AS IN A LOOKING GLASS.

[illegible]

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 [illegible] 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 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 Daysey, 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 XVIII.—(*Continued*)

Under these circumstances, it strikes me that the best course I can adopt will be to entertain his proposal without comment, keep him quiet (as long as I think fit to stay here), with occasional sops, and leave it to Time and the Hour to decide as to the *dénouement*. The longer I can keep him in the dark about Algy the better, for the less money of my own I disburse the better I like it. I am not a mean woman, but I *do* hate "parting" to Jack. When I think of what a lot of pretty things it would buy for Lena Despard, and of the brazen females into whose hands a good deal of it will assuredly float, it makes me feel quite melancholy.

Just as I have arrived at this point of my ruminations, and have succeeded in shading the bistre under each eye to the true natural tint, there is a loud, impatient knocking at the door. As I have finished my toilette at last, I go myself to the door, and admit Mr. Algernon Balfour, who looks as if he has got out of his bed on the wrong side this morning; in fact, in anything but a good temper. I hold up my face to be kissed.

"Mornin', Lena," he says gruffly, and taking no notice of my inviting action. "Do you happen to know what time it is?"

"Oh, yes!" I answer sweetly; "just ten minutes past twelve."

"And you told me to order breakfast at a quarter-past eleven for half-past," he retorts reproachfully. "Of course, it's spoilt now."

"Well, Algy," I say, gaily, "let's go down and order another."

"Of course!" he grunts; "that's easy enough to say—now you've done it. Why, it is real con[?]—nicely we've done it, why it is real con[?] a man don't like waiting for his breakfast all the same."

By this time I am undulating down the stairs with my beloved at my heels like a big collie.

"By the way," he blurts out, "do you *always* get up as late as this? Because if you do that at Balfour Castle my mother will look upon you as a heathen and a child of the Evil One."

"Get up as late as this!" I repeat with innocent blue eyes wide open as tea cups. "I've been up for hours. Hours! I've been walking in the Casino Gardens. And I've had quite a long talk with that nice old bear, Paul Dromiroff, and his friend, Prince Volgareff, the Russian Ambassador to the Court of His Majesty the King of Westphalia!"

This I mouth out with the greatest pomposity, and an asseverating nod of the head at the end, as much as to say—"There, young Balfour! what do you think of that?"

I do not at the moment discover what "young Balfour" thinks of it, for I resume my regal progress towards the restaurant; but as soon as I take my seat at our usual table, I perceive that a storm-cloud has gathered over "young Balfour's" brow.

"Well, what shall we have?" I inquire amiably. "Good gracious, Algy! what's the matter? For heaven's sake don't look at me like that!"

"Order what you like," he growls; "I don't care."

Willing to propitiate my irate lord, I order the same breakfast that Monsieur ordered. But the waiter informs me that the breakfast Monsieur ordered was a special order, and would take at last three quarters of an hour, if not an hour, to prepare.

Algy listens to this with grim pleasure, but I pretend I am not put out in the least, and order a breakfast of some sort.

"Look here, Lena," he says, as soon as the waiter has disappeared; "of course, there is not the slightest harm in your going out for long walks before breakfast—not the slightest. But, at the same time, I do think you might have asked me to come with you."

I am about to speak, but he waves to me not to interrupt.

"That, however, has nothing to do with it. It is not the point I was about to touch upon. But I was about to say that I consider it hardly seemly for you—engaged to be married to me, as you are—to be amusing yourself with a couple of dissipated, debauched, diplomatic old Russians, when, in the fondness of my heart, I imagine you to be sleeping the sleep of the just."

Algy Balfour is jealous, seriously jealous. If it were not that he is so serious about it, I could laugh my heart out. As it is, I compose my face, and answer him with all becoming gravity.

"My dearest Algy," I say, "you don't *really* mean to tell me that you are angry with poor little me about that? Why, to begin with, I have known old Paul Dromiroff for years—long before I knew you."

This is a fiction which the Bear told me I should find useful, and of which I *have* made use, though at the time I indignantly scouted the possibility of my ever condescending thereto.

"And then, after the Prince had expressed the desire of being introduced to me, I could not do less than be commonly polite to him, could I? Besides, look at his position! You see, Algy, you may be rich, but mere riches do not gather about you men who have made their mark in history."

That last phrase is rather good for a "little un," I fancy.

"No, you're quite right," retorts Algy grimly; "mere riches *do not*, doubtless; but a pretty wife *does*. And I'm not so particularly anxious to be honored by the society of any elderly mashers at all."

