

## THREE MAIDENS MARRIED.

'They did. What a fool I was,' he continued, wringing his hands, 'ever to let her have Castonel! It was my wife worried me into it. Ailsa, I must get at the particulars of her death-bed. I shall not rest till I do. If Castonel will not furnish them, I'll ask Mrs. Muff.'

Mr. Chavasse remained irresolute all day. At the dusk hour he stole through the twilight to the house of his son-in-law. But Mr. Castonel had also stolen out somewhere under cover of the night. The faithful upper servant and housekeeper of all the Mrs. Castonels came to him in the dining-room, and the two sat down and sobbed one against the other.

'What did she die of?' groaned Mr. Chavasse.

'Sir,' said Mrs. Muff, 'I know no more than you. When she went to bed; she was as well as I was and ten times merrier, talking about a new cap she had bought, and the visitors she would see on the morrow. That was about half past nine, and by eleven we all a-bed in the house. In the middle of the night—if you killed me, I couldn't tell you the time, for in my flurry I never looked, but it may have been about two—their bedroom bell, the one which is hung by John's door on the top landing, in case Mr. Castonel is called out and wants him in the night, rang out such a dreadful peal, loud and long, as brought us all out of our beds; and master was shouting from his chamber. The others stopped to put a few things on, but I ran down in my night-clothes. Sir, in ten minutes, Mrs. Castonel was dead.'

'How did she seem when you got to her? How did she look?'

'She was writhing on the bed in awful agony, screaming and flinging her arms about. Mr. Castonel called it convulsions. I suppose it was. It was just as the other two poor young ladies went off. He was in a fine state, and threw himself on the body afterwards, and sobbed as if his heart would break.'

'Did she take any thing in the night?'

'Nothing, except some barley-water. She had drunk that, for the glass was empty.'

'Mrs. Muff, he whispered, taking her hand with a beseeching look, 'do you feel that there has always been fair play?'

'The merciful goodness knows, sir. I can't help asking myself all sorts of ugly questions, and then I am vexed at doing it. I know one thing; that it's an unlucky house, and as soon as to-morrow comes, I take myself out of it. I could not stop. Mr. Castonel owes me three months' wages, and if he says I have no right to them, for leaving without warning, why he must keep them. Hannah neither won't stay. I had hard work to make her remain for the funeral.'

'You saw them all after death: How did they look?'

'I saw them all and noticed nothing extraordinary. But Mr. Castonel had the coffins screwed down quickly.'

'Has any thing ever happened to excite your suspicions?'

'I cannot say it has. Though one circumstance has been much in my mind the last few days. The evening of the death of the first Mrs. Castonel, I and Hannah were seated in the kitchen, when we heard a noise in the laboratory. I went to see, and there was Mr. Castonel, who must have stolen down stairs and gone in without noise. He had let fall one of the little drawers, and I saw a phial and a paper or two on the floor. He was in a fierce rage with me for looking in. But the curious part is, that he had always passed off that drawer for a dummy drawer.'

Mr. Chavasse did not speak. He listened eagerly.

'And on the night of your poor daughter's death, sir, he had got that same drawer out again. John went in, and saw him with it, and Mr. Castonel—to use the lad's words—howled at him and chivied him back again. 'What a odd thing it is, Mrs. Muff,' said he to me, that same evening, 'that I should always have took that drawer for a sham!'

'Did you notice him at the drawer when his second wife died, poor Ellen Leicester?'

'No. But he may have gone to it every day of his life, without my seeing him. The curious point is that he should have been seen at it on these two particular nights, and by neither of us at any other time. Oh, sir! whether it has been bad luck, or whether it has been any thing worse, what a mercy if this man had never come near Ebury!'

'It would have been a mercy,' echoed poor Mr. Chavasse.

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## THE MYSTERIOUS STRANGER UNDERTAKES TO EXCITE SUSPICION STILL FURTHER.

