AS IN A LOOKING GLASS.

CHAPTER VI—(Continued)

THIS is perhaps my last chance, and I am fully determined to make a strike of some sort or other before I leave the country. My credit is half gone, and my reputation has almost entirely vanished, and if I do not make myself solid with as little delay as possible I may find that it it is too late. Lady Gage insists on taking me to my room herself and shortly afterwards I go to her boudoir where there are four or five ladies having tea. The men have not yet returned from shooting; but there is an extraordinary individual of the æsthetic type, with hair down his back and immense turndown collar. This young gentleman does not shoot or hunt, and is in every sense a carpet knight. At present this singular specimen of humanity is reciting some poetry—presumably of his own composition—to Mrs Broadways, the Bishops wife, who, with eager glances and bated breath, is drinking in every word of the effete nonsense that this idiot is uttering. If there is one class of beings that I loathe more than another, it is the æsthetes. They don't in the least amuse me, and there is nothing to be got out of them.

I don't know a soul in the room but when Lady Gage presents me, I fancy that I am somewhat coldly received. I ask after Lady Damer, and am told that she is resting after her journey. Just before dressing for dinner, I go to her room. There is a young girl kneeling by the fire. She is strikingly beautiful, with a high bred, refined, and singularly expressive face, a small, well-shaped head, dark hair, and big blue dreamy eyes. She is tall, and has a superb figure. "Beatrice," says Lady Damer, in addressing her as she rises on my entrance, "This is Mrs Despard, of whom I have so often spoken to you. Lena, you recollect Mr Balfour, whom we met at Ostend? This is the young lady who is just going to make him a happy man. Let me present you to Miss Vyse."

* * * *

On going down to the drawing-room, the first person I see is my old friend Frank Fairfield, of the Coldstreams. Frank is a good looking young man of twenty-five, with fair hair and blue eyes, blessed with an excellent constitution, a perfect temper, and twenty five thousand a year. He has, moreover, a castle and a deer forest in Scotland, an estate in Hampshire, and a house in St. James Square. We have been fast friends ever since he was a boy at Eton, and if the truth must be told, I believe I was his first love. However, all that nonsense is now over, although we are still the staunchest allies possible.

He comes up to me and shakes hands.

"My dear Frank," I say, "you are the very last person I expected to see. Whatever brought you here?"

"I hope you are not disappointed," he replies, "and I came here three or four days ago, because I was asked by my aunt, Lady Gage."

"Is Lady Gage an aunt of yours? I had no idea of it.

"Yes," he says, laughing, "I have one or two respectable relatives, although you probably wouldn't imagine it."

When dinner is announced I am, much to my delight, told off to Frank, and as my other neighbour, a bucolic individual of some seventy summers, bestows undivided attention on his dinner, and does not trouble me with any conversation whatever, I am able to make the most of the Guardsman.

He ejaculates me as to all my recent doings, and naturally I tell him just as much as I think proper.

"Lady G. was asking me the other day if I knew you," says Frank.

"Indeed?" I reply. "I hope that you did not give me a very bad character,"

"No," he says. "I am not one of those individuals who habitually speak the truth."

"You impudent boy! how dare you?"

Nothing that Frank says ever offends me

He goes on. "Have you seen Jack Fortinbras lately? Poor old Jack! I am afraid he has come rather to grief"

"Yes; I only met him the other day; and although he has not exactly come to grief, yet I fear he's in rather low water just at present."

"I don't care a straw what any one says against old Jack," he continues; "if he is a scoundrel, he's a very amusing one. He has always run perfectly straight with me, and I fully intend to stick to him"

"My dear Frank, you are one of the most generous-hearted men I know."

"Not at all," he says. "By the way, you saw him last; is there any single thing I can do for the old boy?"

"Yes," I reply. "Ask your Aunt to invite him down here."

At this moment Lady Gage gives the signal for departure, and with the rest of the ladies I troop into the drawing room. I commence talking to Lady Damer, and we are soon joined by Mrs Broadways, the Bishop's wife, a short, fat, ill dressed person of eight and forty, with the manners of a housemaid and the arrogance of a drum major. Lady Damer introduces us, and soon afterwards goes off to talk to Lady Gage

Strange as it may appear, I am always being brought in contact with religious people, or to speak more correctly, the clerical element. And whether they are High Church, Low Church, Broad Church, or No Church; whether they are Armenians, Calvinists, Baptists, or Jews. I always get on well with them, for I love an unfading recipe for me doing. It is this. When the religion topic is started I always affect to disagree with the enthusiast, and then let him or her gradually convert you to their mode of thinking. Say that the matter has never before been presented to you in so clear a way; that what was always perplexing to you is now clear as cross.

day and that the arguments adduced are unanswerable. This flatters the individual to the top of his bent, and if you are careful I flow up the favourable impression that you will have created, you have made a friend for life.