"Why, Algy," I cry, trying to be sprightly, "I declare I believe you're just a teeny weeny bit *jealous* of me."

"Jealous! Pooh!" he says, with supreme contempt; "I'm not likely to be jealous of such people as those. Indeed, I'm almost sorry I spoke at all. It really does not matter so very much after all. And it will only make you say, like women always do, 'If he goes on like this before marriage, what may I not expect afterwards?' I daresay you look upon me as a perfect tyrant already."

"Oh, Algy!" I exclaim, reproachfully, "how *can* you say so? I look upon all you have said as a proof of your love for me. You would not be so anxious about me if you did not love me so truly. If you only knew how sweet it is to be reproved by some one who really cares for you!"

And here I heave a deep sigh, and look unutterable things.

"What are you going to do this afternoon, Lena?" he says at last, now almost himself again.

"Oh, I don't know," I answer, carelessly, "anything you like."

"Well, the fact is," he says, in some confusion, "I had half promised Sir Harry Jones to run over to Nice with him, and have a look at the trotting match between Picayune's horse and the American Plunger's. But, of course, if you would like to go anywhere, I needn't say I'd give it up like a shot."

"On the contrary," I say quickly, "I hope you'll go. It just chimes in with my arrangements. I have a mountain of letters that *must* be answered some time or other, and it has been weighing on my mind dreadfully. I'll answer them all this afternoon while you're away, and we can go to the theatre in the evening together—that is, if you're back in time for dinner."

So the luncheon that began so stormily ends quite pleasantly; and I even do my Algy the honor of walking down to the station with him to see him off.

The train has puffed out of sight. He is off. What a stroke of luck! As an interview with Jack is a necessity, what a boon to have two or three hours of safety wherein to have it! So I hurry back to my rooms to write him a note which will bring him round at once.

This trouble, however, is saved me. As soon as I appear at the top of the stairs, I perceive Félicie, who is hovering about in a distracted state up and down the corridor.

"Ah, Madame!" she cries, "you are alone, thank God! I was afraid you would arrive with Monsieur Balfour, and you have forbidden that they should see each other in your house. So I wait in the corridor. I should have said that your room was being cleamed. I should have prayed you to descend to the drawing-room."

From this disjointing ramble I gather that Jack has invaded the sanctity of my apartment. Rude, but natural!

"Why do you allow Captain Fortinbras to walk in, Félicie?" I ask severely.

"Ah, Madame, I forbid him!" she cries excitedly; "I stand in the middle of the door! But he push me aside—like that! And he say, 'Go to the devil, fool!' and I find myself sitting on the sofa with the force of the blow!"

"That will do, Félicie," I say, turning aside, that she may not see the grin on my face; "you may go now."

Then I walk up to my own door, open it wide, and sail in like an infuriated turkey-cock.

John Fortinbras, Esq., late Captain in Her Majesty's 5th (Queen's Own Musketeers) Dragoons, is reclining on the sofa by the open window. He is smoking a very large and very fragrant Havana, and a tumbler of my special dry Pommery is on a chair at his side.

"I've come to enquire, Jack," I say, with considerable asperity, "whether you have gone *quite* mad this time or not; and, if not, how you account for your extraordinary behavior?"

As I conclude my energetic exordium a ray of sun invades the dusk of my drawing-room, and brings Jack into full view as he lies stretched there at ease on my favorite sofa.

Speak of Jack Fortinbras as ill as you like, call him by what shameful names you like, besmirch him, belabor him as much as you like, you cannot deny that he is, in appearance, every inch a gentleman.

He may have committed many an ungentlemanly act in the course of his stormy life. Much of his past life would not pass muster under the close scrutiny of a court of honor. A very bad time for him would be a cross-examination by some eminent counsel, well posted as to Jack's antecedents.

But, in appearance, at least, he is a gentleman. From the crown of his closely-cropped swart curls to the tip of his pointed patent-leather boots, from the careless sweep of his silky dark moustache to the perfectly fitting case of his light tweed suit, from the simplicity of the costly chain that hardly shows through his coat to the delicacy of the strong fingers that hold his cigar—he looks a gentleman.

At first sight he seems a most desirable person to know, especially to young men about town and girls in their first season. Very especially, too, to girls in their first season. He is their ideal, their Lara, their tiny Livingstone. And when their mammas find out (as they needs must do, sooner or later) all about the Black Sheep, and he gets the sack, very inconsolable are their lamentations, very bitter are their recriminations in his defence, and very solemn are their vows of eternal fidelity to the good-for-nothing rascal. But, of course, they soon "get over Jack," as if he had been a sharp attack of measles.

