AS IN A LOOKING GLASS.

BY F. C. PHILIPS

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS. The story is in the form of a diary kept by Mrs. Lena Despard, an adventuress with a shady record, who is endeavoring to rehabilitate herself by a brilliant marriage. She breaks off by a series of falsehoods and intrigues the engagement between Algernon Balfour, the man she wishes to marry, and Miss Vyse. She introduces Capt. Jack Fortinbras, a blackmailer and card-sharper with whom she was associated, to Miss Vyse, and agrees in the event of his not marrying her to pay him five thousand pounds as hush money when she secures Balfour as the price of his silence concerning her past. Mrs. Despard, after having made a conquest of Sir Thomas Gage, an elderly gentleman of wealth, who assists her financially, goes over to the Continent. She is followed to Paris by Sir Thomas Gage, who declares himself madly in love with her. Lord Udolpho Dwsey, a young Englishman, seeks interviews with her but Mrs. Despard discreetly keeps him at a distance. She joins Algernon Balfour at Monte Carlo and on the way there makes the acquaintance of a mysterious Russian, Paul Dromiroff, who subsequently turns out to be the head of the Russian secret police. Mrs. Despard tries her luck at the gaming tables and wins a large sum. She succeeds in her designs on Balfour, who proposes marriage to her. Subsequently Jack Fortinbras appears at Monte Carlo and attempts to blackmail her.

CHAPTER XIX. *Continued.*

I HAVE told many lies in the course of a long and arduous life, but never a "banger" such as this have I perpetrated either before or since. It is a bold stroke; but its effect seems to be entirely successful. Dolly is utterly flabbergasted, he lies back comatose in his chair breathing hard, and saying never a word. I have won the day.

"I needn't add," I drawl, fanning myself lazily, "that if you took it into your head to suggest to Algy that he had introduced an improper person to me, he might take it into his obstinate Scotch head to tell you to 'Gang to the deevil, and mind your ain business!'"

This evidently sinks deep into Dolly's mind, and takes root there, whence it will in all probability sprout forth into a very pretty quarrel.

"And now, I say, rising, and stifling a yawn, "don't you think it's about time for you to get up and go? I am expecting the Russian Ambassador to put in an appearance every minute; and you are looking most disgustingly disreputable. Come, be a man; get up and go home. Lie down and get a couple of hours' sleep. You'll be all right then."

He looks at me vacantly, with the tears in his eyes.

"I'll go, Lena," he stutters. "I'll go if you'll give me something to drink."

I go direct to the cellaret, and fill a small tumbler with brandy and water.

"Here," I say; "drink this, and pull yourself together a bit, there's a good fellow."

The spirit seems to revive him. He does pull himself together, and looks almost sober. The he walks across the room nearly as far as the door. Then he stops and turns back, holding out his hand. Two big tears (not *altogether* maudlin, I am vain enough to fancy), well up in his blue eyes and slide down his cheeks to the floor.

"Mrs. Despard!" he falters—"Lena! Will you—can you—forgive me!"

"Good heavens!" I cry, excitedly, "The Ambassador's voice! Go, quick now, for goodness sake!" and I ruthlessly hustle him out of the room.

Poor fellow! I am half inclined to pity him. If he *was* tipsy, he had been drinking to drown his sorrow at leaving me; if he *did* come to my rooms, he did not intend to intrude further than to leave a last farewell (in eight pages) with Félicie. Unhappy youth! Fatal gift of beauty that I possess! Ah, me! Oh, dear! Alas!

Hardly have I absorbed the glass of green Chartreuse, which is necessary to restore my somewhat shaken nerves; hardly has Félicie set the Rose Fountain going and cleared away the glasses, when a discreet knock announces the arrival of a more diplomatic visitor than my last.

"Ah, madame," says the old Prince, bending over my hand and whisking his grey moustache lightly over it, "I am later than I had hoped. But what do you expect? To get away from an Imperial Highness is almost an impossibility. Now, however, I can recount to you the secret history of La Corilla."