There was a visitor at Mr. Hardwick's house, and the two had been in earnest conference for some time. The stranger—Mr. Smith, or whatever his name might be, had been arguing his point with some earnestness.

'You make out that portion of the case very well,' said the squire; 'but it is all suspicion after all. There is a possibility that Mr. Castonel might have changed the powders; but there is not enough evidence to proceed on. Mrs. Vaughan is a very prejudiced old woman, and sees things in the light of her hate. Understand me that I would be willing enough, as a magistrate, to attend to this, but were I to be too forward, and nothing come of it, Mr. Castonel would make me suffer. There is no apparent motive for such an act on his part.'

'There is a motive, and a strong one, with an utterly unprincipled man. I wormed this out of the old dame. He was the father of the child.'

'That would show less motive, or none, for its destruction unless you make him out a perfect fiend.'

'But suppose he made a conditional promise that he would marry the mother, when he was a widower, if the child were then alive?'

'Did he make such a promise?'

'Mrs. Vaughan will swear that she overheard him.'

Just then Mr. Chavasse was announced. He took no note of the stranger, so great was his excitement.

'I tell you, Squire Hardwick,' said he, 'I must have an inquest: my poor child's body shall be examined. I will know whether she has been poisoned or not. If there has been foul play, he shall suffer for it. They shall all be taken up—all—all!'

'And Mary Shipley's baby too,' said the stranger.

'And that too. I don't know you, sir, but I thank you or the suggestion. I should like to know about this Castonel—who he was originally—where he came from. No

one knows. Maybe he has no right to the name.'

'You are mistaken there,' said the other; 'he has a right to the name.'

'Possibly; but that woman at Beech Lodge could tell. A cousin—a pretty cousin she. It's my opinion that she's nothing more nor less than—'

'Stop, sir,' thundered the other, angrily, without remembering that he was not in his own house. 'I will not suffer you to say any thing against that lady.'

Mr. Chavasse looked astonished.

'I assure you,' continued the stranger, resuming his ordinary tone, 'that there has been, and could be no intercourse between that lady and Mr. Castonel, other than proper. I could satisfy you of that by four words; but I shall not do so now. You will know all some time, and in the mean while you may take my word for it. No man shall impugn that lady's conduct or character in my presence with impunity.'

'Why, that is what Mr. Castonel himself said to poor Mr. Winton,' said Chavasse.

'Did he? So much the better for him. It was his duty to do so.'

'Duty?'

'I said—duty. Rest easy, all will be explained before long. Have your inquest—your examination—I was endeavoring to persuade Mr. Hardwick to the step when you came in. But he wants an affidavit of probable cause.'

'I'll make one, then,' replied Chavasse.

'Suppose we have an informal inquiry first,' suggested the cautious magistrate. 'Let us have the parties who can throw any light on it, and examine what they have to say carefully, before we commit ourselves. Feeling should not have its way in a matter like this, which is too serious to go at, except with coolness and caution.'

'Your daughter has not been murdered,' observed Mr. Chavasse, bitterly.

'Very true,' replied the magistrate, calmly. 'But we have no evidence yet that yours has been. Come, now, don't interrupt, but hear me out. There is a series of remarkable facts, that in connection are suspicious—the point to determine is, whether they are enough to act as a defence in case we fail, and are prosecuted for false arrest.'

'I would spend every shilling I have in the world to get justice done on the murderer of my daughter.'

'Granted; but not to merely find that you could prove no murder at all. Besides, as you said just now, I have had no daughter murdered, which is no evidence that I do not sympathize with you, but explains why I go to work with more deliberation. There is one great obstacle as yet.'

'Obstacle?'

'Yes. I was speaking of it to this gentleman before you came in. It is the apparent absence of any motive for such wholesale slaughter.'

'Motive!—why—abundant.'

'Very good—what is it?'

'Mr. Chavasse was silent for a minute or more, and then he broke out vehemently—'

'He has poisoned them—there is no doubt of it.'