Even to me (who know him thoroughly), he seems desirable *enough*. It is very aggravating to think how few handsome people are really reliable, and how painfully true is that old proverb—"Handsome is as handsome does."

However, the sight of a handsome face always affords me a transient sort of satisfaction, like the inspection of a beautiful picture, or sculpture, or wild beast; like a glimpse on the dusty road of some bit of glittering blue sea, with the white sails dotting its heaving bosom like big sea-gulls; or like the sudden gleaming apparition of the long white, jagged line of the Bernese Oberland as you top some stiff Alpine ascent.

My entrance disturbs our friend but slightly. He waves a greeting with one hand, and removes his cigar from between his lips, but he does not make the slightest pretence of leaving the sofa.

"Extraordinary behavior?" repeats Jack. "What have I to say of my extraordinary behavior? Ha! ha! That is a good un. I don't see anything extraordinary about it at all, except your forbidding me entrance. By the way, I hope I didn't give Félicie too much of a shaking. She's rather nice, and I shouldn't like to hurt her. Well, she oughtn't to get in the way, that's all."

Like the man in the play, I stand "pausing for a reply," with one hand on my hip and the other impatiently tap-tapping the table with my fan—though I don't suppose the man in the play carried a fan, so he must have done it with something else—umbrella of the period, perhaps.

"As to my coming up here," continues Jack, "what more natural? Considering what friends we two have always been, and that we were actually partners up to a year ago, I don't quite understand your astonishment."

"What!" I cry, dramatically; "do you mean to tell me that you don't know as well as I do that at this moment you are risking my reputation; and at this moment (who knows?) you may already have compromised me beyond retrieval—somebody may have witnessed the pretty scene, Captain Fortinbras bursting into my rooms after a smart struggle with my maid Félicie? Do you mean to say that you do not know that to be seen in your company means ruin to me, and that your presence in my apartment would contaminate me for ever in the eyes of Algy Balfour?"

Jack Fortinbras rises and stretches himself, with a broad grin which reveal white teeth that look decidedly wolfish just now.

"Now," he says, "my dear Lena, I can drop equivocation, and tell you honestly and plainly why I came here."

"Well, why?" I enquire, snappishly.

"For two several and distinct reasons," he retorts, sententiously; "one was the hope of hearing you spout that speech you spouted just now."

"The hope!" I repeat, thoroughly bewildered. "What speech do you mean?"

"Why," he replies, "that grand jaw that you sputtered forth just now about reputation and compromise, and ruin and contamination. It wasn't very flattering to me, but it was just what I was hoping to hear. I should have been most awfully disappointed if you had received me with open arms, and asked me to have a brandy-and-soda. That would mean that you had no money, that you wanted *me*. You are never commonly polite to me unless you are hard up. Whereas, when you avoid me, when you talk of my compromising you, I know full well that you have some planton, that you have found some goose with the golden eggs whose prejudices have to be respected. So you've made it all right with Algy Balfour, have you?"

He looks at me searchingly; but if he thinks that I am going to be pumped at *my* time of life, he is vastly mistaken. I walk across the room, and install myself in a comfortable arm-chair.

"I need not ask you what the *second* reason was," I remark, entirely ignoring his question, "that brought you here. You want money, of course. How much is it this time?"

Jack sits down again and pulls out his note-case, which he inspects as if he did not know to a penny what it contains. Then he produces a large pile of silver from his right-hand trousers-pocket, and a smaller pile from the left.

"Let me see," he says, pensively; "three fivers, six and a half Naps in gold, and twenty three francs in silver. That's the bank at present. You can tot it up better than I can."

"Just exactly 528 francs," I say, magisterially; "or, if you prefer it according to the English computation, nearly half-a-crown more than £21. Surely, you can't be in any immediate want of money."

"Well," says Captain Fortinbras, as if considering the point, "with strict economy—the strictest economy, mind—I *think* I could manage to live here three whole days on it. I *think* so."

"Don't be such an idiot, Jack," I say, laughing in spite of myself, at the serious, frugally minded look he had assumed. "Out with it! How much do you want?"

"Well, Lena," he answers, quite affectionately, "I *want* ever so much more, of course, but I *must* have £500 at least."

"Five hundred pounds!" I repeat aghast. "You must be mad, Jack; you might as well ask me for £5,000 at once. Look here, be reasonable for once. Will £50 be of any good to you to go on with, and I'll give you some more when I've had time to write to London for it."

"Well, hang it all, Lena," says Jack, after a disappointed pause, "you'll have to make it three ponies, you know. Fifty pounds last no time in this infernal place. Come along—fork out."

