AS IN A LOOKING GLASS.

[illegible]

SYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS. The story is in the form of a diary kept by Mrs. Lena Despard, an adventuress with a shady record, who is endeavoring to rehabilitate herself by a brilliant marriage. She breaks off by a series of falsehoods and intrigues the engagement between Algernon Balfour, the man she wishes to marry, and Miss Vyse. She interviews Capt. Jack Fortinbras, a blackmailer and card sharper with whom she was associated, to Miss Vyse, and agrees in the event of her not marrying her to pay him five thousand pounds as hush money when she secures Balfour, as the price of his silence concerning her past. Mrs. Despard, after having made a conquest of Sir Thomas Gage, an elderly gentleman of wealth, who assists her financially, goes over to the Continent. She is followed to Paris by Sir Thomas Gage who declares himself madly in love with her. Lord Udolpho Dayary, a young Englishman, seeks interviews with her, but Mrs. Despard discreetly keeps him at a distance. She joins Algernon Balfour at Monte Carlo and on the way there makes the acquaintance of a mysterious Russian, Paul Dromiroff, who subsequently turns out to be the head of the Russian secret police. Mrs. Despard tries her luck at the gaming tables and wins a large sum. She succeeds in her designs on Balfour who proposes marriage to her. Subsequently Jack Fortinbras appears at Monte Carlo and attempts to blackmail her.

CHAPTER XXI.—(*Continued*).

"LONGER," says Mr. Legard, as if he were putting a stupid boy right in an addition sum.

How wonderfully we can sleep on these long railway journeys; I never slept so soundly before.

"He must have got the information, or the power of getting it, through his bill discounting connections," observed Mr. Salmon.

"That," says Mr. Legard, with an absolutely perceptible muscular movement in his nose, "is a matter of which, Mr. Meyer Salmon, you are perhaps better able to judge than myself."

"I beg your pardon, sir," says the solicitor.

Rattle! rattle! shake! rattle! shake! shake! rattle! whistle! rattle! rattle! clatter! shake! clatter! On goes the train.

"He must have been a bad egg throughout," continues Mr. Salmon, apologetically.

"Of course," says Legard, "as long as he sold them news they paid him. When he sold them lies they put you on his track."

"Anyhow," says the solicitor, in the most deferential manner, "I think we know all the parties implicated."

"That is your business," again retorts Mr. Legard. "From what Dromiroff says, Fortinbras will do best to make tracks for Ecuador, or some such place. As for the poor wretches whom he has got into trouble, they must take the consequences. And let me tell you, Mr. Salmon, that I am very tired."

Rattle! click! [illegible] bang! click! rattle! On goes the train. [illegible]

Now here is a very curious link in my life. Although I am a woman I can understand things. Jack is hopelessly ruined. He has been doing something or other—Heaven knows what—which has brought him in the black books of the Russian police. And the Russian police have sold him to the English police. And the English police have made inquiries. I remember now how poor Jack shied when he saw my dear Dromiroff. And Mr. Legard has been sent out from Parliament Street with a private mission. And Mr. Meyer Salmon is one of the many solicitors who do odd jobs for Government.

Just imagine! So Jack has been in the service of the Russian secret police, has he? And has been clumsy and stupid. Poor Jack! And this is the way they treat their servants, is it? So much for your long story about Miss Brown, my dear Dromiroff. I wonder where she is? I shall be better as simple Mrs. Balfour than as any Comtesse de Corallis smothered in diamonds. You are a bad old man, Dromiroff,—a very bad old man. The *bouillabaisse* was very, very nice—very nice indeed; but you are a wicked old thief.

As for you, Mr. Legard, I could kiss you, if you were not young and so aggravatingly self sufficient. You are a clever man, Mr. Legard, but there are weak points in your face. Who was she? Take care, or people will one day be asking that question about you. Anyhow, it is a blessing to know that Jack is thoroughly cleared out of the path. And what a dreadful noise Algy dear makes when he sleeps! He will be my third. It is almost sinful to play the martingale on Providence in such a reckless manner. How will it all end?

