

MISS HELEN'S LOVERS.

"The young lady was wearing a very handsome watch set with brilliants," he volunteered, addressing the porter. "It was an emerald hunter as far as I could see from where I sat in the carriage. She took it out and looked at it more than once before we reached—"

"Do you know the lady?" inquired the porter, looking hard at the man. "Are you acquainted? Is she a friend of yours?"

"I have never seen the young lady in my life until to-day. I was in the train when she got in at Meriton."

Then the porter leaned out of the carriage and called loudly for "Bill," who, in the shape of another porter, presently arrived, accompanied by the guard and a policeman, by whom Helen was questioned closely, and by whom her companion was keenly scrutinized. The train which had halted outside the station in order that the tickets might be collected, now proceeded into St. David's station, the policeman and "Bill" remaining in the carriage, the former still cross-examining Miss Mitford and keeping a watchful eye on the man. Helen told her short story concisely; she was not the kind of woman who outwardly loses her head or grows confused in an unpleasant emergency; though, in truth, she was frightened and miserable at heart, she preserved a dignity of manner calculated to freeze her interrogators.

When the train drew up alongside the crowded Exeter platform, the man with whom Helen had traveled collected his belongings and was about to leave the carriage, had not the policeman interposed, civilly enough, but decidedly.

"I am sorry, sir, but we shall want to speak to you. The circumstances are not altogether satisfactory, I'm afraid. Before reaching this lady looked at her watch, it was safe then. She falls asleep almost immediately on leaving—, you were alone in the carriage with her; when she awakes the watch is gone, likewise the purse. The circumstances, as you'll allow, are not satisfactory, and it is my duty to sift them to the bottom."

The man turned first red and then very pale.

"Then you suspect me of stealing?" he demanded, and the dismay in his voice touched Helen; she turned her gray eyes compassionately upon him.

"I am quite sure he did not do it," she said quickly, addressing the policeman.

"Thank you, ma'am," said the man.

"What reason have you for saying that, Miss?" inquired the policeman, sternly.

"I can see he is an honest man," Helen answered; her feminine logic was not convincing.

"She had none other than a woman's reason," he thought; but he said nothing.

The policeman smiled grimly.

"He will have to prove himself an honest man by turning out his pockets for one thing and giving a satisfactory account of himself for another. Will you kindly oblige me with your name, sir, your business and your destination?"

"No difficulty about the one or the other. My name is Smithers, William Smithers, native of Barford, county of Warwick. I'm a gentleman's servant, valet to Mr. Albert Jones, who is travelling in a first-class smoking compartment in the front part of this train. We are on our way to Newton Hall, Noelcombe, North Devon, the seat of Sir Adolphus Jones, Knight, father to my master."

The policeman listened to this explanation attentively, then turned with a wise and skeptical smile to Bill.

"We must find this Mr. Albert Jones, Bill," he said.

At that moment there hurried past the carriage window a tall, good-looking young man, whose face was wrinkled with a frown, and who scanned the crowd upon the platform in evident and impatient search for some one whose duty it was to be found.

"That is my master," cried Mr. Smithers, with a note of triumph in his voice.

"Ask the gentleman to step here a moment," said the policeman, addressing "Bill."

"I must get out," Helen said, despatchly.

"I have to change trains here, I can not wait."

"We must settle up this matter before you go, Miss."

"Then we must settle it outside, on the platform. I can not stay here."

As she spoke, "Bill," accompanied by the gentleman, reached the door, which stood open. This Mr. Albert Jones was of prepossessing appearance. He was a handsome, prosperous, genial, young man. His easy temper was very seldom ruffled, indeed a less contented man than he could have found little to grumble at in his smooth and golden path. But just now he looked hot and irritated, and he spoke angrily.

"What on earth is all this about, Smithers? Why on earth will you travel third when I pay for your second-class ticket? You are so internally economical that you deserve to be looked up."

Then catching sight of Helen's figure from behind the policeman, whether she had withdrawn on his approach or went on with charitable interest and some condensation. "If that is the person who fancies Smithers has got her purse, I can assure her that she's mistaken. Smithers don't rob me so I am sure he would not rob her. But if she can't get home without a ticket, I hope she will allow me to provide her with any money she may want."

