

"It takes much to convince a father of such an unpleasant truth as that, Charley."

"Not much, if my experience goes for anything."

"I trust it is not typical, Charley."

"I suppose you're going to stand up for Geoffrey next?"

"I have no such intention. But if I did, it would be but to follow your example. We seem to change sides every now and then. You remember how you used to defend Clara when I expressed my doubts about her."

"And wasn't I right? Didn't you come over to my side?"

"Yes, I did," I said, and hastened to change the subject; adding, "As for Geoffrey, there is room enough to doubt whether he believes what he says, and that makes a serious difference. In thinking over the affair since you left me, I have discovered further grounds for questioning his truthfulness."

"As if that were necessary!" he exclaimed with an accent of scorn.—"But tell me what you mean," he added.

"In turning the thing over in my mind, this question has occurred to me.—He read from the manuscript, that on the blade of the sword near the hilt, were the initials of Wilfrid Cumberland. Now, if the sword had never been drawn from the scabbard, how was that to be known to the writer?"

"Perhaps it was written about that time," said Charley.

"No; the manuscript was evidently written some considerable time after. It refers to tradition concerning it."

"Then the writer knew it by tradition."

The moment Charley's logical faculty was excited, his perception was impartial.

"Beside," he went on, "it does not follow that the sword had really never been drawn before. Mr. Close even may have done so, for his admiration was apparently quite as much for weapons themselves as for their history. Clara could hardly have drawn it as she did, if it had not been meddled with before."

The terror lest he should ask me how I came to carry it home without the scabbard, hurried my objection.

"That supposition, however, would only imply that Brotherton might have learned the fact from the sword itself, not from the book. I should just like to have one peep of the manuscript to see whether what he read was all there?"

"Or any of it, for that matter," said Charley.

"Only it would have been a more tremendous risk than I think he would have run."

"I wish I had thought of it sooner, though."

My suspicion was that Clara had examined the blade thoroughly, and given him a full description of it. He *must*, however, have been at the Hall on some previous occasion, without my knowledge, and might have seen the half-drawn blade on the wall, examined it, and pushed it back into the sheath; which might have so far loosened the blade, that Clara was afterwards able to draw it herself. I was all but certain by this time that it was no other than she that had laid it on my bed. But then why had she drawn it? Perhaps that I might leave proof of its identity behind me—for the carrying out of her treachery, whatever the object of it might be. But this opened a hundred questions not to be discussed, even in silent thought, in the presence of another.

"Did you see your mother, Charley?" I asked.

"No. I thought it better not to trouble her. They are going to-morrow. Mary had persuaded her—why, I don't know—to return a day or two sooner than they had intended."

"I hope Brotherton will not succeed in prejudicing them against me."

"I wish that were possible," he answered. "But the time for prejudice is long gone by."

I could not believe this to be the case in respect of Mary; for I could not but think her favourably inclined to me.

"Still," I said, "I should not like their bad opinion of me to be enlarged as well as strengthened by the belief that I had attempted to steal Sir Giles's property. You must stand my friend there, Charley."

"Then you do doubt me, Wilfrid?"

"Not a bit, you foolish fellow."

"You know, I can't enter that house again, for my father is sure to see it; but I will follow my mother and Mary the moment they are out of the grounds to-morrow, and soon see whether they've got the story by the right end."

The evening passed with me in alternate fits of fierce indignation and profound depression, for, while I was clear to my own conscience in regard of my enemies, I had yet thrown myself bound at their feet by my foolish lie; and I all but made up my mind to leave the country, and only return after having achieved such a position—of what sort I had no more idea than the school-boy before he sets himself to build a new castle in the air—as would buttress any assertion of the facts I might see fit to make in after years.

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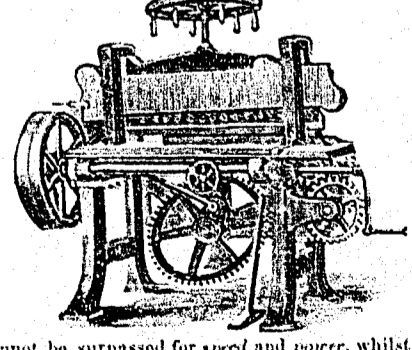
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