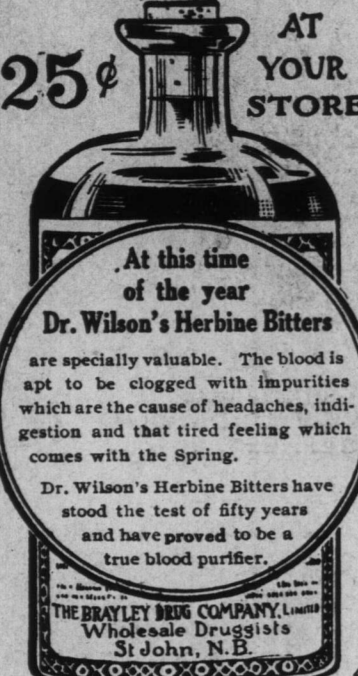


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CHAPTER XXXI.

Then Richard Drayton made up his mind what to do. Leonora's flutterings were calming down. He went up to the man beside her. "After all," said he, curbing a strong inclination to kick this cozener, "there is something else I must speak of to you. Suppose we step out together for half an hour?"

"Oh, tresome!" murmured Leonora to her pale fiancé.

"One minute only, cherie!" he answered in the same tone, stopping to lift her white hand to his mustache; then the two went out in the lobby together, and in one man's scowl of contemptuous disgust the other saw his game was up.

"Jean! My hat! My gloves! Ah, the lazy beggar is not here. I must wait upon myself. Excuse me." And with that he dived with snake-like rapidity into an unlighted passage, whence for nigh five minutes his companion impatiently awaited his return. No sign of him then. Richard Drayton followed in the same direction; went through balise-covered doors, down a long corridor ending with a second staircase, up which came Jean, humming gayly. Then it all flashed on him. Number eighteen was a double house; a corner house. By the side entrance the bird had flown. "Monsieur Morecoombe-Wood? Oh, he has set out since many minutes—rapidly! Would Monsieur return to Madame Alwyn?" asked Jean, and to his excessive mortification Mr. Drayton felt that was the only thing he could do.

Ushered again to her salon, the lady was doubly surprised to receive him alone. Tenfold more when he begged a private interview, and—Leonora, in bewildered annoyance, having swept away in through folding doors, to throw herself on a couch in the next room, and listen attentively to every sentence uttered in the one she had left—beyond expression startled at what he had then to say.

"Am I satisfied with the marriage projected for my daughter?" Thus he broke the ice. "Of course I am, Mr. Drayton! Mr. Morecoombe-Wood is a gentleman of property, of leisure, of undeniable position, of excellent birth. His family is irreproachable. He is a baron: Hanoverian, Bavarian—I am not sure which. Count Kus-

ter, his closest friend, has visited us here. He can not speak too highly of him. My daughter stays with Count Kuster's circle through the winter Berlin season. I do trust"—faltering angrily before Mr. Drayton's pitying expression, "you are not come to me with any annoying hearsay. Slander floats in Paris as well as other places. But I have no desire to hear any of Mr. Morecoombe-Wood."

"My dear madame," was the reply, "I wish fervently I had no worse than slander to report. Try your utmost not to be upset. But there is no time to lose. The truth must out come what may. I am bound to tell you this man you have received as 'Mr. Morecoombe-Wood' is just plain Francis Thompson: a fraudulent clerk in England; a thief in his employment in Brazil; a card-sharper noted in a dozen cities; an unmitigated scoundrel under all conditions. You have but one thing to be thankful for in your connection with him—that is, that you have probably seen the last of him."

"The—last—of him!" gasped Mrs. Alwyn, her cheeks shriveling with anger and fright beneath their coating of cosmetics. "Mr. Drayton, this is—not true! I—you—he shall confront you! He shall disprove this! Take me—take me to him! How can I, how can my child, know peace till we find this false!" And with frenzied weeping and fright, powder and rouge rubbed off, leaving a woman grotesquely aged and faded, Mrs. Alwyn demanded a carriage to take her and Mr. Morecoombe-Wood's calumniator to the Boulevard de Maresherbes there to win denial for these most abominable accusations!

Poor lady, the miserable drive had a yet more miserable end. The swindler, never unprepared, had got the start of them. From his elegant appartement, hired, not as he had assured them for the year, but for one month only, the concierge told them; furnished not from his purse but from his landlord's; monsieur had but a short quarter of an hour before removed many personal belongings, "summoned to Bordeaux!" And not his belongings only were missing.

"Where," cried Mrs. Alwyn, "are the cases of china sent here direct from England? They were to be ready when my daughter came. We were to have a frieze of 'Spode,' Mr. Drayton, worth a hundred guineas! There was Wedgwood too. And a piece of Falence de Henri Deux! Priceless! Where is it? Where is my daughter's trousseau? Half had been sent here. They were to have come on Saturday themselves. There was lace! There were jewels! Mr. Drayton, Mr. Drayton, I am losing my senses! What am I to do? What am I to do?"

Difficult, this, to answer. Between the wrath of the unpaid concierge, the lady's ravings, and his own imperfect command of French, Richard Drayton had a distracting night of it. Back at the Avenue Bois de Boulogne sounds reached the salon where he was left awhile, of Leonora's bewailing, upbraiding, blaming, her mother fondling, soothing, scolding, retorting; both finding their one consolation in casting the onus of this catastrophe upon each other; a deplorable duet, lasting till long after midnight.