This open handed generosity, this convenient suggestion should surely have been received with gratitude and thanks, but exasperated, robbed, proud Helen chose to be offended. With the mien of an affronted princess she pushed her way past the policeman and answered this overbearing gentleman with extraordinary dignity and coldness.

"I did not think that your man had stolen my things. I knew that he had not. And I want nothing but to be allowed to leave the carriage. Would you kindly let me pass?"

CHAPTER III.

"Whose humble means watch not His haughty spirit," Shakespeare.

Miss Mitford's voice, face and manner were so unexpected as to be a little startling. But the young man instantly stood aside and raised his hat with an ingratiating smile. He smiled, not because he found her manner amusing, but because it was his habit to smile where women were concerned.

They were always so very gracious to him that he had never yet found occasion to frown in their company. He half offered his hand to help her alight from the carriage, but he was just a moment too late, she was already on the platform.

She found that the train to Noelcombe was behind its time; it would not be in for half an hour. During the earlier part of that interval, Smithers, who was now exonerated from suspicion, and Helen, formed the nucleus of a group consisting of several officials, the policeman and Smithers' master, who, to that young person's annoyance, had entered with officious interest into the discussion concerning her loss. He was a young man of some energy, and energy to those who live idle lives is a superfluous possession, of which they are glad to find opportunity to rid themselves. Besides which Miss Mitford was an unusually pretty girl and in distress. So he took the investigation of the affair into his own hands, directed every measure which was adopted for the recovery of the property, asked a hundred questions and showed some talent for the detective trade.

The cross-examination to which she was compelled to submit was not the least unpleasant part of the unfortunate day. At length, the subject, exhaustive as it proved, was brought to an abrupt conclusion by the arrival of the Plymouth Zulu. Helen withdrew to the ladies' waiting room where she sat, sulking, in the stifling heat of that crowded room. She was cross, hot, tired, but she was glad to escape from her undesirable notoriety and still more glad to be quiet of the persistent gaze and searching interrogations of that complacent son of the low-born, purse-proud Sir Adolphus Jones, whose condescending attentions were intolerable.

"The train won't be in for ten minutes," he said, at once. "I hope you don't mind my having sent for you, but I thought you would like a cup of tea, or something before you go on."

Mr. Jones, young, good-looking, popular among his fellow-men, and heir to a prodigious income, was not likely to be humble nor blind to his own advantages.

The kind maidens and their still kinder mothers, with whom he came in contact at every stage of his life, had flattered and cajoled him into the belief that his personal attractions were irresistible. Of the more substantial attractions which he possessed they were evidently oblivious, and he, to do him justice, did not suspect his guileless flatterers of ulterior designs, but accepted their proffered friendship with frank pleasure, ascribing his popularity with the fair sex to any reason and every reason but the right one.

With an appreciative eye, he noted the beauty of Miss Mitford's graceful figure; the turn of her throat, the erect pose of her head, the length of her curly lashes, the dimple that cleft her round chin, and the curve of her short, upper lip. She was more than pretty—she was beautiful, and just the style of girl whom he admired; he wished to see more of her; he would like to hear her talk. How silent she was, and how solemn—saddened, no doubt, by her depressing position. He would like to see her smile; her smile ought to be very sweet; there was a suspicion of a dimple indenting her pale cheek. How white, how travel-soiled, how grave she looked. He was so sorry for her. But her conduct was disappointing, for she, with frigid politeness, refused his offer of tea, and turned to re-enter the ladies' waiting-room.

"Why not wait here?" he inquired, earnestly.

"I should like to rest until the train is in," which what he called her unfortunate governess manner.

"You can rest out here," pointing to an adjacent bench; "there is more air out here. It is much better for you than being stifled among all those women. Do come, you are looking so awfully down here, and I will bring you a cup of tea down here."

But the waiting-room door had closed behind her before his sentence was ended. It was evident that she was very gauche, but it was also evident to her observant and good-natured companion that she was tired out; he was convinced that she had refused his offer from some other motive than disinclination for the proffered refreshment.

"It is an awkward thing for a shy girl to accept anything from a strange fellow," he reflected. "I was clumsy; I must manage it better. She shall have her tea, I swear, or I know she is dying for it," and he walked off to the refreshment room.