"No, Prince," I reply, "I will ask you to serve me better. Offer me your arm as far as the shooting lawn, as all Monte Carlo will be there to see the Gold Cup shot for. And you can tell me some of your own diplomatic experiences on the way."

And very soon I am toddling by the tall Ambassador's side on my way to—a more important interview than I am at all anticipating.

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As we wend our way towards the shooting ground, the frequent bang of the guns warns us that the competition has already begun. The meeting is under the auspices of the International Gun and Polo Club, at whose pleasant grounds, near Brighton, I have spent many a delightful afternoon. Under the spreading trees of Preston many is the blue rock I have seen laugh to scorn the odds on the gun with a whirring rush and lightning-like flash; many is the hotly-contested game at Polo that I have watched, where blows rained fast in the struggle, and the shins of riders as well as ponies kept record of the fact.

It is not long before we arrive at the trysting place. Indeed, Monte Carlo is so small that it is not long before you arrive anywhere. From the Hôtel de Paris you are in the railway station in a couple of jiffs; you have hardly left your bedroom before you are standing among the throng at the Trente-et-Quarante table; and, as the theatre is almost under the same roof as the shrine of the Goddess of Fortune, if you prefer to patronize the play, you cannot be said to be running far afield in search of your pleasures.

Here in the presence of a large audience of the fair sex, who profess to be so sorry for the poor pigeons, but know exactly when to back the gun, the members of the Club and other distinguished strangers disport themselves in every variety of male finery, and display their prowess with every variety of weapon.

Surely this is the most peculiar as well as picturesque shooting ground in the world. Backed by the cliff, the lawn gives the merry sportsman just room for a fair shot, and then dips down, a sheer precipice, into the sea; so that when a pigeon is winged, it is in the open sea that he is caught by the host of hangers on who swarm under the cliffs in boats just like their British prototypes do outside the enclosure at Hurlingham or the Gun Club on dry land.

It is very pretty, however, to see a blue rock who has baffled both barrels, and a small volley from the flotilla below, speed his strong way out to sea and liberty. Doubtless he soon changes his course, and makes for land, but as he goes he looks as if nothing but the orange groves of fair Algiers would stop him, and it is a pretty sight.

And now I am the on subject of pigeons, I will take the opportunity of wondering why their lives must needs be sacrificed to the fancy which possesses most men for measuring their skill against each other with the fowling piece.

There is one answer only one, and that a bad one namely, that the only possible substitute for live birds would be a mechanical contrivance, and that, (O word of fear!) would not be "Sport."

Sport, indeed! Surely, surely, there is no sport in clapping birds half-dazed with imprisonment into a trap, and letting them out to be potted at twenty-five yards' rise by sportsmen who care not one jot for the glory their skill will gain them, but who care a very great deal for the money it will put into their pockets.

Sport, forsooth! Why, there is more *sport* in a drag-hunt! So I really do *not* see why the noble marksmen should not content themselves with the nimble glass ball or the volatile but artificial highflier, and leave the poor pigeons to come to their inevitable end in less wholesale fashion.

But all this does not bring me any nearer the conclusion of my narrative of this eventful day's adventures; so I had better return to my faithful old Ambassador, who is talking glibly on, heedless of inattention.

Of the gay and giddy company, some I know, and they know me (not many, thanks be!); others I do not know, and they do not know me. Many I know very well, and they—well, they know me not at all.

Either this latter class are composed of High Mightinesses, to whom nobody is anybody who does not figure in their immediate circle, and, therefore, are naturally ignorant of my existence; or of people in society who pass the principal part of their lives in trying to keep other people out of it, and, therefore, are especially hard on any one who, to their knowledge, has once been *in* it, as I have.

It is this latter division of the latter class whom I especially dread, and whom, of course, I most ostentatiously defy, set at naught, and, generally speaking, snuff at.

Fortunately, Algy knows none of this dangerous crew, or—which comes to much the same—refuses the honor of their acquaintance. They are too stiff and formal for him, too starched and cut-and-dried; he likes something more free-and-easy—more natural, and give and take, and go-as-you-please, you know, like his little Lena!

