

DIAMONDS FOR THE BRIDE

Or. a Proposal by Proxy

CHAPTER I.

One windy afternoon in spring, April with the chill of March still unforgetting, Sir Luke Morden, physician, sat at the receipt of customers. His consulting-room was rarely empty, and some half-dozen patients waited their turn and studied ephemeral literature in the gloomy salle d'attente which looked into the street. He was dismissing a young girl and her anxious mother; as the door closed behind them he made a rapid entry in his case-book, and then sounded a table-bell. The man in waiting made his appearance, suddenly and silently as the slave of the lamp.

"I will see Mr. Gower next." And then Sir Luke turned over the fat volume to a blank page, for this was a new patient.

The man noiselessly withdrew, and opened the door of the waiting-room. "Mr. Gower," he demanded from the assembly, all of whom raised expectant faces. A young fellow quitted the elbow-chair at the window, and threw down his pictured paper for the next victim of delay. Ushered into the physician's sanctum, no defect was patent to the keen eyes which met his entrance, save a certain anxious knitting of the brows.

"You do not look like an invalid," said Sir Luke, with a smile. "What can I do for you?"

Gower seated himself in the patient's chair facing the light; a man of splendid physique, long-limbed and wide-chested; but that significant, upright furrow scored its marked line more deeply as he replied:

"I am well in health; I never was better. But something has gone wrong with my memory. And I am to be married next Tuesday. I want you to tell me whether the mischief is serious—irreparable?"

"You mean you have a tendency to forget—names, is it? Or to substitute the wrong word?"

"No; I am right in that way—no worse than other people. But I have forgotten—five months of last year. I have not a shadow of recollection where I was or what I did between two fixed dates in May and October. Is the memory recoverable? I want to know what was the matter with me, and if your opinion another such blank is likely to occur?"

The doctor did not betray surprise. Those four walls had listened to many strange revelations; questions were propounded there to which only omniscience could reply. There was a small paper-cutter on the table beside him, which he was accustomed to handle in any difficulty. Most men have some such tricks of manner. He began to finger it as he answered:

"You had lived on them in the interval. Five months—"

"Doubtless I had lived on them, and it makes the discovery all the stranger. I drew no money from England. I sent no letter in those lost months to a soul who knew me here. There was a handful of loose money in my pockets, gold and the smaller currency. But in addition to this, I was carrying a sum of six thousand francs."

"Most people would welcome such a discovery," Sir Luke began. "They would hardly welcome it in circumstances such as mine. Did I earn the money or steal it, or can it have been a trust, the property of another? It does not bear thinking of. It is as if another soul had animated my body, for whose deeds I am responsible, though innocent."

"I advertised the notes as found in Paris on a certain date, the owner to give particulars. I have them separately lodged, but no one has claimed. Now, Sir Luke, tell me, what are my chances? Is there any treatment which will restore a lost memory? And am I in danger of the same blank and suspension happening to me again?"

Sir Luke picked up the paper-cutter, and he bent the flexible blade and toyed with it while he answered:

"As to whether it will recur there can be no absolute certainty, but in my judgment you need not fear return. The blow against the kerk in Paris did the mischief, limited by some association with the former accident. You are clear for all that has happened since; you have your ordinary memory of things before. That is so, is it not?"

"Yes. There is nothing abnormal about me, except that I have lost five months, dropped out of my life."

"And probably you were normal throughout. What happened to you in Paris, the jar to the brain, destroyed the memory register, or temporarily effaced it. Most likely you will come across a letter of that time, or see again a place that you visited; and in a moment, as if by magic, the lost months will be restored to you."

Gower drew a long breath, more in impatience than relief; the anxious furrow still contracted his brow.

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position. But, of course, your fiancée knows?"

"No. All that belongs to the past before we met. But I will tell her, and tell her also what you say."

Sir Luke assented, with his eyes still on the patient's face. "Certainly she should know." There was a pause, and then Gower broke out, almost with passion: "You will think I am a coward, but I am afraid of the blank behind me. A black void, and I know not what spectres may arise out of it. Is there no treatment which will restore what I have lost? Can nothing be done?"

"I do not advise treatment. Your general health is good; if it begins to suffer, come to me again. Do not dwell on what you call the blank; fill your mind with new interests, live your natural life. In all probability some chance circumstance will supply the clue, and your memory will return. Or a couple of years hence you will not care if it returns or not."

