



BY HAWLEY SMART.

Author of "Breezie Langton," "At Fault," "Tie and Trick," "Long Odds," "Without Love or Licence," &c., &c.

(Exclusive rights for Canada purchased by the DOMINION ILLUSTRATED)

CHAPTER XXI.—POLLY'S MARRIAGE.

Frances Smerdon had been leading a life of great discontent of late; she was restless and discontented because she was left in complete ignorance of a good deal that she was anxious to know. Of Nellie Lynden she had heard no word since she said good-bye to her at Manchester. Where she was, or what she was doing, Frances had no idea. That Hugh Fleming was alive and well she gathered from the papers, which all contained paragraphs concerning the missing officer. In her anxiety to hear something of Nellie, she had written to Polly Phybbs, but the girl could only reply that she knew no more than Miss Smerdon; she had never seen or heard of either Dr. or Miss Lynden, since their departure, that there were letters for both of them, but she did not know where to forward them; she further informed Miss Smerdon that it was very awkward, she did not know what to do; that the landlord of the house would, she was afraid, shortly give trouble; that a half year's rent would become due ere long, and that the Doctor stated that if he could hear nothing of the Doctor or his money by that time, he should be compelled to take the house once more into his own hands; that he did not understand a gentleman in Dr. Lynden's position absenting himself in such an extraordinary fashion; that it would be called absconding as a rule, and was suggestive of Dr. Lynden having fled from his creditors, but he acquitted him of that, because to the best of his belief he owed no man money in the city, except himself. Why could the Doctor not have given up the house before leaving, if he had no further use for it? That was the usual custom with yearly tenants. He had been treated with no consideration, and should certainly not keep a house vacant for a man who had behaved as badly to him as the Doctor had done. The result of this one man's grumbling was that an idea gradually sprang up in the neighbourhood that the Doctor had fled to escape the consequences of his evil doing, though of what his evil doing consisted no one had an idea; even a name was not given to his assumed crime.

Such, narrated in wandering fashion, was the gist of Polly Phybbs' letter, and Frances was fain to admit that there was scant information to be gained from that quarter. The one thing it seemed to point to was that Dr. Lynden had no intention of returning to Manchester; that something might have occurred to necessitate his leaving it temporarily as easy to understand, but it was singular that he had not found time to make his landlord acquainted with his decision.

The weeks slip by, and the Easter of eighteen fifty-six is at hand. Peace is not proclaimed, but is known now to be an absolute certainty; and as

Frances Smerdon thinks over the great drama that is now played out, it all seems to her like a dream. A few months back, and she had felt herself intimately connected with some of those who were playing their parts in it, and now she had no idea what had become of them. The papers, it is true, still mentioned the doings of the Crimean Army, but the fighting was over, there were no deeds of arms now to chronicle, and the letters of "Our Special Correspondents" were chiefly made up of accounts of their own tours up the country. It was rarely that there was any allusion to particular regiments, and of the —th she had heard never a word for months. Now it may be remembered that there resided at Manchester a Mrs. Montague, who had constantly acted as chaperone to the two girls. She had never maintained any correspondence with Miss Smerdon, but one morning Frances received a letter from her. She was a well meaning, frivolous, gossipy woman, but news to her was as the breath of her nostrils. She was never so happy as when either receiving or retailing it, and she had just picked up the story that Hugh Fleming was engaged to be married to a Russian Countess. Like everyone else, she was in perfect ignorance of where Miss Lynden was, otherwise she was just the woman to have at once hastened to condole with her on the infidelity of her lover. Not being able to write to her, she thought the nearest approach to it would be to write to Frances Smerdon, as her most intimate friend. Frances was thunderstruck at hearing such a rumour was current, and her first feeling was one of indignant disbelief. But as she reflected on Mrs. Montague's news, came the recollection that though that lady was an inveterate gossip, she was for all that a veracious one. That such stories as she might have to tell she had at all events heard and not invented. Still, it was hard to believe, so thoroughly in love as Hugh Fleming had been, he had proved faithless in so short a time. Ah, well, she had made as terrible a mistake in her own case, and perhaps she was quite as far wrong in Nell's. Then Frances came to the conclusion that if this was true, well, her friend was well out of her engagement; that a man so fickle as Hugh Fleming was not worth wasting a thought about; but for all that she felt that Nell Lynden would not feel it quite so easy to tear this love from her breast, a love that had cost her such heartache and anxiety during the past year. She longed more than ever to be by her side and comfort her during this fresh hour of trial, and yet she knew that Nell was the last girl to bear with commiseration from anyone in such trouble as this would be to her. There was only one means to inquire into the truth of this report that Miss Smerdon could think of, and accordingly she once more wrote to Polly Phybbs

to ask if she had heard anything of her master and mistress. The reply was as before, nothing.

Miss Phybbs at present had her hands tolerably full of her own affairs. Police Constable Tarrant had been blest with another inspiration. What Sergeant Evans had gathered from their investigation of the laboratory Dick had no conception. That the Sergeant did not think much of his own astuteness, Dick had gathered from his concluding words on that occasion, but it happened to suit him to persevere in the belief that the Doctor was guilty of malpractices of some sort. And, as we know, the opinion of the neighbourhood rather favoured that supposition. Mr. Tarrant impressed upon Polly that it was more imperative than ever that strict watch should be kept on the Doctor's house. He had his own reasons for this, having been suddenly struck with a brilliant idea; it was perfectly preposterous that he should be paying for his lodgings while such an excellent billet as the Doctor's house was next door to vacant.

"You see, Polly," said Mr. Tarrant, "the way the Doctor went off is in itself suspicious, and of course he'll have to account for himself. When you want to catch a fox watch his earth. Now you see I can't depend upon you. You've let him slip through your fingers once, and you'd do it again. Of course, for keeping an eye on 'em there is nothing like living in the same house, but then, you see it ain't in you. It ain't your fault; it's not everybody's got the gift of observation."

"I don't believe Dr. Lynden will ever come back."

"Oh yes he will, they always do. Now, I tell you what, my girl. I'm just going to combine business and economy. What do people do when they go away—for nobody knows how long—like Dr. Lynden? What do they do, I say? Why, they puts a caretaker into their house, of course; and who makes the best caretaker? A policeman, a man like myself, who is both a guardian of the law and a keen observer. My wages ain't that liberal that I can afford to play ducks and drakes with my money, and it's all nonsense my paying for my lodgings while there's plenty of vacant bedrooms and the run of a tidy kitchen here for nothing."

Now all this gave rise to not only discussion, but considerable altercation between these two. Mr. Tarrant was a man not much given to see beyond his nose, and whose keenness of observation was pretty much confined to what affected his own comfort. Polly, on the other hand, demurred to his becoming an inmate of the household. She pointed out that if she allowed him to come and live there in the absence of her master, it would give rise to considerable scandal among the neighbours at her expense. This, Mr. Tarrant promptly