Rather a change, after his attachment to the stately and straitlaced Miss Vyse, is it not?

But as I think of the consequences if one of the ghoul band, who feed upon the corpses of socially dead society, their whilom compeers, should inform Algy Balfour of my matrimonial episodes, a cold shudder runs down my back which is positively painful, and which makes me wonder whether it is like that that great criminals feel when they are arrested.

I have never actually *deceived* Algy. I have never told him in so many words that I was a widow, that my late husband was dead. But I have allowed *him* to say as much in my presence scores of times. I have even, by imploring looks and secret signals, induced to silence men who knew the truth of the story as well as I did, and before whom Algy would brag that he was about to disprove the infallibility of the saying that marriage with a widow is seldom or never auspicious.

It would really be a very serious thing for me indeed, if, by any chance, Algy were to chum up with somebody who knew too much.

But pshaw! A truce to such moanings and groanings and ill-omened intonings. Let us attune our harp to a merrier lay. This is not the Lamentations of Jeremiah, but the journal of a woman of the world; and I am *not* fated to reach this point of my fortunes only to be hurled down again to the bottom of the rugged path just as my trembling little hand grasps the prize.

My sweet old Prince has just found me a luxurious lounging-chair, and has produced from the depths of his inner consciousness a dainty satin bag, which I discover, to my quite infantile delight (for I am too babyishly fond of candy, you know), to be full of *marrons glacés*, my very favorite form of confectionery.

I complete his conquest by one of my patent 'upward' looks (*you* know—a very slow, long look, with a final quick flutter of the lids, and a shadow of a sigh to underline it), and then turn my attention to the proceedings.

Who is that, just ready to fire? The old gentleman with aquiline nose and close-cropped white hair and peaked beard, with a black velvet costume that makes him look quite Vandykeish and a deadliness of aim that makes me feel inclined to back him in ponies against the field. Who is that aristocratic featured personage? He might be one of the Bourbon Princes, or some Spanish Grandee nothing less, of a surety.

Who is he? Why Bombinol of course; Monsieur Bombinel, the retired chocolate manufacturer. He lives very comfortably indeed upon his nice little savings of some £50,000 a year, and annoys his fellow sportsman not a little by adding to it with wearisome iteration the proceeds of every second item on the card.

Who is that tall red-haired man out there, with a red moustache like a tooth brush in a state of combustion, and a redder face, like a corpulent lobster just emerged from the boiler, with trousers so tight that he must get his legs melted into them every morning before a quick fire, and a vocabulary so plentifully garnished with recondite slang of recent invention as completely to distance, and, as it were, cast into the shade the phraseology most lately sanctioned "for use in churches and places where they sing" by the *Pink 'Un*?

Who is that very objectionable personage? He might be a prosperous Leicestershire horse-coper, or some sawney yokel squandering his father's evil-gained and avariciously-hoarded thousands; very certainly, nothing more.

Who is he? Why, his Grace the Duke of Fitz-Battleaxe, who, having conscientiously got through two princely fortunes—his own and his wife's—has just sold his priceless collection of ancient armor and church vestments to the Emperor of Timbuctoo, and is now living very comfortably on the proceeds.

Here there stands a handsome young English Royal Highness, most gentlemanly of all European Royal Highnesses, amusing himself immensely with every phase of the bright, varied scene about him, and affording intense and absolutely indescribable gratification to the pretty young daughter of the English chaplain, by pouring forth in her ready ear an easy and unaffected flow of small talk, having just been introduced to her, at his own request. It is so perfectly natural to him to *be* natural. To her, it seems a species of divine condescension never to be forgotten, or to be hid under a bushel.

Here—oh, here, is one of those people whom I know, and who knows me. Thanks be, I know more to *her* discredit than she does to mine, and so I do not fear her!