A few minutes later a maid, accompanied by Smithers, and carrying tea, cake, biscuits, and a plate filled with white heart cherries, entered the ladies' waiting-room. There, at Smithers' direction, the tray was placed on the table by Helen's side, with the words—

"The gentleman desired me to bring these, ma'am."

The retreating figure showed no consciousness of Helen's quick disclaimer—

"It is a mistake. I ordered nothing—I want nothing."

That tea and those seductive cherries stood untasted at this foolish girl's elbow; she looked at them wistfully, but she touched them not. When her train came into the station, she felt that she was turning her back on a terrible temptation, as she bustled out upon the crowded platform, where she was immediately joined by Mr. Jones.

"This way if you please. I've got you a carriage. My man will see to your luggage; it is with mine."

And he hustled her on till they reached an empty compartment, the door of which was held open by Smithers.

"I am traveling third," she said, glancing within the carriage. "This is first."

"The man—the who-do-you-call it at the ticket office—stammering over the prevarication—gave me a first class ticket for you."

[As indeed he had done, and had been paid for it, too.]

"Thank you, but I like third best; it is the coolest."

"As you please." This girl was less shy than disagreeable after all. "I am going in there," indicating the smoking-carriage next door, "so you would get this place to yourself. The rest of the train is very much crowded."

Helen hesitated. She believed that the white ticket which he held had been provided by the generosity of the railway company; she also believed that by a fortunate coincidence—not by bribery and corruption—the selected compartment happened to be empty—the only compartment in the full train.

Smithers, with respectful mien, patiently held the door open. "Take your seats!" shouted a porter at her elbow. An eager crowd of excited excursionists surged past; a drunken man staggered close to her. Mr. Jones said nothing, but preserved an indifferent air. The drunken man settled the question. Helen shrunk away in disgust from him, and saying, "I really think I will go in here," entered the carriage precipitately, and with some loss of dignity.

"There was an excursion to Exeter from Barnstaple to-day," Mr. Jones explained. "They go back by this train. We shall get rid of the crowd there."

He was standing on the platform, still with his hand on the sill of the open window. He was thinking that it would have been pleasanter to travel with this handsome girl than to smoke next door. He was in search of an excuse to change his mind and join her. Miss Mitford, with a calm and unapproachable mien, returned his steady gaze. An excuse was not easy to find, but just before the train started he gave her an inkling of his intention by his last words—

"You will find some papers in there if you care to look at them. I shall see you again at Barnstaple; I shall have done my smoke by that time. *Au revoir.*"

He means to travel with me from Barnstaple to Noelcombe," Helen concluded, closing her lips tight and not looking amiable.

That is precisely what he had meant, and what he also proceeded to do.

At Barnstaple he entered the carriage, as though it was a matter of course that he should do so, and taking the seat opposite to its occupant, he said:

"I hope you don't mind my coming in here?"

There were such a lot of men in the other carriage that they smoked me out."

She made some inarticulate sound which suggested her indifference to his movements.

A pile of illustrated papers lay, where he had placed them, beside her on the seat. He pointed at them and asked whether she had been reading.

"It is too hot to read," she said.

"Perhaps you are one of the people who can never read in a train?"

"I read sometimes."

"It makes your head ache, perhaps?"

"Yes, it does."

"Does it make your head ache to look at pictures?"

"No"—a moment's pause; "but talking makes my head ache."

"I'm so sorry; that is particularly unfortunate, for I have a question or two which I really must ask you. You see, I ought to have a full description of your watch and purse, a minute account of your fellow-travellers—every particular, in fact, of the circumstances to send up to headquarters as soon as possible. I am sorry to trouble you, but I want it down in black and white; it would not do to trust to my memory in any important business."

He drew out a book—it might have been a note-book—and pencil from his breast pocket, and began in a business-like way to question Helen, and write down her answers. She was impressed by his manner and set at ease by this explanation of his intrusion.

"Your name?"

"Helen Mitford."

"You came from Meriton, you said—started about 2.30? How far do you live from the station?"

"Two miles."

He entered this important item carefully.

"Meriton is a pretty village," he remarked. "I have often passed through it on my way to Dromore."

