

"What did you want?" said he.

"A moment's conversation with you, Mr. Nagpore," I replied. First shot fired! a bull's-eye to me! I saw him wince as I uttered his name.

"You are mistaken," he said, hurriedly; "I am not the person you take me to be; perhaps it will be better if we spoke together in private?"

"It is most essential," I replied.

"My love will you retire for a few moments?" said Mr. Nagpore to the lady, pointing to the door of the little room; "this gentleman and I have business together."

Miss Bella Mortimer rose, looking very furious, and swept from the room.

I remembered the last occasion on which I had seen her; when we had a very pleasant waltz together at Weippert's, and was much amused.

No sooner had the door closed behind her than Mr. Nagpore turned fiercely upon me. "I demand, sir, to know the meaning of this espionage! You think I do not know you, but I recognize your face perfectly. You have lodgings at Tatham's, the market-gardener, immediately opposite my house, for the last few months. You are, I presume, a detective, or some one in the employ of a private inquiry office. Be frank, and tell me what is your object."

"To induce you to give your consent to my friend Piers Bulteel's marriage with your niece," I replied.

"I have no such power or position as you have ascribed to me."

"But I think I am strong enough to bring about what I want."

Mr. Nagpore looked at me keenly—"And the means which you could use for the purpose are—"

"Merely the explanation to the clients of Mr. Nagpore, of Westminster, and the friends of Mr. Nagpore, of Hampstead, of the manner in which that esteemed gentleman passes some of his leisure time."

Mr. Nagpore's cheeks grew scarlet. "Do you mean to say," he exclaimed, "that you dare to trade on such a pretence as that? Don't think that I am weak enough to be ensnared in such a pit-fall. That lady who has just left the room is my ward, the daughter of one of my oldest friends, who, dying, entrusted her to my guardianship. Do you hear, sir?"

"Perfectly, Mr. Nagpore, and I am delighted to hear what you say; there will be no difficulty to bring in a few common friends;"

"Who may they be?"

"Oh, only the rector and churchwardens of St. Asaph's Hampstead, who have come down here with the school-children, to give them a treat of fresh air on the river, for a few hours. The excursion was arranged after you started for Leeds, and I have come on in advance to prepare the feast of tea and buns for the children, in the garden of this hotel."

"The rector of St. Asaph's and the churchwardens, and the children come down here! Good heavens, I am lost!" cried Mr. Nagpore.

"Not at all," I replied; "they will only be too delighted to find you have not gone to Leeds, that you are here to help them in the harmless gaiety, and to make the acquaintance of so charming a lady as your ward, Miss—Miss, shall I say Mortimer?"

All the blood forsook Mr. Nagpore's cheeks as I said these last words, and he advanced towards me with outstretched, trembling hands. "You are the master of the position," said he, "and you know perfectly well that the *expose* with which you threaten me would be my social ruin. You still hold to the terms you originally propose?"