

WHOSE WAS THE HAND?

By Miss M. E. Braddon.

CHAPTER XV—Continued.

"Is she? Let her help me to make a fortune then, and she shall carry on experiments which must result in a mine of wealth—yes, as big as gold mines as old as time, and more glorious fortune, for it will bring fame with it, the fame of the inventor. Tell her that I must have the money, Louisa, or something desperate will come of her refusal to help me. I have tied over a month since I have had a loan, but I can not raise a much longer. I am deeply in debt, and all the most precious things in my laboratory will be seized by my creditors, and that will mean ruin. Tell her she must help me—tell her when you are alone with her. Leave the old harpy, my aunt, out of the discussion. I know Dolores will find me the money if she is left to her own inclination."

"I will not be your intermediary. I will have nothing to do with you; and I only hope that Dolores will be wise enough to refuse you any further help. She must know that you have had her about your schemes and experiments, your speculations, and wild dreams of wealth, not once, but many times. She must know that you have been leading an idle, profligate life in the very worst company in Paris, while you were pretending to be a genius and an inventor and to live only for science. She does not know as much about you as I do; but she must know that you are false to the core; she must know that you have traded upon her love for you, and will go on trading upon it to the end; that there is no baseness, no depth of shame, to which you will not stoop to gain your own ends. She does not know what I know, that you are as cruel as you are mean and false."

"The livid pallor of her hollow cheeks was intensified by the burning heat-spot which glowed like a live coal on each, and gave an added lustre to gloaming eyes—eyes that had grown too large for the pinched and haggard face."

"Sacrilege!" cried Duverdiere, "you are usually possessed by a dumb devil, but when you do talk, by Heaven, it is a torrent. No matter, I am not generally in need of an intermediary with a pretty woman, and I have no doubt I shall be able to come to an understanding with Dolores before long."

"This conversation took place in the morning. Gilbert Florestan called in the Rue St. Guillaume on the following evening. He found Duverdiere established in a rooming house, the same in which Dolores was sitting, looking very lovely in a flowing tea-gown of palest pink silk, which set off at once the grace of her supple, slender figure, and a pendant and bracelet of magnificent sapphires. Florestan had never seen her wear these gems until tonight, and he guessed that they were a recent gift from her mysterious protector."

"He pitied her all the more when he saw these new tokens of her slavery, for the wearer's eyes had a look of profound sadness, while the mother's hard and cruel face was radiant with recent triumph. Louise Marrot was not in the salon. He and Duverdiere were the only visitors, and he had a perfect consciousness that he was not wanted by any one except Mme. Quijada, who received him with marked embarrassment, and begged him to stop till eleven o'clock."

"I fear my salon is the dullist in Paris," she said, "but you must remember that we are exiles, and have lived in the strictest retirement ever since we left Madrid."

"Florestan protested that there was nothing he preferred to a small and quiet circle, society in which conversation really meant the interchange of thoughts. He talked of Madrid, a city in which he had spent three years of his diplomatic career, and although Mme. Quijada fenced with his questions with supreme ability, it was obvious to him that her knowledge of the Spanish capital was superficial, and that she could not have occupied a good social position in any part of Spain."

"If she ever lived in Madrid, she lived there as she lives in Paris, as an adventurer and an outcast, outside the pale," he told himself.

"Her refinement, believed to be the thinnest veneer, laid on in later womanhood; her education was of the smallest, yet she contrived to impress every subject that was mooted—political, social, or literary, with an aplomb which carried her further than the widest knowledge will carry a diligent conversationalist. Duverdiere openly sneered at some of her observations, and provoked more than one vindictive glance from the southern eyes."

"Dolores talked very little, and for the most part in confidential tones only meant to reach her cousin's ear. Duverdiere talked like a man who had seen the world of men and knew the theories belonging to the most advanced socialism, science, a millennium of socialism, when the forces of nature should be the willing slaves of man, and hard work the standard of the laborer's brow, should be ancient history, and when the governing powers of the world should be reduced to the lowest point, when armies and navies should have become a tradition of the Dark Ages, and poverty and starvation should prosper as mytheal as the rapt of Proserpine or the birth of Minerva."

"He spoke with a suppressed boastfulness of a certain invention of his own which was fast approaching perfection, and which would revolutionize the coal mines of France and ultimately of the world, an application of electricity to the working of the mine would minimize labor and achieve in less than a month the results which now require a year. Dolores listened with admiring looks and fullest faith in the speaker. Mme. Quijada looked the disbelief and aversion which she may have feared to express in words. Florestan felt that the atmosphere was charged with electricity, and that the storm might burst at any moment, yet he prolonged his visit till a few minutes after eleven, at which hour Duverdiere made no sign of departure."

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