"You say you do not advise treatment. Then there is some sort of treatment. What is it?"

Sir Luke twisted the paper-cutter, and this time looked down on it with a knitted brow.

"There is a kind of treatment, but it is not generally recognized by the Faculty, nor would I suggest it for you. You have heard of hypnosis; well, it lies in that direction—the creation of artificial mental conditions, in which positive danger is incurred for a doubtful advantage. Professor Chalmers is a clever man, and my very good friend, and he claims to have effected cures. But, if you follow my advice, you will have nothing to do with him."

Gower took out note-book and pencil; he did not seem to heed the dissuasion. "I will ask you," he said, "to give me his address."

"By all means, if you wish it. Chalmers, The Hermitage, Grez. He has made his home in France now for some years, as English savants offered him the cold shoulder."

Gower was too intent to heed the slight stiffening of the doctor's manner. Sir Luke went on in his flat, even voice: "Chalmers expects his patients to submit to very stringent conditions, and he only takes cases that interest him: those that bear directly on the mental phases he is studying. So going to him may chance to be lost labor. But if I understand you rightly, Mr. Gower, this experience of yours ended six months ago. If you are only now seeking an opinion, some fresh occurrence must have stirred anxiety. You talk about a void and spectres. Has any spectre risen?"

Gower looked up from his note-book. He was ready to answer, but Sir Luke was aware that he spoke with a certain restraint, and more guardedly than before.

"You may quite possibly have gone to Lucca."

"I can be positive the man they spoke of was not I," said Gower decidedly. "But, as I say, it set my insecurity in a new light, and revived the fears I was forgetting. Well, I am obliged to you, Sir Luke, for giving me a hearing. You still advise me not to put myself under this professor?"

"I say wait and trust to time, and keep an easy mind. You are about to increase your responsibilities as a married man, and you must run no risks with Chalmers. You have my best wishes, Mr. Gower." And Sir Luke shook hands cordially in adieu.

The table bell was struck, and the servant, promptly appearing, opened to Gower the door upon the street. The chill wind was refreshing after the oppression of the airless house, though it swept up dusty swirls at the corners. But that harassed furrow remained deep-scored on the brow of the intending bridegroom as he walked away.

(To be continued.)

The Unquenchable Fire.

CHAPTER XV.—(Cont'd)

And the meaner forest-bred creatures hang back. Their outstretched tails droop, and are pressed between their legs; their backs are hunched, and they turn their long, narrow heads from the green glitter of the two pairs of terrible eyes. But the pause is brief, and the noise has died only for a second. One wolf moves a step forward, hunger overpowering his worst fears. As before, it is a signal. The whole pack leaps to the fray; struggling, howling, fighting as they come, ripping at comrade and foe alike. They care not a jot who goes down so long as they feast their starving bellies. And the battle is swift; so swift that it is almost impossible to realize that it is over. The pack, leaping and baying, pass on, following the blood trail of the man, leaving more bones upon the plateau, more blood upon the trodden snow. And the royal dwellers of that little plain have vanished as though they had never been.

The path has taken a downward slope, and the man looks ahead for the fair face, hungrily, feverishly. She has vanished, and his heart cries out bitterly, and his voice echoes through the barren hills with a dreadful despair.

And as he goes the path declines lower and lower, and up out of the shadowy depths the tree-tops rise at last. The air he breathes is denser now, and the effort of life is easier. As the path declines, the mountain-sides rise higher and higher, until the blue vault, now shadowing with the purple of evening, obstructs the way, and the confines of the heavens are reached. A narrow streak of daylight shines above like a soft-toned ribbon set in a background of some dun-colored material; ahead is a barrier of snow and ice, with its appalling suggestion of dangers beyond, while below him, down in the depths of the gorge, the earth frosts up in a gloomy contrast. And, too, even the sparse vegetation has changed its appearance. It is but so crude, so vast, such as can be seen in no other corner of the earth.

He hastes on with all the speed his weary limbs will permit, stumbling as he goes, for the frost of the high altitudes has entered his bones, and he cannot now feel the touch of the broken earth. But his yearning heart is ceaseless in its despairing cry. Nothing matters. Where—where is she? The trees come up higher and higher, and the gloom closes in upon him, and he comes to the barrier.