Rattle! click! click! click! rattle! rattle! click! says the train.

CHAPTER XXII.

I MUST have fallen asleep soon after I had heard more than I expected about Mr. Jack, and quite as much as I wanted. The attendant wakes me with the announcement that we are close to Paris. I am dreadfully tired and not at all myself. I wonder if I am losing my nerve. If so, I am losing it at the very moment when I ought to keep it. I have heard men talk of losing their nerves suddenly—in the hunting field, in a steeple-chase, in the midst of sudden difficulties. I feel cold and chilly; I feel as if I should like to go to bed for a month, and not be troubled with anything. I feel certain that something dreadful is going to happen to me. I should like to leave Algy altogether, and go away all by myself to some quiet little place where nobody who had known me could ever possibly come. I am thoroughly tired of life. It is horrible. Why was I ever born?

People say that the suburbs of Paris are pretty. They are hateful. There is a dull, grey fog hanging about them. It looks like tobacco smoke, and it smells of mud. We roll past mile upon mile of empty trucks, past gas works, and factories, and squalid houses, and other such abominations. Only one thing is clear to me. Under no circumstances must Algy see Raymond Guise.

As I am thus meditating, Algy comes up to me. He takes each of my hands in each of his.

"You look tired, dearest," he says. Then he puts each of his great strong hands on my little cheeks, and bends my head back as if I were a child, and kisses me between the eyes. I shall go mad.

"We must have breakfast first," he says, in his most cheerful of English voices, "and then we will go round to the Embassy, see Guise, and then we'll have as pleasant a day as we can. There will be some beastly formalities, of course—declarations of identity, of our age and nationality, of our parents being dead or alive—and of our having been vaccinated—and all the rest of it. But Guise is a capital fellow. He will rattle the things through in no time. What is the matter with you, Lena? You look ill."

How strangely Providence sends chances to us unlucky, helpless women!

I begin to cry. On my word it is no pretence—I can't help crying.

"I feel very ill, Algy," I say. And I take hold of his hand as if I wanted to feel that I had somebody by me to help me. "I don't think it's anything, dear. I am tired and overwrought. Don't be afraid. I'm not going to faint. I never did in my life. But, please don't leave me—not for a minute. Don't go out of my sight."

As I remember this, I see that, for once, I must have been more than other women than I have sometimes been. I am certain that I touched Algy to the very heart. He made no fuss. Strong men never make a fuss when they are in earnest. He closed his hand in mine, and said:

"All right, Lena. Don't worry yourself." And by this time we are rolling into the station, and our two travelling companions are back getting their luggage together, and all is confusion. Algy is careful with me as if I were a small child. As soon as the train has stopped he almost carries me into a carriage. With incredible rapidity he puts Félicie under the charge of a railway employee that she may see to the details of luggage. And in less than half an hour I am resting on a comfortable sofa at the Hotel Continental, and Algy is sitting by me, and the room is full of eau-de-cologne, and flowers, and smelling salts, and grapes, and champagne, and all kinds of things which he has ordered in the reckless kind of way men do, on the off chance that some one or the other of them will please me or do me good.

Now, the flowers do really please me, and the champagne really does me good. And Algy forces on me a small sandwich of partridge, and I begin to feel better, and Félicie arrives with the luggage. And now I have my day's work to face.

"Will you go to bed and rest a bit," says Algy, "or will you breakfast? If you think you could rest a few hours, I could go round to the Embassy and bring back Guise with me. Of course you need not see him if you don't feel strong enough?"

"No," I reply. "I will change my things and have some breakfast, if you will promise not to leave the house. Don't go out, dear, I am not quite right yet, and I want to feel that you are within call of me. Don't be angry with me for being so stupid. Things have tired me."

"Angry," he laughs; "the journey was enough to tire any one. I know it has tired me. Go away, my sweet. I won't leave this room until you come back. If you want anything let me know."