Helen started and looked at him.

"You know Dromore?" he pursued.

"Yes."

"The Chilterns are awfully nice people."

Lady Chiltern was Helen's cousin and most intimate friend; but she had grown frigid again, for what had the Chilterns to do with the notebook, or the theft?

"Would you kindly describe your fellow-travellers?" he proceeded, with solemnity, his pencil poised in the air and his dark eyes watching her expressive face.

"A thin, middle-aged man—I thought he was a dissenting minister—sat next to me. There was a woman—a smart woman with feathers and dirty hands—opposite to me. The other people were men; I hardly looked at them. I could not recognize either of them."

"Poor men?" murmured the gentleman, writing in his book.

This superfluity of the dialogue was a mistake on his part. A delicate color rose to Helen's cheek; she averted her eyes and her attention from her *vis-à-vis*, and fixed them on the landscape. The scenery through which they were passing was magnificent. Great hills, topped with jagged boulders of gray granite, clothed short turf on which droves of horned sheep were browsing, streaked and belted with woods of oak and ash, rose almost perpendicularly from out the smiling valleys.

"Oh, look," she suddenly cried, with a deep-drawn breath of happiness, pointing through the open window, "there is the sea."

A blue and wrinkled belt of water glittered between a cleft hill, at the sight of which Mr. Jones, on being thus accosted, expressed rapture.

"Have you never been here before?"

"Never."

"It is such a ripping little place, I know you will love it. Whereabouts in Noelcombe are you staying?"

"I don't know exactly where the house is."

"I might have to see you, don't you know, about this business; I may have forgotten to ask you some important question, so I ought to know your address."

"My aunt lives at Carnation Cottage."

For some time his governess theory about her had been wavering; it now expired.

"How long shall you be down?" he asked, anxiously.

"I do not know."

"You will be here until the week after next?"

"Oh, yes."

"I shall probably hear something from the railway company in a few days; in that case I will call and tell you what they say—that is, if you will allow me to do so."

"Thank you; you are very kind."

The words were unimpeachable, but the tone in which they were uttered was not encouraging.

"We shall be very lucky if we can hear of either watch or purse again."

The "we" was offensive to Miss Mitford.

"Yes, the recovery of things lost in that way is so unlikely that I am exceedingly sorry that you troubled yourself at all about the matter."

She was very dignified and grand, but he was not awed.

"It is the sort of a search I like," he said frankly; "I shall be as proud as Lucifer if I can trace them. If it can be done, it shall be done, I promise you."

"I don't see how you are going to do it."

"Leave it to me," he told her with an smile of superior wisdom. And then he diplomatically began to extol the glorious country through which they were passing.

There was More Point, there the merciful sharp peninsula of jagged rocks, there was the famous Tor, there a Druidical stone, there a cromlech. If his geography was inaccurate, Helen did not discover it, but listened to what he said with interest and smiled upon him.

But when the travelers reached Noelcombe Road poor Helen discovered that the misfortunes of that unlucky day were not yet over. With a culpable want of forethought, Mr. Jones desired her to interview station master and ticket collector in his presence. Out came his note-book again, and the tedious routine of endless questions which she had already answered had to be repeated. At the time the useless delay fretted her, but when at last she was set free, and, on emerging from the station, found that omnibuses and cabs had alike started for Noelcombe, leaving her and her box five miles from her destination, she was dismayed and ready to cry.

"Why didn't you fetch me?" she inquired, miserably, of a porter; "you saw me here, you knew I was going to Noelcombe. Why did you let the omnibus start without me?"

"I understood you were along of Mr. Jones, Miss," the man said; "you came up in the train along of him. His man went on in the cab, but the dogcart is outside waiting."

At this moment Mr. Jones himself approached and asked Helen anxiously what was wrong. When she had explained her position and this culminating misfortune, he was extremely concerned. He hated the porter with great severity and used unparliamentary language about the thick heads of the west-country people.

"However," he added, turning to Helen with courtly and ingenuous air, "it is fortunate that my cart is here, for, as I am going your way, I need not tell you how pleased I shall be to drive you to Carnation Cottage."

His manner was very happy. If Helen had not, by an abrupt turn of her head, caught sight of a meaning grin on the face of the porter, she would most likely have complied gratefully with this suggestion, but that grin aroused a suspicion in her mind that determined her immediate action.