Then, tortured and disheveled, the elder lady appeared again, revealing a yet more serious cause for her violent agitation.

"Mr. Drayton, if this horrible nightmare be true, where is the man? He must be found, detained; for he has grossly robbed me!"

"If you loss be bearable, I would almost counsel your putting up with it for the sake of your daughter. If you move the law against him you will only have to suffer painful publicity, and he owns nothing but ill-gotten gains at cards. Nothing can be recovered of him."

"But it must! It shall!" half shrieked Mrs. Alwyn, and then divulged the further fact that besides smaller sums lent him "just till his dividends came in," and for furniture which he represented himself as purchasing, the sharper had actually inveigled his dupe into taking her daughter's portion—half her entire remaining fortune—from the English funds, and placing it in a "compagnie" of which he was a managing director! This worthless scrip she now showed with trembling eager-



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ness, only to have her worst fears confirmed. In fatuous credulity she had been befooled of five thousand pounds, and Richard Drayton dared hold out no hope of recovering one farthing!

He went by daybreak to set the police astir, Mrs. Alwyn insisting on that course, the result of which was the discovery, some four-and-twenty hours later, that the swindler, in flaxen wig, and yet another alias, had got safely off from Havre and set sail for an American port. Whether he had meant to carry out the marriage on the ensuing Saturday, and so wrong his victims yet more heavily, could never now be known.

Major Villiers, stopped by telegram from coming over, so strongly urged by letter their making the best of a very bad business, that all idea of legal retribution was discarded. At the end of the week Mr. Drayton left the bitterly distressed ladies preparing to give Paris a wide berth as soon as they should be fit to travel. Then, remembering it for the first time it all this hurly-burly, he ventured the suggestion that the presence of Mrs. Alwyn's youngest daughter might be some comfort now. Might he, or might Miss Dacie, send Miss Sydney to her?

But the mother answered, with concentrated irritation, "Most certainly not. My daughter has chosen to strip herself of all that might have helped us. Now, therefore, less than ever can I condone her willfulness or suffer her return!" And seeing she was too angry and too actually ill to be reasoned with, Mr. Drayton had to take back to England this unsatisfactory reply as the corner-stone of his—in so many ways—most unsatisfactory expedition.

CHAPTER XXXII.

When Sydney woke after that strange night of overwrought emotions, the sun high in the heavens, and sounds about the house, told her usual rising hour long past. As she fully roused to realization of what crimsoned her cheeks and smote her with a pain she could not have parted from for worlds, a light tap sounded at the door, and Miss Jean's head was cautiously intruded. "Oh, awake this time!" she exclaimed, advancing cheerfully. "I looked in twice before, but I wouldn't allow Fanny to disturb you. No, Fanny, I said; 'when people sleep so heavily, it is a sign they require it; though if I reasoned like that for myself I should be rarely up before noon. I am sure the birds were twittering and it was getting quite dawn to-day before I had had a single doze!"

This was a general delusion of Miss Jean's, a harmless hallucination, never gained in her household. But this morning the martyr-like boast carried with it singular dread. Nervously determining to hear the worst at once, Sydney lifted her head to ask, "Did anything disturb you, then, so very much last night?" And the suave self-delusion of the reply—"Oh, nothing fresh! Only, as you may imagine, after such an agitating talk with my poor brother I was not able to close my eyes for hours!"—was a relief beyond expression. The new mystery of her own life, ineffable, folly, sweet, miserable as it might be, she could keep safe from outside cognizance. To have had the other phase of the late hours' brief drama suspected, known, would have been terrible. Miss Jean's shocked investigations, their inevitable sequence, Mr. Babbington's officially scandalized upbraidings, these Mr. Hurst was spared. Immeasurably grateful she felt that this was so.

While Sydney rapidly thought, Miss Jean chatted on; wondered Miss Grey could sleep with undrawn curtains; it was bad for her eyes; she always told Gilbert it was bad for his. Yes, she never neglected any trifles that might give him a chance, poor fellow, though long since she had lost all

hope for him. She quite imagined he had done as much for himself, but going off as he had this morning to Dr. Legh showed her mistaken.

"Gone!" Sydney echoed, sitting up, he fears for him all starting to the fore again. "When? Had Mr. Hurst left Wynstone that morning?"

"Good gracious!" cried Miss Hurst. "Do you sleep in a dressing-gown, Miss Grey? Haven't you sufficient blankets? Would you like Cousin Priscilla's knitted quilt? Why didn't you tell me you were cold?"

"I am not, indeed," Sydney stammered, "only—my head ached. I fell asleep with this on. And you said—Mr. Hurst—"

(To be Continued.)

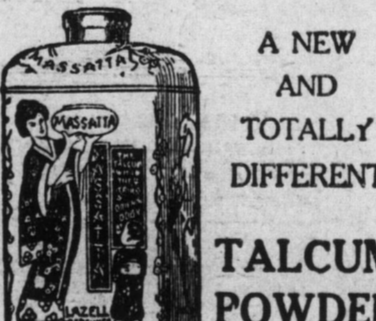
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