I think Félicie had a very adequate notion of the situation. She has never been more quick or more attentive. My toilet is made with a skill that really refreshes me. The cognac, which I have not ordered, makes its appearance without a remark, and, in less than half an hour, I look ten years younger, but certainly very tired, or, to be more exact, my appearance has in it that indescribable something which is known as interesting.

Breakfast does me no harm. I delay it as long as I can. When it is over, Algy, of course, asks what I am going to do. I purposely leave it to him to ask.

"Do you know, dear," I say, with a suspicion of tremor in my voice, "I still feel a little silly. Let us do nothing today. A day is not long, is it? Take me for a drive."

He assents, of course, and we go for the drive. It is about three o'clock, and the sun has at last actually begun to shine. We tell the coachman to go to the Bois. When we get to the Cascade, I propose that we should take a stroll, which Algy, after some show of resistance, on the ground of my health, finally assents to. It is clear that the only way of preventing the meeting between Algy and Guise is to get the former out of Paris and back to England. Algy is in a most pliable frame of mind. He is disposed to humor my slightest caprice, because he believes me ill. Besides, I really am ill. I am not acting this time. I feel very wretched and miserably anxious as to the result of all this, and I am sure I show it.

"Algy," I say, "I have one thing to ask you. Just let me have my own way for once. Before long, you know"—and here I give a little feeble laugh—"I shall have to do as you tell me, I suppose. Give me my way now, dear."

Algy has got about him all that bluff, cheery, hearty kind of manner which young Englishmen in good health always have when they are pleased and when things have been going well with them. He has nothing in the world to make him unhappy—at least, nothing that he knows of. So he answers cheerily enough:

"Why, of course, Lena. What is it?"

"Algy, dear," I say very timidly and, to do myself justice, prettily, "I don't want to be married in Paris. I am English, and I should like to be married in an English church. It was dreadful weather when we got here this morning, and I have odd little fancies of my own about luck. And I don't like Paris, at least, not for anything of this serious kind." And here I lodge my hand on his great big arm, as if I saw some one coming of whom I am afraid. "Let us be married in dear old England, Algy."

"It will take a fortnight," he objects. "There is always such a bother about the license."

"Never mind, darling. Be kind to me for once, and I will be very good. I will start with you for England to-night."

"You are not well enough," he says.

"Women have fancies, Algy. I shall be really ill if I stop in Paris. I shall feel better the moment I am in England. I am sure that there will be bad luck if we are not married in an English church."

Now I see that he doesn't like it. He doesn't exactly know what it means. There are some matters in which a man likes to have his own way, especially if he sees no reason why he should not. But I am evidently ill, and presumably fanciful, and Algy is very kind. These great big men always treat women like Newfoundland dogs treat children.

"We must see a doctor first," he says. "You are not strong enough to leave to-night."

"Let me judge of that, dear. Only let us start at once. I have Félicie, you know, and she knows my ways. I am not really so very ill. It is only a little nervousness, and ——" here I slip my hand into his, as if I were a little child who wanted him to take me for a walk—"*I am very happy.*"

"All right, my girl," he says. "Have your own way. We start at once if you feel well enough when you get back."

And we very soon have got back. And Félicie is doing what little packing has to be done while Algie and I are dining. There is just time to catch the train, and I do not think I need really fear another encounter. It is impossible that the chances should always go against me. I won't believe it. I have played too often.

Algy is, of course, very kind and attentive to me the whole of the journey, and I am glad of it, as the sea is abominably rough. He is not a fussy man, but yet looks after everything most carefully. I begin to like him better and better every hour, and am almost afraid I shall end by becoming sentimental. We land at Dover, when I am installed at the "Lord Warden," Algy taking up his quarters elsewhere in the town.

Tired, however, as I ought to be, I am so worried and overwrought that I cannot sleep without even more than my usual dose of chloral. But when I do go to sleep, I do not wake for ten or twelve hours, and the day is well over before I have roused myself.

