Three Ships 75 75

" " Noughts and Crosses 75 75
 " " The Splendid Spur 75 75
 " " The Astonishing History
 of Troy Town 75 75
 QUIGG, L. E. Tin Types 1 50 50
 RICKETT, J. COMPTON. The Quickening of Caliban 1 00 1 00
 RICHEBOURG, ÉMILE. Old Raclot's Million 75 75
 ROBERTS, MORLEY. Mate of the Vancouver 75 75
 RUSSELL, W. CLARK. List, Ye Landsmen 1 00 1 00
 " Romance of a Transport 1 00 1 00
 " The Emigrant Ship 1 00 1 00
 SACHER-MASOCH, L. VON. The New Job 75 75
 SALE, PIERRE. The Price of a Coronet 75 75
 SHAPCOTT, REUBEN. Auto. of Mark Rutherford 1 00 1 00
 " Mark Rutherford's Deliverance 1 00 1 00
 " Revolution in Tanner's Lane 1 00 1 00
 SHERARD, R. H. By Right, Not Law 75 75
 SOUVESTRE, ÉMILE. Man and Money 75 75
 SPENCER, MRS. G. E. A Plucky One 75 75
 STERNE, STUART. The Story of Two Lives 75 75
 STODDARD, ELIZABETH. Two Men 75 75
 " Temple House 75 75
 " The Morgesons 75 75
 STRETTON, HESBA. Half-Brothers 1 00 1 00
 SYLVA, CARMEN. Edleen Vaughan 75 75
 THOMAS, ANNIE. Utterly Mistaken 1 00 1 00
 THOMPSON, MAURICE. At Love's Extremes 75 75
 " A Banker of Bankersville 75 75
 TOMPKINS, E. S. DE G. An Honest Hypocrite 75 75
 VALDES, A. P. Faith 75 75
 VALENTINE, JANE. Time's Scythe 75 75
 VAN ZILE, EDWARD S. Last of the Van Slacks 75 75
 " " Don Miguel, etc. 75 75
 VERNE, JULES. Cæsar Cascabel 1 00 1 00
 " Mistress Branican 1 00 1 00
 WALWORTH, MRS. J. H. Baldy's Point 75 75
 " " Bar Sinister 75 75
 " " New Man at Rossmere 75 75

" " Without Blemish 75 75
WEYMAN, S. J. Story of Francis Cludde 1 00 1 00
" The Man in Black 1 00 1 00
WOOLF, PHILIP, M. D. Who is Guilty? 75 75
WOOD, J. S. An Old Beau 1 00 1 00
ZOLA, ÉMILE. Doctor Pascal 1 00 1 00
" The Downfall 1 50 50

Transcriber Notes:

Throughout the dialogues, there were words used to mimic accents of the speakers. Those words were retained as-is.

Errors in punctuation and inconsistent hyphenation were not corrected unless otherwise noted.

On page 31, "Nevertheles" was replaced with "Nevertheless".

On page 51, the comma after "John Parver herself" was replaced with a period.

On page 53, "Hillison" was replaced with "Hilliston".

On page 73, the period after "valued this spendor" was replaced with a question mark.

On page 82, "fufilled" was replaced with "fulfilled".

On page 102, "CHAPER" was replaced with "CHAPTER".

On page 107, "the the" was replaced with "the".

On page 116, "was" was added before "by no means".

On page 122, "Jerringham" was replaced with "Jeringham".

On page 125, a quotation mark as added after "That's strange.".

On page 127, "Hillston" was replaced with "Hilliston".

On page 136, "was" was added before "now perfectly composed".

On page 145, the period after "description of the scarfpin" was replaced with a question mark.

On page 150, "bundle old newspapers" was replaced with "bundle of old newspapers".

On page 162, "clever conversation that" was replaced with "clever conversation than".

On page 162, "and like to" was replaced with "and liked to".

On page 208, "idyllic" was replaced with "idyllic".

On page 210, the quotation mark was removed after "to their accomplishment.".

On page 212, a comma was added after "he said".

On page 224, the period after "only be Jeringham" was replaced with a comma.

On page 267, "Jerringham" was replaced with "Jeringham".

On page 280, the period after "with the case" was replaced with a comma.

On page 284, a comma was added after "into the garden".

On page 311, the period after "we ought to proceed" was replaced with a question mark.

On page 323, the quotation mark after "not tended to improve it." was removed.

On the first page of Selected List of Novels and Tales, a period was added after "Edmond".

On the second page of Selected List of Novels and Tales, "." was added in the line for "Farjeon, B. L."

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