That is faded old Mrs. Hughes, the wife of Jack Hughes who writes the money article in the *Evening Smasher*. She calls herself "Baby" Hughes, and dresses like sweet seventeen, but I'll swear she'll never see two and forty again. She would give her eyes to be introduced to H.R.H., but there is one objection against that. I wonder . . . the objection can be. Perhaps that . . . author who is always leaning . . . could tell you! Oh, no—I forgot, it is not an author this season. It is Prince Woronzoff, who calls her his "Bébé" to her face, and roars at her behind her back.

Jack Hughes, her husband, is also a competitor for the prize, and it is his turn to fire. Just as the trap snaps open he catches sight of Woronzoff bending much too close to the Sultana of his heart. He fires; misses, of course—Jack generally misses—and turns a sort of mottled purple in his red face. His chubby white beard bristles fiercely like the quills of the fretful porcupine. He is frightfully jealous of "Baby," I must tell you. He makes for her now. She sees him coming, and rises, trembling visibly. What will he do to her? Will he lock her up with him in their room at the hotel, and then make the midnight hideous by howling for his razors? Or will he——?

"There she is!" says a well-known voice. I look up, and see Algy arm-in-arm with Picayune, and in the company of Sir Harry Vesey and several other men. Picayune explains that the trotting match was over sooner than they expected. I go up to Algy quickly, and take his arm.

"Come, Algy," I say soothingly, "take me back to the hotel."

He obeys, and we reach the Casino gates. There he stops.

"Lena, I can't live without you always at my elbow. Let us leave this to-morrow, and be married in Paris the day after. I mean it, by God!"

And he disappears into the hotel. His manner is very strange, and he is evidently laboring under suppressed excitement. *Will* he be of the same mind in twenty-four hours? I think, in any case, I had better tell Félicio to pack.

CHAPTER XX.

Hotel de Paris, Monte Carlo.

WHILE Félicie is packing I review the situation. Dolly will, I am certain be as good as his word. With him I need not trouble myself. My faithful old Ambassador may go back to Westphalia, or to St. Petersburg, or to Siberia, for the matter of that, so far as I am concerned. The one troublesome card fate at present holds in his hand against me is Jack, and that card will be effectually trumped if Algy really remains in his present mind.

If we only start for Paris to-morow, I shall be Mrs. Balfour before Jack can follow us. And then, if he shows his teeth, why, *sapristi*, I must show mine; and I have a very handsome and strong set. I may have to pay him his five thousand pounds, of course. But he will only jump at taking two on account. That I can manage out of my run on lucky 13. And, when he has taken it, what can he possibly do further? What was that extraordinary song I once heard some man humming at Ascot—

> Says Poll, though I'm sorry to part,
> Yet, quarrel we must, my dear Sue,
> For your character's utterly gone,
> And I've not got sufficient for two.

As Mrs. Balfour, I cannot afford to attempt to rehabilitate Captain Fortinbras. He is . . . a *little* too well known. Besides, Algy would not allow it. And you see, my faithful journal, I shall *rather not like to* owe a duty to Algy. What a delightful change. And it will be too risky a game for Mr. Fortinbras to declare war against me with actual blackmail already in his pocket. Poor Jack! You *are* good-looking, Jack, and you're very amusing. But you haven't altogether been fair with me, and it is better for both of us—for me, at all events—that our roads should separate.

It will not do for me to show myself to-night. Of course, I am so overwhelmed with sudden happiness that I must stick in my own rooms and brood over it all. My heart, as they say in English novels, is too full for words. Algy has actually asked me to "name the day." What is that that vulgar woman—Mrs. Cluppins, I think—says in *Pickwick*? "She knows she fainted clean off herself when Mr. Cluppins asked her to name the day, and expects that every one as has the feelings of a lady will do the same."

Not having the feelings of a lady, I will allow my intense emotion to obtain relief in happy and complete repose. So I tell Félicie to order dinner for half-past seven, something light and nice. And until then I will just reckon up how I stand. Before very long I shall have to clear the decks, as they used to say on my second's yacht.

Curzon Street, I trust, will soon be got rid of. Then the balance of my London bills is not so very much. I wish I had time to get back and offer them something small in full before my marriage. The rogues! they would clutch at it. And it would be so charmingly pleasant to save a few hundred or so. "Butter out of a dog's throat," as that odious Sir Rowland Coverside once said; only I don't think he said "dog," for I recollect he had taken the trouble to see old Elaine for me about one of her outrageous accounts. Ah, well! in any case, my "little pile" is safe in London.