It would have been a relief to have said something really rude to this presumptuous, low-born stranger; her eyes were dangerously bright, she was very angry. With a meaningless inclination of the head she waived the question, and turning, re-entered the station. After giving the stationmaster sufficient orders for the forwarding of her box at the earliest opportunity, she inquired from him her way to Noelcombe, and then, without looking to the right hand or the left, set off at a rapid pace in the direction indicated.

A few minutes later the unconscious offender, Mr. Jones, climbed into his cart, and drove off after the dark figure, which was already at some distance from him, and upon which he kept his eyes. He wondered why she would not start with him; perhaps she was shy of the people at the station. She had not seemed a bashful young woman; no doubt that studiously cold way of hers was a form of shyness. He would wait until she turned the corner of the road, and was consequently out of sight of the station, before he picked her up.

How well and how quickly she moved! Neither heat nor weariness beat down her crest; her head; how high she held it! Her shoulders were rigid as she walked; there was no undulation, nothing gentle, nor drooping about her; she had an uncompromising back. The sun was low in the west, the air was cooler than it had been all day, a freshening evening breeze had risen, yet how pale she looked. Poor girl, she was tired out. He touched the horse with the whip, and next moment was alongside of her and addressing her by name.

"Miss Mitford, you went off in such a hurry; you had gone in a moment, before I knew where you were. Please get in as quick as you can, the horse won't stand."

He leaned over the splash-board and offered her his hand to help her into the cart.

"Thank you, but I'm going to walk to Noelcombe," she answered, moving on as she spoke. He caught sight of her face; there was animosity in every line of it.

"You can't walk," he said, "it would kill you. It's five miles—more—and an awful road—hills the whole way—hills like a switchback."

She did not argue, but she walked on faster; he kept the cart by her side.

"I assure you that you can't walk," he said, a little irritated and very much surprised. "You don't understand, I am not exaggerating—it is five miles if it is a step. You don't know what that distance is in this part of the country means. You must get in—indeed, you must; you are tired out already."

"Thank you, but I would rather walk were the distance ten times greater than it is."

"Under those circumstances I have nothing more to say."

And, taking off his hat with great ceremony, Mr. Jones drove off, leaving an irritating cloud of dust in his track.

Before the cart was out of sight Helen had repented her decision.

"I was a fool," she said, "it would have been better to have driven with a butcher or a hangman than this."

"This" was a long, steep, stony hill which stretched before her.

CHAPTER IV.

Long lines of cliff breaking have left a chasm; And in the chasms are foam and yellow sands; Beyond, red roofs about a narrow wharf In cluster; then a molder church, and high A long street climbs—

ENOCH ARDEN.

Noelcombe was just such another fishing-hamlet as that home of Philip, Enoch and Annie, above described; but its one narrow street, after climbing half-way up the broken cliff-side, was met and lost in row after row of neat, newly-built lodging-houses.

Marine Parade, Sea View Terrace and West Cliff Place daily disgorged during the season an innumerable army of "visitors," for whose summer sea-blow these houses had been lately erected by the great patron of the village, Sir Adolphus Jones, who, in

a speculative way, appreciated the attractive beauty of the place.

The old residents of Noelcombe and its neighborhood—among whose number Sir Adolphus was not—conservative to the backbone, regarded those horizontal rows of remunerative houses, and that enormous mansion, flanked by acres of glass, and oversmart alike in color and design, in the middle distance, with distinct disfavor.

But the county patronized Sir Adolphus and his family; rich neighbors who owned an eligible son, daughters, too, sufficiently good-looking and more than sufficiently dowered, who kept open house where champagne flowed like water, where a French cook presided in the sumptuous kitchen, where your presence was eagerly welcomed, and where your wit was sure to be appreciated.

Miss Elizabeth Mitford was in face, disposition, and in manner, a mild caricature of her brother, the rector.

Her gray hair was arranged in rows of graduated curls on either side of her tanned and weather-beaten face, her long nose dipped over a wide mouth that curled up at the corners with a bland contentedness which was almost, but not quite, a smile; her chin receded, and her over-arched eyebrows wrinkled her forehead deeply, and left her round blue eyes wide open.