'I fear so,' said Mr. Hardwick, 'but still there is no impelling reason. We may get a clue to it by a little management.'

'Management! burst forth Mr. Chavasse, again, 'I am sick of management. All I want is a straightforward, thorough, square investigation. Let us get to the bottom of the business by a direct mode. If he didn't murder my daughter, let him show his innocence.'

'Softly,' answered the magistrate, almost provoked into a smile, 'you forget that it is not the rule of English law to ask a man to prove his innocence; though an English public may do such a thing. His innocence is presumed until we show something to the contrary.'

'Oh, I know all that—that's of course; but I mean let us go at it at once in a direct way. Let him be committed to await an investigation.'

'He must be arrested first, and it requires an examination before he can be committed, and sufficient prima facie evidence, backed by an affidavit, for even a warrant.'

'Did you never hear of murders being done without any apparent motive?' asked the stranger.

'Certainly, but if no motive at all be shown, it may lead to his escape. Look at it. He had nothing to gain by the death of his wives.'

'Yes, but his first two were in the way of his marrying Fiances, where he might gain something,' suggested Mr. Chavasse.

'Which tells against the theory of his having poisoned your daughter,' returned the other. 'His hope of money through her was in her surviving you. So far as self-interest went, it was in favor of his guarding her life with jealous care.'

'It seems to me you are arguing his case for him,' said Mr. Chavasse, moodily.

'Trust me,' returned the magistrate, 'that the barrister who defends him would put it in a stronger way. It is clear that the motive was not interest.'

'It might have been hate,' interposed the stranger.

'Possibly; but what is the evidence of its existence? There were no quarrels between him and his wives. In your daughter's case, you told me once yourself, that he lavished on her every thing that the tenderest husband could, and more than you would, were you in his place. So far as you know, or the public know, their relations were of the most affectionate kind. Even the sharp-sighted Mrs. Muff knows of no difficulty between the two. So you see there is no ground for that motive to stand on.'

'Suppose he had no motive, but just sheer downright desire to kill them?'

'It would be hard to put that idea before a court. A smart barrister would make it acquit his client, if the facts were doubtful.'

'But if we can show that they did take poison—that the poison could have been given by no one but him—if we can bring up the baby-case where there was a motive,' interposed the stranger, 'what then?'

'I fear you would only build up a basis on which a smart counsel would rear a very pretty fabric of insanity. The days of Blue Beard are past. Men are not supposed to poison three young and handsome wives in succession, without apparent cause, and in the last instance against their own interest.'

'What do you propose to do—dismiss the case when it comes before you officially?' queried the stranger.

'No! the circumstances are such as to give rise to grave suspicions, sufficient to justify me, perhaps, in acting as a magistrate. If a coroner's jury should find a verdict, as it probably would, the commitment would inevitably follow. But I am anxious that if he be, guilty—'

'If! He is guilty!' exclaimed Mr. Chavasse.

'Admit that I believe it so—that we are all three here satisfied of his guilt, it will not weaken the case against him, if we sift all the evidence carefully. You know what grounds you have to go on, in the first place; and then you may get a clue to the motive, which will make it surer.'

'We have heard the witnesses already.'

'No—only a portion, and then in a discursive way. I propose that we shall get Mr. Tuck before us.'

'And Mr. Rice?'

'Probably; but we will get little out of him, unless in a court, or before the coroner. He is in Mr. Castonel's employ and knowing the examination to be extra-magisterial, would probably have nothing to say. What we get must be voluntary. Mr. Tuck is not of the same nature, and we may glean a deal from him. I thought of the tiger, but he is rather sharp, and may not be managed.'

'Leave him to me,' said the stranger, with a slight chuckle of confidence. 'He is a mercenary young cur, and I can squeeze him as dry as a sponge. When I have done with him you will find little more to extract.'

'You may get too much,' rejoined Mr. Hardwick, drily.