Algy makes his appearance at dinner, and over the coffee we discuss our plans. We agree that he shall go up to town, and that I shall go to Farningham and stay at the "Red Lion," so, that during the fortnight that must necessarily elapse before our marriage he can run down and see me every day, if he feels so disposed.

I like Farningham very much. It is a pretty, quiet little place, and I shall not be likely to meet any one whom I know. Besides, the church is very nice. I have often driven past it. It is a small, old-fashioned village church, and I should somehow like to be married there.

Suddenly, however, an idea occurs to me. It will not do to let Algy be too much in town. I must plant him for the fortnight somewhere near me. So I suggest that he should stay at a little village on the outskirts of Farningham, where I know he can lodge at a comfortable farm-house. I shall thus be able to get him over every morning early, and to lessen the chance of his coming across any one—Jack, for instance,—who might possibly want to make mischief.

Algy not only consents, but is delighted with the suggestion. And so now at last things are settled, and we are both very happy for the rest of the evening. It is late when he leaves—late, that is to say, for Dover. But again I find I want my chloral.

The cross-country journey next morning to Farningham is pleasant in many ways. In the first place, I avoid the risk of the mail train, in which there would almost certainly have been some one who would know one or the other of us. Then, too, Kent is really very pretty even in mid winter. It is like Normandy, only, as the Americans say, rather more so.

I wish it were summer. It is so much more pleasant to be married in summer but, after all, the thing has to be done, and the sooner it is over the better. I know that the worst minute or two you can have with a big salmon, are those spent in the supreme achievement of getting him into the boat, and I have been told that there are, as a rule, no few moments in a voyage more dangerous than those when you are actually entering harbor in bad weather. I am sure it is so in my case. I shall need all my powers of pilotage for the next fortnight.

Farningham looks cheering even in winter. The "Red Lion," is cheerful and cosy, and the lawn in front of it bright and green. The little stream is rippling down merrily, like the brook in that stupid song of Tennyson's. The big chestnut by the bridge is bare of its leaves, of course; but its great limbs show out all the better against the wintry sky.

The landlord makes us wonderfully comfortable. We have a brisk fire with plenty of logs. The cookery may be in the stereotyped style of the English country inn, but it is not at all bad. There is fairly good clear soup, an excellent fowl, a neatly prepared omelette, some pears and some really good champagne. And, after dinner, I ensconce myself cosily in a large easy-chair, and Algy occupies another and lights a cigar. I shall encourage him in smoking, in spite of all that Charles Reade says about it in one of his novels, the name of which I have forgotten. Men are always gracious and at their best when we allow them to smoke, and, indeed, generally to do as they please. When the cigar is about half over I boldly venture upon a question.

"Algy," I ask, "have you written to your mother yet?"

"Why no," he answers nervously. "I hate writing letters. But I will write to-morrow, if you like."

"If you don't mind, Algy dear," I say, "I would rather you did not write at all. Of course, it is for you to decide."

"I am glad of it," he replies. "That's a weight off my mind. You don't know what my mother is. She will be asking a hundred questions, and giving no end of worry and trouble. I do hate that kind of inquisitiveness, don't you?"

Of course, I reply that, except in the case of his mother, I detest it cordially. He laughs merrily.

"You will have to see her soon, you know, and you will judge for yourself. I think I can trust you to hold your own. But you will find her a very tough customer."

"It is a most disrespectful way, sir," I reply, "in which to speak of your own mother," and with that the conversation drops.

"There is another thing, Algy," I say presently. "You see, I know more about it than you do, for I have been married before. We must run up to town, and go to Doctors' Commons and get the license. I know you will have to make some dreadful sort of declaration that you have lived in the same place for a fortnight, or that I have, or that both of us have, and that we are both of full age, and all that kind of thing. And then, you know, we can get married here as soon as we please. However, there is a fortnight yet, so it does not matter at present, and we can be very comfortable down here."