So I disappear into my boudoir, and shortly return with £75, which I trust will stay Jack's insatiate maw for a while at least.

Then I made him open another bottle of Pommery, and this time, drink there of myself, and, furthermore, indulge in the luxury of a cigarette.

"I can't say much for you," I observe, between two puffs, "as a correspondent, Jack! I left you at Denston Park under the most favorable circumstances; sole master of the field; thrown into constant companionship with an heiress and a great beauty. Of course, I expected to be kept posted as to the progress of your suit, if not to receive a diary of your love-making. Instead of that you send me one short, badly expressed letter, from which I gather that somehow you have succeeded in failing to please Miss Vyse, but which does not explain *how*. Now, tell me all about it. Instead of coming here to drain *me* for money, you ought to be a married man and rolling in wealth."

"Ah, well, you see," he answers, "I never *was* a good hand at describing things. And this, by the way, is rather a sore subject. I must say I felt like pulling it off. I don't think I ever felt so cocksure about anything in my life. She seemed to have taken such a thorough fancy to me."

"When did you find that out first?" I inquire carelessly.

"Oh, a day or two after you left," he replies. "You know, about two or three days after you left, Sir Thomas Gage went off suddenly on some mysterious business and came back in a couple of days looking awfully seedy, and, as Miss Vyse and I thought, rather guilty."

Little does the noble Captain suspect where Sir Thomas Gage was bound for when he left Denston; little does he know that if it were not for *me* Sir Thomas Gage would be hanging at my apron strings to this very day.

"Well, while Sir Thomas was away I was, somehow or another, thrown a good deal with Miss Vyse, who was most kind to me. At last I thought matters were ripe, so I proposed, and I think I did it very well."

"And what was her answer?" I inquire.

"That she liked me very much, but she would marry no one. She had once loved and had been disappointed, and she should never really care for any one again. I tried to shake her determination, but it was useless. Confound her!"

Jack gets up in his rage, and then, referring to his watch, suddenly finds out it is time to trot.

So he "trots."

But as he passes through the open door, I hear two voices in astonished rejoinder:

"Hullo!" says Jack's voice.

"Hullo!" says another.

And in another moment Lord Udolpho Daysey stalks into the room.

CHAPTER XIX.

Hotel de Paris, Monte Carlo.

Looking over the last few pages of my confidences to you, my "dere diry," I find that I have branched out at unconscionable length with regard to the events of these latter days. Page after page of conversation reported verbatim—why at this rate, my gossip, you will swell to such an inordinate size that I shall not be able to carry you about with me! You will be a diary in fifteen volumes before I know where I am.

But the result, the consequence, of each of these conversations may prove of such importance in my future that I think it quite as well to note them down as they take place, and even to rack my memory to recall the exact words which were used, the gestures which accompanied them, indeed, every slightest detail which may enable me to account for circumstances which are otherwise unaccountable. One forgets so easily what has been said in the heat or the lassitude of chatter. Your friend looks coldly upon you; you forget that you wounded his pride by something you let slip and immediately apologized for this morning. Young Spoonbill never sent you that opera-box for Patti's last night after all, but then, you should remember that most walls have ears, and you certainly *did* tell Lady Jericho the other evening that the only reason you tolerated that zany Spoonbill at your parties was that he saved you a clear £100 a year in stalls and boxes.

It is just as well to jot down even the most trivial detail that recurs to your remembrance. There is no knowing what warning it may convey, what pitfall it may not reveal, what light it may not shed, when you read it over, say three months hence.

This, therefore, must be my excuse for the elaboration which I have bestowed upon my late contributions to your information; an elaboration which certainly savors a good deal more of the Three Volume Novel than the Diary, and shows (I say it without fear of contradiction) that I really have a turn for literature.

I am sure I should be at no loss for a plot. Some of my own adventures would form very dramatic plots indeed. Some of my friends' adventures would outvie even *them* in intensity. And as for the descriptions, language, grammar, local coloring, and so forth, I am quite sure that little Tom Doomster, the little barrister, I fascinated at Vichy last year, would put that all right for me. And *he* ought to know something about the proper way of writing novels, as he is a literary editor to the *Weekly Poopoo*, and reader to Messrs. Shortman & Sharp, the eminent publishers.

However, to return to the story of this eventful day. As soon as I hear the voice of Lord Udolpho Daysey in amicable salutation with Captain Jack, I ring my silver bell furiously, and the faithful Félicie makes an immediate appearance—rather too immediate indeed, inasmuch as it shows that she must have been very close behind the door during the latter part at least of my interview with Jack. But as she is already pretty deep in all my secrets, that does not much matter.