She was indifferent to her appearance but not to her comfort. For the sake of shade, she wore a wide-brimmed straw hat, bound, for the sake of security, with a black ribbon beneath her chin. For the sake of coolness, she wore a light chintz gown, fashioned with a view to ease, not elegance; for the sake of convenience, she wore no gloves.

I have described her in her gardening garb, and as she spent the greater part of each day in this pursuit, and often snatched an hour from the night for murderous sallies on slugs—which is a form of gardening—this was her perpetual summer costume.

The atmosphere within a hundred yards of Carnation Cottage was redolent of flowers; the round grass plot before the house was edged and sprinkled with beds that were thick with blossom.

A small conservatory which opened out of the drawing room, was a complete blaze of color. Miss Mitford's plants seemed to understand and respond to their owner's love, and half-killed themselves to gratify her by their profuse bloom.

The trellised walls of the cottage were concealed by creeping fuchsias, and myrtles, which were trained so as to completely cover them. Against the house was a broad bed of poppies, their scarlet and yellow petals caught the rays of the sinking sun. On the window ledges were tiled boxes filled with mignonette, lobelias and marguerites.

Ar old-fashioned border of hollyhocks, sunflowers, sweet peas, candy-tuft, honeysuckles, phloxes and pansies edged the gravel walk that swept round the grass plot and led to the gate through which Carnation Cottage was reached. This gate was no smart entrance, but a green door let into the cob wall; by its side was a bell-handle mounted on a brass plate, on which the direction "Ring and walk in" was engraved.

On the centre of the lawn a tulip tree and a standard magnolia grew side by side, beneath them stood a rustic garden seat on which Miss Mitford was now sitting; she held her watch in her hand, at which she glanced every now and then, with evident anxiety. Presently she rose, and bustling over to the garden door she opened it and prowled out upon the road, thence she soon returned very breathless and with an increased anxiety depicted on her face. She then hurried into the house calling "Betsey."

People who are desperate use desperate remedies, and if Betsey was not a desperate remedy, she was at least an old servant, who though she was wont to say, "she knew her place," did not keep it, but tyrannized over her gentle mistress as a "valuable servant" alone knows how to do.

When Miss Mitford had repeated her call for "Betsey" several times, she recollected that Betsey was always conscientiously deaf to a call, and only responded to a summons from the bell. So she rang, and then paced to and fro the hall, looking now at the grandfather's clock in the corner, now at the flowers on the table.

An old woman, lean as a rook, with hard black eyes, and a mouth which twisted down with a curl at the corners, opened a side door and came into the hall.

"Look at the time, Betsey," cried her mistress, pointing at the clock and shaking her head. "See how late it is, and that dear child has not yet arrived. I begin to feel sure something has happened. I have been uneasy all day, no doubt a presentiment of misfortune and—"

"Thunder in the air, ma'am," interrupted Betsey, "and tying up them carnations in a blazing sun is enough to give presentiments to mummies."

"John tells me that the omnibus came in half an hour ago," pursued Miss Mitford, almost crying. "The flies are even fleetier than the omnibuses. Dear me, dear me, the more I think, the more anxious I become. Betsey, where can that poor girl be?"

"Miss Helen is a young lady who can take good care of herself, ma'am, better than many twice and thrice her age. Her head is fit for use as well as for ornament, and she holds it high."

With Betsey the absent were always right—the present wrong—Miss Elizabeth hardly heard her words, she sprang up from her seat and wrung her hands, fearful misgivings began to crowd upon her anxious mind.

"These are dreadful days, Betsey," she said, "the papers teem with horrors. I live so safely here that I do not consider the dangers of others less blessed than myself. Those terrible murderers cut their victims into small portions and throw them here and there over the hedges."

Betsey possessed the nineteenth-century weakness—a perniciously skeptical mind; she even went to the length of occasionally doubting the infallible truth of what she read "on the paper," so now, instead of sharing her companion's fears, she smiled, an acid, superior smile.

"So we hear, ma'am, but we don't see nothing of such things down in these respectable parts, and as for Miss Helen being murdered and made away with, I'd be sorry for the ruffian who attempted it!"

(To be Continued.)

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