

"Mrs. Jaxon, I fully agree with you in thinking him innocent of all complicity with the Clives," returned the solicitor in his measured tones. "On the other hand, it never did good to any cause to ignore the truth. And the truth upon this occasion certainly does not all tell in Mr. Ryder's favour."

Mary sighed, and flung off the hat which she was still wearing. She and Walter had only arrived in the house a quarter of an hour ago. But it was impossible even to ask the solicitor, who had waited so long for their coming, to exercise his patience, or delay the private interview any further. Upon its absolute privacy, by-the-bye, Mr. Keen had insisted, for reasons perhaps best known to his prudent soul.

"I'm afraid I'm stupid," said Mary, feeling rather snubbed, and taking refuge in humility. "I daresay Walter has grasped all the points, but I am quite sure that I haven't. Would you please just go through them again?"

"Willingly. The first circumstance, then, that seems to involve Mr. Ryder in the business, is that some weeks ago he presented a cheque at the Bank. In payment he received twelve notes, each for a thousand pounds, two of which he immediately had placed to his own credit. Of course upon this there arises the question why and by whose authority? Number two in order of time, though scarcely second in importance, is the consideration that that cheque was undoubtedly forged by some one or another, yet endorsed by Mr. Ryder, who admits the signature. Last of all comes the fact that the cheque which Mrs. Brookes did assuredly sign, and herself give to Mr. Ryder—she happened to mention to Stella that she had done so, and this again Mr. Ryder corroborates—was changed by Mr. Clive. The endorsement upon this document Mr. Ryder declares to be a forgery, in support of which, however, there is, you see, only his word. In any case, it is certainly a much more cleverly executed imitation than that of Mrs. Brookes' name, which I wonder the Bank folk ever accepted. At any rate, that the cheque, at some time or another, passed from him to Mr. Clive can be definitely proved. This has a very ugly look."

"Of course the idea is that he gave it up and presented the forged cheque for the bribe of two thousand pounds?" said Mr. Jaxon as the solicitor paused. "Making him do so was an undeniably

clever dodge, as no one would have suspected him of evil. Quite possibly that was how the signature escaped scrutiny."

"Quite possibly, as you say. Yes; that is, I believe, the theory of the police, so far, at least, as I can make it out. Naturally they are not very open with me, but by putting two and two together that is what I gather. And it may so easily entangle him in a charge of conspiracy; which would be a sad thing for a young fellow just at the opening of his career."

"Especially for a clergyman, who, above all men, must guard his reputation," said Walter. Whilst Mary asked, "How does he account for the two thousand?"

"That's the worst of it. Such an unlikely tale! He says that it was a sudden whim of Mrs. Brookes' to give it to him as a sort of trust for her late husband's children,—for you, and Stella, and Jack, in fact. But the drawback is that the sum seems quite too much to be flung away in a freak, and far too little to be applied to the purpose he names. Altogether it looks improbable."

Mary nodded thoughtfully, evidently turning over the information in her brain.

"Exactly what any one would say who didn't know much of Mrs. Brookes," she observed at last. "But for all that, precisely the idiotic sort of thing she might do at any moment. But didn't he give her a receipt? Isn't that forthcoming?"

They were standing in a group round the fire which Stella had ordered for Mary's comfort, and she was kneeling upon the hearthrug, warming her hands as she talked and listened. All three had been too intent upon the conversation to notice the door open, and hence no one had perceived that for some seconds the company had been increased by two. Stella and Guy had indeed entered in time to catch Mr. Keen's last remark and Mary's reply, and Guy it was who now announced their arrival by speaking. Though his face was grave—and no wonder after that which he had just heard—he had the air not only of an innocent but of a confident man.

"Look here!" he exclaimed, "we refuse to be shut out of your councils any longer. Yes, Mr. Keen," with a half smile, "I quite understand and appreciate your delicacy and thoughtfulness; but you can't really suppose that I have