Now he pauses under a mighty archway. Below it is black with age and the shadow of the depths; the super-structure of the depths; the superstructure alone is hung

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"For some time I had been in a low, depressed condition. My appetite left me and I soon began to suffer from indigestion. Quite a number of small sores and blotches formed all over my skin. I tried medicine for the blood and used many kinds of ointments, but without satisfactory results. What was wanted was a thorough cleansing of the blood, and I looked about in vain for some medicine that would accomplish this.

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with snowy frost curtains, and these help to emphasize the forbidding nature of the dark, narrow under-world. Down, down he goes, as though he were journeying to the very bowels of the earth, heedless of the place, heedless of all but the shadow he seeks. And now, again, the nature of the world has changed. The barrenness is emphasized by almost skeleton trees of such size as no man has ever seen before. High up aloft there is foliage upon them, but so meagre, so torn and wasted as to suggest a wreck of magnificent life. The trunk, and they are so few in that vast rift, might dwarf the greatest elm to a sapling, and yet their wondrous size would not be properly estimated. They are the primordial pines; a relic of the original, and, perhaps, their age must be counted with the extreme age of the earth's vegetation. They shelter nothing but barrenness, and stand out alone like solemn-headed sentries, the watchmen for all time of the earth's most dim and secret recesses, where storms cannot reach, and only the forest beasts can penetrate.

Again the poor benighted brain finds relief. Down beside these monsters his eyes are gladdened once more with the fleeting vision. He sees the figure moving ahead, but slowly now; no longer is she the gay, laughing creature he has hitherto followed; she moves wearily, as though exhausted by the journey she has taken. His heart thrills with hope and joy, for now he knows that he is overtaking her. Her face is hidden from him, and even her fair form has taken on surroundings.

"Aim-sa! Aim-sa!" he cries aloud. And again, "Aim-sa!" Till the gorge rings solemnly with the hoarse echoes, and the Wild is filled with discordant sounds, which come back to his straining ears mingling with the bitter cries of the ravenous pack of wolves behind.

The figure pauses, looks round, then continues her slow-paced movement; but she does not answer. Still he sees her, she is there. And now he knows that he must come up with her. He toils on.

He talks to himself, muttering as he goes; and a train of incoherent thought passes through his brain. He tells himself that the journey is over. She has brought him to the home, which shall be theirs. The heart of the Wild, where the mountains rise sheer to the sky above; where no man comes where a dark peace reigns, has ever reigned. Where snow is not, and summer and winter are alike. It is the home for a tortured spirit, the lower depths of the

bosom of mother earth. He looks about him, and thrills with the consciousness of their solitude. She no longer moves now, but turns and faces him. The sweet familiar features are clearly outlined to him, although the shadows are deep and the grim surroundings hold nought that is fair to the eye. He shakes back his shaggy head; he thrusts out his chest as a man proud as he approaches the woman he loves. He summons all his failing strength. His knees are bent with weariness, nor do they answer to his demands, and his torn feet drag heavily over the virgin path. The haunting cry of the wolves comes down to him from behind, but he sees his goal. This woman. And every trailing stride lessens the distance between them. He sees her stoop as though to adjust her moccasins. She moves again, but she does not stand erect. A half articulate cry breaks from him. She is coming to him. Now he sees that her head is bowed as though in deep humility. His cry has left his throat; and all is silent. Suddenly she lifts her head, and her tall figure stands erect, steady eyes, eyes which seem to have caught something of the hue of that awesome gorge. Her heart leaps with joy. How tall she is; what superb form! And she moves on with her body swayed gracefully to the rhythm of her gait. Her arms are stretched out appealingly towards him. And sees that she is clad in the rich furs of the North. Clad as though for a journey. And he tells himself with a thrill of mad desire, that she is ready for their journey. Their journey of life they will travel together. Now the wolf-cries come loud and more fierce. If he is deaf them, the woman is not. Her head turns sharply, and a fierce light leaps into her eyes. The change is lost upon the man. He stretches out his arms and staggers towards her. They come together, and he feels the soft touch of her fur robes upon his face and hands. Her arms close about him, and her warm breath fans his fevered cheek. And he is drawn, willingly, closer, and closer to her bosom. But what is this? The embrace draws tighter, tighter and tighter; he becomes rigid in her arms; he cannot breathe, and life seems to be going from him. He feels his ribs cracking under the pressure; he cannot cry out; he cannot struggle. And then there comes a sound of something ripping, of flesh being torn by ruthless hands. The man is quite still; a dull, numb, nerveless; a sigh.