"Of course we can," he replies, and he throws away his cigar, draws up a footstool, places himself at my feet, and begins to talk in a desultory way about all kinds of things. I like this, because it shows he is happy, and getting, indeed, positively domesticated. He talks about his place in Scotland and his old mother. He tells me a lot of tiresome stories about his life at Eton, and some, which are rather more interesting, of the good time he had of it in the Queen's Bays. And at last he comes to a topic about which I had been curious, but had never liked to show myself so.

He tells me about the Balfour jewels, which have been heirlooms in the family for four or five generations. One of his ancestors, it seems, had been embassador at the Court of Louis XIV., and had married a French girl who was extremely beautiful. He had been very extravagant, and had never cared for money. So, as he dearly loved his wife, his marriage present in the way of diamonds was something wonderful. The Grand Monarch was more than usually liberal in the way of pearls, and the grandees of his Court all followed suit.

Now, Sir Percy Balfour—that was his name—knew a thing or two, although he had so deeply dipped his estates, and he took particularly good care that all these jewels, which were, even at this time, worth nearly a hundred thousand pounds, should be strictly settled upon his wife, to be handed down as heirlooms in the family, together with the entailed estates. This wise example has since been followed by each successive head of the family. So that the Balfour jewels are now of immense value, and would, in their cases, Algy tells me, fill a couple of good-sized sacks. A queen might envy them, as he says.

This is pleasant hearing; but I expect there will be a bit of a row when the old lady is politely requested to hand them over. They have always remained in her keeping, but since her husband's death she has steadily refused to wear any of them. The old Puritan considers it sinful in a widow to wear jewellery.

Altogether it is a most enjoyable evening. A dreamy lotus eating. I had almost said, a picturesque evening. The crackling logs throw a flickering light on the panels and pictures and the brightly polished furniture. Algy has been at his very best; I hope to Heaven he will always remain so. I declare I am quite sorry when the time comes for him to go. And I take the very greatest care, as he leaves, to make him promise faithfully to be early in the morning.

To turn again to the prosaic facts of life. Hot port wine and water, taken after you have got into bed, is almost as good a narcotic as my dear chloral. Félicie has had long practice in its concoction. I am soon fast asleep, and for once in a way I have a good night.

CHAPTER XXIII.

Red Lion Hotel, Farningham.

THE days passed quickly enough at Farningham, and the fortnight is nearly over. Algy, I need not say, has spent most of his time with me. The weather has been delightfully fine, and we have walked and driven all day, and spent the cosy evenings together. I am not ashamed to confess it, I am getting really attached to Algy. He is perfectly devoted to me. He seems to improve daily. He exhibits so much tact, even in the smallest matters of daily life. He is everything that I conceive a man should be. I love him! There it is in black and white.

Last evening I felt almost inclined to throw myself at his feet and tell him all. But my love was not quite strong enough to risk that. I knew, of course, what the result would be. And I could not lose him now. Self interest has at last lost its place in my heart. All I think of, all that absorbs my soul, is the great love that has sprung up in my heart for this man. I worship him, and my affection for him only falls short at one point, and that is, telling him the truth, and, consequently, losing him.

He was compelled to go up to town three days ago. I cannot find words to express my agony of mind until he returned. Great Heavens! I thought, if he should only find out something about me and throw me over! The anxiety was maddening. I feared his being away, and I feared his return. But, when I met him at the station, and saw the look of pleasure on his dear face at the sight of her he loved, I knew that all was right. I cannot, and will not trust him out of my sight again, except at his farm-house quarters, where there is not a cat he knows, and where no danger can possibly exist.

And after we are married I must trust to my wit to prevent his hearing the truth about me, and to my influence over him to prevent his believing it if he does hear it. That I must chance. But marry him I will. And, bad as I may have been—and I have never endeavored in your pages, my dear diary, to gloss over my shortcomings—I will make him a good wife, and I will make him happy, as only a woman of the world can make her husband.

