

'It was a near relation of your own, Mrs. Jelf.'

'Then I am more puzzled than ever,' replied my hostess. 'Pray, tell me who it was.'

'It was no less a person than your cousin, Mr. John Dwerrihouse.'

Jonathan Jelf laid down his knife and fork. Mrs. Jelf looked at me in a strange, startled way, and said never a word.

'And he desired me to tell you, my dear madam, that you need not take the trouble to burn the hall down in his honour this time; but only to have the chimney of the blue room swept before his arrival.'

Before I had reached the end of my sentence, I became aware of something ominous in the faces of the guests. I felt I had said something which I had better have left unsaid and that for some unexplained reason my words had evoked a general consternation. I sat confounded, not daring to utter another syllable, and for at least two whole minutes there was dead silence round the table. Then Captain Prendergast came to the rescue.

'You have been abroad for some months, have you not, Mr. Langford?' he said, with the desperation of one who flings himself into the breach. 'I heard you had been to Russia. Surely you have something to tell us of the state and temper of the country after the war?'

I was heartily grateful to the gallant Skirmisher for this diversion in my favour. I answered him, I fear, somewhat lamely; but he kept the conversation up, and presently one or two others joined in, and so the difficulty, what ever it might have been, was bridged over. Bridged over but not repaired. A something, an awkwardness, a visible constraint, remained. The guests hitherto had been simply dull; but now they were evidently uncomfortable and embarrassed.

The dessert had scarcely been placed upon the table when the ladies left the room. I seized the opportunity to select a vacant chair next Captain Prendergast.

'In Heaven's name,' I whispered, 'what was the matter just now? What had I said?'

'You mentioned the name of John Dwerrihouse.'

'What of that? I had seen him not two hours before.'

'It is a most astounding circumstance that you should have seen him,' said Captain Prendergast. 'Are you sure it was he?'

'As sure as of my own identity. We were talking all the way between London

and Blackwater. But why does that surprise you?'

'Because,' replied Captain Prendergast, dropping his voice to the lowest whisper, 'because John Dwerrihouse absconded three months ago, with seventy-five thousand pounds of the company's money, and has never been heard of since.'

II.

John Dwerrihouse had absconded three months ago, and I had seen him only a few hours back. John Dwerrihouse had embezzled seventy-five thousand pounds of the company's money, yet told me that he carried that sum upon his person. Were ever facts so strangely incongruous, so difficult to reconcile? How should he have ventured again into the light of day? How dared he show himself along the line? Above all, what had he been doing throughout those mysterious three months of disappearance?

Perplexing questions these. Questions which at once suggested themselves to the minds of all concerned, but which admitted of no easy solution. I could find no reply to them. Captain Prendergast had not even a suggestion to offer. Jonathan Jelf, who seized the first opportunity of drawing me aside and learning all that I had to tell, and was more amazed and bewildered than either of us. He came to my room that night, when all the guests were gone, and we talked the thing over from every point of view without, it must be confessed, arriving at any kind of conclusion.

'I do not ask you,' he said, 'whether you can have mistaken your man. That if impossible.'

'As impossible as that I should mistake some stranger for yourself.'

'It is not a question of looks of voice, but of facts. That he should have alluded to the fire in the blue-room is proof enough of John Dwerrihouse's identity. How did he look?'

'Older, I thought. Considerably older, paler, and more anxious.'

'He has had enough to make him look anxious, anyhow,' said my friend gloomily; 'be he innocent or guilty?'

'I am inclined to believe that he is innocent,' I replied. 'He showed no embarrassment when I addressed him, and no uneasiness when the guard came round. His conversation was open to a fault. I might almost say that he talked too freely of the business he had on hand.'

'That again is strange: for I know no one more reticent on such subject. He actually