

‘But no; old fellow, joking apart,’ said Harry in a serious tone, ‘why *didn't* you come?’

‘With all my heart, joking apart,’ I replied, ‘why didn't *you* come?’

Just at this moment a light rap called me to the door, and upon opening it, I received from one of the servants, a note bearing my address, which, with some surprise, I opened and read. Its contents were as follows:—

‘ROSEVALE,
Aug. 20th, 1878.

‘Edward Hastings, Esq.

‘Sir,—Your unwarrantable intrusion into the house of Mrs. Percival last night calls for prompt explanation and apology, if indeed, under the circumstances, either be possible. Whether intended as a practical joke, a piece of harmless pleasantry, or an act of pure bravado, your conduct in masquerading under the assumption of a name and personality other than your own, is equally offensive; and for your audacious and extraordinary performances in the rôle of a buffoon—but which, perhaps, may sit quite naturally upon you—I assure you, sir, you will be held to a strict accountability.

‘Yours, etc.,
‘J. BRIARTON.’

‘Briefly, but strongly expressed,’ I exclaimed with a laugh, as I finished reading. ‘I thought it would come. Poor Briarton! he is the most unreasonable of lovers. The extraordinary performances refer no doubt to those ducks and that champagne bottle, and the audacity probably consists in my having presumed to make myself agreeable to *his* lady love. As for the rest of the note, it seems to indicate a slight confusion of ideas, as he calls Mrs. Morley by the name of Percival, and appears to be doubtful about my identity too.’

‘Harry, to whom all this, of course, was quite unintelligible, had been regarding me with a half-puzzled, half-comical look; but at mention of the name Percival, he burst into a loud

laugh. He asked permission to read the note; which, having done, he indulged in another hearty burst of laughter, and regarding me with an intensely amused and comical expression, he exclaimed:

‘Ten thousand pardons, my dear fellow; you certainly did keep your word, but you—you went to the wrong house, that's all.’

‘What do you mean?’ I exclaimed. ‘Precisely what I say,’ replied Harry.

‘Pshaw! the idea's ridiculous, absurd—impossible,’ I said. ‘I followed your directions and made no mistake about the house.’

A sickening suspicion, momentarily strengthening, that I had fallen an only too ready victim to one of De Villefort's most successful practical jokes, began to creep over me; but the matter seemed so inexplicable—so impossible of solution upon any such supposition, however, that I vehemently scouted the bare idea of such a thing as mistaking the house.

‘I think I can explain the matter,’ said Harry. ‘I know that Henry Percival has been expecting a friend, a Mr. Charles Mortimer, to visit him for some time past—in fact, now that I think of it, he did tell me that he was to arrive last night. He expected to be absent himself in Paris for several days, and asked me as a particular favour to call upon his friend. You were undoubtedly taken for him, as he is an entire stranger to the family; though how you could pass the whole evening there without the mistake being discovered, quite baffles my comprehension.’

‘Yes; you are doubtless right;’ I said, ‘and I now blush at my own stupidity in not seeing it sooner. Let no one say after this that truth is not stranger than fiction. An explanation and apology, I suppose, is next in order, and then to settle accounts with De Villefort.’

‘De Villefort; why, what has he to do with it?’ asked Harry, with some surprise.