What a strange alteration has taken place in me! Here is a man that I used to ridicule, that I did not care a snap of the finger for, that I robbed of his bride, that I plotted to get money from, that, for the sake of whose position and the wealth and power it would give me, I have schemed to marry, and oh! how successfully. Here is a man, I say, that I would willingly take without a farthing, and live with him in a little house on the small income that I possess.

Women are strange creatures. At least I feel that I am. All this is not gush. It is the real, honest truth. And, if it were not for my apprehensions, I should be the happiest woman in England.

The day after to-morrow I am going up to London to get the license, and the day after that we shall be married. I had some little difficulty in arranging this plan with Algy. He thought there was no reason why I should take a tiring journey, when he could manage things equally well. But I talked him over, and gave him one or two good reasons, or, at any rate, unanswerable ones, and, as usual, I got my own way.

I wonder where Jack is. I hope and trust that I shall not come across him during the few hours I am in London. I shan't risk going to my house in Curzon street. I shall take Félicie with me, and she can go there and see the woman in charge and get my letters.

Somehow or other I still fear Jack. In spite of what Dromiroff said and did, I don't believe I am safe from him. He is desperate, I expect, and would stick at nothing. He never did stick at much. And he must hate me for having so thoroughly defeated him, and got the best of him. And he would kill me, if he could. I know Jack down to the finger nails. And I know what a demon he is. I would willingly give him a thousand, or even two, to make him safe. But he would take the money and then come for more, and I should be blackmailed to the end of the chapter. No, I must defy him, and let him do his worst. I think that I should murder him if he succeeded in separating me from Algy.

I had such a horrid dream last night. I was walking alone in a thick wood, where the undergrowth was dense and the boughs interlaced overhead and shut out the light. It was like that horrible wood in Shelley's "Sensitive Plant." One knows how things get mixed up in one's dreams—how two things are at once the same thing, and yet retain their own identity, much as Lilith, Adam's other wife, of whom Rossetti is so fond, was both snake and woman, or as that fearful individual in "Undine" is both demon and water torrent.

The trees and bushes seemed to be living creatures,—noisome venomous things with eyes and teeth, and long, shiny arms like an octopus. And they bent towards me as I passed—that is to say, the bushes did—and tried to entangle me. And the trees dipped down from above, as if to clutch me. And the ground was dank and livid, and the air thick and heavy.

And then I suddenly saw a great beast in my way, like some huge toad, hideously speckled, warty, horribly repulsive. And, in my dream, it was a toad and yet it was Jack Fortinbras, and it was Jack Fortinbras and yet it was a toad. And it stood in my path, glaring and mowing, and the slaver dripping from its diabolical mouth.

Then I had a strange kind of courage come upon me that seemed to make me as strong as a man, and I faced the brute, and I was going to attack it, literally to hurl myself at it, when there was a great flash of light, and everything seemed to clear away, and I saw nothing but the light and Algy in it, coming towards me. And then the light became more intense, and I could see nothing for it—not even Algy.

And I felt that I was falling, falling, falling, with the intense blinding light all round me. And then I seemed to experience a great shock and jerk, and woke up with my teeth set and my hands clenched, and trembling violently.

That was my dream.

Félicie hurried in from her little room, which leads out of mine, terribly alarmed. I had shrieked so loudly, it seems, that I woke her up. For the first time in my life I saw her frightened. She knocked up the landlady, and got brandy, and rubbed my hands, and sponged my forehead, and put hot water to my feet, and after awhile I got better. But she was still anxious, and refused to leave the room. And I believe she would have insisted on sending for the village doctor, only that, after awhile, I fell into that kind of stupor, something more than sleep, which always follows intense exertion.

I have heard that prisoners in the olden time used to fall into it after they had been tortured, or that else they would certainly have died.

(*To be Continued.*)

A ST. LOUIS man was recently arrested and sentenced to serve three months in jail for entering a burning building and saving a six year old child. He was charged with obstructing the firemen in the discharge of their duties.