'Never fear for that.'

'I mean that it may not be reliable.'

'I understand you; but I can sift the wheat from his chaff, without arguing very much shrewdness on my part. I have had occasion to do it once or twice before.'

'I rely more upon John and Hannah's evidence, than even Mrs. Muff's,' continued the magistrate. 'Hannah is talkative, and therefore inquisitive; though Mrs. Muff is prudent, and likely to have rebuffed her, she has no doubt gleaned a good deal, and many matters not likely to have impressed her, which will come out, may guide us.'

'Hannah was lady's maid?' inquired the stranger.

'No—in the kitchen; but don't you know that the kitchen knows most of the parlor? All people are at the mercy of their servants, in the matter of secrets, and the lower you get down the ladder the more is picked up. What does not astonish your valet makes your scullion ponder.'

There was some force in this last observation of Mr. Hardwick, and it seemed to strike the other two. At least it was not contested.

'I think, continued the magistrate, 'that by the time we have sifted what is at hand, some indications of further evidence may appear.'

'And when do you propose to have the examination?' asked Mr. Chavasse.

'As soon as possible. To-morrow, at farthest.'

'I should like to be present,' said the stranger.

'There is no reason why you should not. I will have them summoned here quietly—Mrs. Muff, Hannah, John, Mr. Tuck, Dame Vaughan, and Mary Shipley—in fact, all of those who probably know anything before us, and sound the depth of the evidence.'

'Very well—but it shall not rest, any way.'

The stranger, promising to be present at the proposed inquiry, was about to leave the house, Mr. Chavasse stopped him.

'Did you know that man before he came to Ebury?'

'Yes.'

'Was he—was he respectable?'

'He was so considered.'

'Is Castonel really his name?'

'It is. I never knew him by any other name.' The stranger left. Mr. Hardwick turned to his friend.

'What do you mean Chavasse, by harping on the name of Castonel?'

'Mr. Hardwick, I always thought that Castonel's features were familiar, and I think I can place them. Do you remember when you and I were boys—my father was an attorney employed by yours, in all his business?'

'Yes.'

'You remember a kind of half-tiger, half-page in your father's service, by the name of George Briggs?'

'Yes—he left, or was turned off for something. I have a remembrance of hearing some one—my father or some one else say, that he was connected with a good family, by the mother's side.'

'Well, he fell in love with Mrs. Leicester—she wasn't Mrs. Leicester then, you know, but engaged—and between us all we budgered him almost to death, poor fellow; I believe we drove him away among us—Winton and I particularly.'

'More shame to you all. Well?'

'Castonel has his face—that is, as I would think it to be grown older.'

'Nonsense, Chavasse! Castonel I have seen and spoken with too often—he has attended here professionally. He is a gentleman in manner, and I should judge one by breeding.'

'True,' replied Chavasse, 'but they called this boy, 'Gentleman George.' He was noted for manners above his station.'

'What does it matter, after all? Suppose it were so, what then?'

'Nothing; but it is strange.'

'Oh, you will see a thousand such resemblances. It is scarcely possible that this man can be 'Gentleman George.'

'What of him?' asked Ailsa, who came in with his wife, on a visit to the Hall, and overheard the last word as he entered.

'We were talking of him,' said Hardwick. 'I wonder what became of the fellow?'

'I did hear,' replied Ailsa, 'a few years since. His mother's uncle adopted and educated him, and left him a few thousand pounds, on condition of changing his name. He was bred to medicine.'

'Go on,' said Chavasse. 'What became of him then?'

'He ran away with the daughter of the Duke of Carberry, whom he got acquainted with somehow, and though the Duke never recognized him, cut quite a figure in London.'

'And his name?'

'I never had curiosity enough to ask.'

'Castonel and George Briggs are one and the same, as sure as you are all there,' said Chavasse. 'Don't you remember his face?'

'I never saw him,' answered Ailsa.