"Félicie!" I cry, sharply, "if Lord Udolpho Daysey calls, I am lying down with one of my nervous headaches, and cannot see any one."

"Oh yes, you can, Mrs. Despard!" cries a wrathful voice, as the door bursts open with a crash of its complaisant and ineffective French lock, which I had fondly relied upon as a full protection against any sudden intrusion.

"Oh yes, you can, Mrs. Despard!" cries Dolly, as he enters the door with a very pale face and a strangely unsteady gait; "you can see me, and your nervous headache can vanish into thin air for the present like your other deceptions. It is true I had not intended to inflict my presence again upon you *again at all*. I was about to leave you this note—my note of farewell. I was going away without a word when I learned something just outside this door that gives me the right to come in and have a little talk to you before I take my departure."

It is as he says. In his hand he holds an envelope addressed to me, and he is evidently dressed for a journey.

According to my usual practice under such circumstances, I do not attempt to answer him yet. I simply confine myself to considering how I shall deal with the situation, and waving Félicie out of the room.

"Leave us, Félicie," I say majestically, "but stay within call."

On his side, he does not say anything for a moment, but tears open the letter, and looks over two closely written sheets of his own handwriting.

"Eight pages!" he says at last—"eight pages of sentimental rubbish written by a man who ought to know better; by a man who calls himself a man of the world!"

And then he tears it up viciously, as if it were my flesh and he were tearing that. And then, becoming aware that my gaze is eagerly fixed on the paper (for I am hoping that he is about to hurl the fragments from him), he carefully replaces them in the envelope, and then in his pocket.

"Oh no, you don't, Mrs. Despard!" he laughs, with a look of abnormal cunning. "You'd like to piece the letter together again, and show it to people, and laugh yourself into fits over it, wouldn't you? But you won't—you *won't*!" and he flings himself down involuntarily into an arm chair.

"You have been drinking, sir," I say severely. "What do you mean by coming into my presence *drunk*?"

"Drunk!" he repeats, with a hiccough. "Your presence! I am not the first person who has been drunk in your presence, by a long chalk."

"How dare you say such a thing?" I cry, starting forward in my chair.

"Dare!" he repeats, as before; "I dare a good deal more than that. I *dare* say you have welcomed men—ah, dozens and scores of men!—to your presence who have been *made* drunk by you! Yes, Mrs. Despard, by you and your confederates; but principally and most often by you."

"And do you imagine for a moment," I retort, with a fine smile, "that although you are so bold as to 'dare say' all that—as to invent all those falsehoods—that the fact gives you any right to stagger into my apartment in this state, or indeed, to enter my apartment at all in *any* state?"

That fine smile of mine is one of my peculiarities. When it appears on my countenance it portends nothing good to the person I am smiling at, or happens for the moment to occupy my thoughts.

It is then that I feel most like the—

"Destructive, damnable, deceitful woman"

of the old play. It is then that I feel—*peculiar!*

"I dare say not," he answers calmly. "But as you happen to be the confederate of a man who has fleeced me to the tune of £3,000 odd, I think I have some right even to *force* my way in with the object of asking you how you dared deny the fact in Paris when I spotted you at the Eden Theatre."

"You are laboring under a mistake," I say, quite gently. "You never suggested such an abomination when you spoke to me in Paris. You simply asked me if you had not seen me in certain compromising resorts with Captain Fortinbras. I answered in the indignant negative, which was the strict truth."

"It was false!" shouts Dolly, now beside himself with agitation and the fumes of drink. "Why, have I not just seen, with my own eyes, Jack Fortinbras leaving your rooms with the air of a conquering hero?"

"Nothing more natural," I say, with the most utter calmness; "although I am naturally distressed to have to contradict so courteous a gentleman as Lord Udolpho Daysey, Captain Fortinbras, who is only just arrived in Monte Carlo, was introduced to me for the first time—last night."

Dolly sinks back aghast into his chair.

"Last night!" he echoes. "Only last night!" He can't get over it for some time. At last he returns to the attack. "A desirable introduction, on my soul! You have allowed the most thorough-paced rascal and swindler in the whole of Europe to be presented to you. I don't think your beloved Algy Balfour will *quite* approve of the acquaintance for you. Of course I am at liberty to say where I met Captain Fortinbras this afternoon if Algy should ask me?"

"Most certainly," I respond; "you may say anything you like about it to Algy. Because, you see, the person who introduced Captain Fortinbras to me in the roulette-room last night was no less a person than *Algy Balfour himself!*"

(*To be continued*).