Thanks to those grandest of benefactors, the Controllers of the Casino, and thanks also to my most estimable Paul, I am safe against anything. Yes—literally against anything. Marvellous, isn't it?

And so I sink into a sort of dreamy repose. I really almost wish I were a little younger—provided, of course, I knew all I know now. I feel almost as if I could interest myself in gathering flowers and listening to birds, and gazing at the clouds, and watching the speckled trout leap in the mill-tail. (What is a mill-tail, and why are trout speckled, and why on earth do they leap?)

I really think I'm falling asleep. Am I dreaming?

If I am, I am rudely disturbed by a commotion at the outer door, and, as Félicie makes her appearance, Fortinbras pushes by her. He has a big cigar in his mouth. I am sure he has been drinking, and his face has an uglier look on it than I ever yet saw there. He thrusts his hands into his pockets, throws himself down in a chair, stretches out his legs, crosses his feet at the ankles, and glares at me, not viciously, but downright furiously. It is now or never, and I had better be the first to fire. So I pull myself together.

"Are you utterly mad?" I ask, "to behave in this manner, or only drunk? Or are you both?"

I have sprung to my feet, and I can feel there is danger in my eyes.

"Look here, Lena," he says, steadying his voice, "don't try any of your airs on with me. I know you too well. And I won't have them. And what's more, let's have none of your lies. I've learnt something within the last few hours; and I know all about you, my lady. All!"

Now, I wonder exactly how much he does know. I must find out.

"You are drunk," I say, "which is a strange thing for you, who ought to keep your head cool. I suppose you have been losing at the tables, and you have come here to try to screw some more money out of me. You nearly took all I had the other day. You see the door. Go."

"You're lying to me," he returns, without moving; "but there's nothing strange in that for you, who live by it. I am not drunk, but I have been losing, and you have not. I have just heard of you."

Thank Heaven! So that is all he knows.

I draw a little breath, and feel I can manage things.

"You have broken the bank," he continues. "You have made £20,000 if a penny. You have it here, and yet you grudge me a few wretched hundreds and order me out of your rooms as if I were a cur."

Here he gets up out of his chair, walks to the mantelpiece, leans his elbow on it, and speaks very slowly, emphasizing every word as judges do, I am told, when they sentence criminals. I really believe he thinks all my money ought to be his, and that I have defrauded him of it.

"You promised me five thou. when you marry Balfour. I don't care a single blow whether you marry him or not, or whom you marry or when. But that five thousand pounds I intend to have now and at once. If not I go to Balfour, and tell him all that went on at Denston Park. Now don't argue with me. I will have nothing but 'yes' or 'no.' Give me your answer."

"The money is in London," I reply. "That I can prove."

He meditates for a minute.

"Now, if you were not such a liar," he muses, I would take your check, as I have done before. Show me those proofs."

I produce my bankers's receipt for my winnings. He looks at it, and considers. Then he continues:—

"None of your checks for me. I will have this out of you in absolute money. You must write to your banker's to-night to remit the amount to you here. I will give you four days—exactly ninety-six hours from now. Meantime, you must give me fifty before I leave this room. I shall have my eye on you, and should you attempt to leave this place, I go straight to Balfour. No more of your tricks for me."

I make no answer but I give him the fifty pounds and he leaves. Now comes the great question, what am I to do.

* * * *

Now here is probably the most perplexing situation in which I have yet found myself placed. If it were not for my Monte Carlo winnings happily safe in my banker's in London, thank Heaven, I should hardly know what way to turn. If I turn to-morrow with Algy, as at present arranged, Jack will be as good as his word. He will come down to the station, or meet us on our way to it, in a state of brandy, and even if everything does not come out there will be enough to make things very much worse than unpleasant. If, on the other hand, I see Algy to-night and persuade him to stop here a few days longer he may in an hour or two of caprice think altogether better of our immediate marriage, and then all my work for many months past will be seriously jeopardized. It is too dreadful! It is indeed.

And the worst is that I cannot see my way out of it. The only idea that at present occurs to me is to be terribly ill to-morrow, to send for Algy to come here, and to detain him as long as I can. There will be just a chance of Jack seeing and making another row. But for that I must take the best precaution I can. His fifty pounds will probably last him for a day. However, I can only do my best.

While I am thus meditating, Félicie noiselessly enters and hands me a card. Gracious Heavens! It is my dearest and best of friends, Paul Dromiroff.

It does not take me a moment to decide. "Show him in at once," I say.

The door opens as noiselessly as before, and Paul himself enters, accompanied by no less than Captain Fortinbras. What on earth does this mean?

I bow to them to take seats, but Jack remains standing. The Russian, accepting the offer, composes himself in his own ursine fashion, and smiles pleasantly.

"Mrs. Despard," he says, "I have the pleasure to be able to bring you some good news. Dallying away my time just now at the rooms I came across Captain Fortinbras, to whom I had once the honor of being introduced. He has paid me the compliment of confiding to me a small matter of some little delicacy, and of asking me my advice. My small experience was only too readily at his disposal. He, with that frankness and absence of all hesitation which is so characteristic of an English gentleman, has decided to act upon the suggestions which I had to offer him. On this point Captain Fortinbras will, I am sure, corroborate me."

Jack says nothing, but looks doggedly at the floor. I never saw him so sullen or so utterly beaten.

M. Dromiroff imperturbably folds his plump, round hands over the lower buttons of his capacious black frockcoat, and placidly proceeds.

"Captain Fortinbras," he continues, "has been losing lately at the tables; not much, but still more than a younger son can afford to lose. I feel towards him as if he were a son of my own. I have always had a liking for young Englishmen of family, good education, and unblemished honor. Captain Fortinbras reciprocates my sentiments. I have advised him to leave here at once, and to avoid the terrible temptation of Monte Carlo."

I can see at once what all this means. What bewilders me, to use feminine language, is how on earth it all comes to mean it all. I look at Jack. Dromiroff looks at me sweetly, with the air of a guardian angel of exceptional experience. Jack still looks at the floor, and bites the ends of his moustache. I never saw him do that before.

"I know," continues the Russian, "that Mrs. Despard entertains a sisterly regard for the Captain, and I am sure it will be a relief to her to know that he has promised me to leave for London to-night. He has a certain small sum still left, and should he want any more I will see that he is supplied. My solicitor in London is expecting some important papers, which I have only to-day been able to verify at the Consulate. His clerk will take them back, and will render Captain Fortinbras any little service or attention he may require during the journey. I myself will have the pleasure of assisting at his departure, and it will always be a great satisfaction to me to remember that I have done a little to prevent some of that unhappiness of which we see only too much in this wicked place."

And M. Dromiroff twirls his thumbs each round the other as if he were really on the best terms with himself for his own high standard of benevolence and morality.

Evidently the less I say the better. And Dromiroff has taken the greatest care that there should be nothing left for me to say. So, after a few seconds of silence, I rise to my feet with my most pleasant and sisterly smile.

"Captain Fortinbras," I remark, "ought to be doubly grateful to you, M. Dromiroff, and no doubt he is so, or will be. Captain Fortinbras, you are fortunate in having gained the confidence of a gentleman whose knowledge of the world will, I am sure, prove of the greatest value to you. Pray, dear Captain Fortinbras, cultivate the acquaintance of M. Dromiroff, and endeavor to show yourself worthy of it. You will know where to find me," I add sweetly; I shall not leave here for some days. Write to me, or better still, telegraph as soon as you reach London. Good-bye, dear Captain Fortinbras."

And I hold out my hand in the very sweetest of manners.

(To be continued).

AN ornithologist says that birds frequently commit suicide.

W. E. SIMMONS, of Valle Vista, San Diego county, Cal., has raised a tomato weighing seventeen ounces and measuring five inches in diameter.