It was thus in a great measure that I succeeded in getting over Lady Gage at Ostend, it is thus that I now make a friend of the Bishop's wife. She goes over the whole ground from the time of the publication of the Essays and Reviews until the present date, and I listen as if in rapt attention. I rarely interpose, and when I do, it is merely to exclaim. "Ah now you have made the point clear to me for the first time. Thank you so much for the trouble you are taking, now I understand it.

The result of my half-hour's martyrdom—for the lecture continues until the men come in—is that I have thoroughly ingratiated myself with Mrs Broadway, and Lady Damer afterwards tells me that she hears her observe to Lady Gage. "What a very superior person Mrs Despard is—so wonderfully intelligent. It is really a pleasure to talk to her"

What a humbug I am! However, I can't help it. One must live by one's wits, or otherwise. and it is necessary that mine should be brought pretty frequently into requisition to eke out my miserable £600 a year

Directly the men return Frank comes up to me and says. "Oh! about what you were asking me—of course I will arrange it, when do you think Fortinbras could come?"

"At once, I should fancy," is my answer.

"I will speak to Lady Gage to-night," says Frank, "and will send Jack a wire in the morning

Thank Heaven, that is settled. I don't quite know what Jack wants here on his own account, but I have quite determined what I want him to do for me, and that is to make up to Miss Vyse, and, if possible, compromise her in some way, and so break off, or, at any rate, postpone her marriage with Algy Balfour

For mad as you may think me, my dear diary, I have made up my mind, by hook or crook, to secure dear Algy to myself.

From my experience of him at Ostend, I am quite confident that, Miss Vyse out of the way, it would be very plain sailing.

I must candidly confess that I feel an awful wretch to thus plot against a young girl's happiness; but, after all, every one for himself and the devil take the hindmost.

Miss Vyse is very young; I should scarcely think she is twenty, and she has all her life before her. I, on the contrary, am considerably over thirty, and the less I say about my past the better. But now I have the strongest possible yearning towards the respectable, and am determined to succeed in my object; and if a hundred young girls stood in my way I should be utterly remorseless.

I see scarcely anything of Miss Vyse this evening, as she is rather unwell and goes to bed quite early. Poor girl! if she only knew the trap that was being prepared for her! After all, if I am successful, I verily believe that it will be the best thing in the world for Algy. I am sure that I shall make him an excellent wife, a far better one than his present intended.

Young girls don't understand men, and it takes them six or eight years before they know how to make them comfortable.

Well, I have made a good beginning to-night. Jack will doubtless be here in eight and forty hours, and when once he starts a scheme that is likely to benefit him, he is what Frank Fairfield calls a "flyer"

The Bishop's wife wishes me the most cordial good-night, as also does Lady Gage, whose good opinion I have entirely regained; and with a mind thoroughly contented and a conscience that has at all events ceased to annoy me, without the aid of chloral I sink into the most delicious, dreamless sleep, and do not awake until Felicie appears with my chocolate the next morning

While I am dressing my mind reverts to the subject of Lady Damer. Do what I will I cannot divine the object of her sudden affection. If she does not soon show her cards, feminine curiosity will triumph, and I shall have to ask her point blank. However, it is a good fairy that has been at work, for anything more fortunate than the recent course of events it is impossible to conceive.

My good night's rest has considerable benefited my personal appearance, and when I am dressed, and look at myself in the cheval glass, I am so satisfied with what I see reflected that a feeling of regret comes over me that Algy Balfour is not here.

About eleven I go down to breakfast, and meet Frank Fairfield coming out of the dining room

"Good-morning, Lena. he says. "Jack is coming. I was up early this morning. and telegraphed to him, and have just got his reply. Here it is.

And there it is, sure enough.

"From CAPTAIN FORTINBRAS, Albany,
"To CAPTAIN FAIRFIELD, Denston Park, Bucks.

"Just got yours. Thanks, awfully. Shall be down to night in time for dinner.

CHAPTER VII.

Denston Park, Bucks. October.

AT breakfast none one proposes that those ladies who care about it should walk out with the shooting party.

No one appears to exhibit any alacrity in accepting the invitation, but at last Miss Vyse says, "I should like it of all things if any other lady will come too."

I am down her throat in a moment.

"I shall be delighted," I say. "Shall we go and get ready?" And so it is settled

Needless to add that I endure a perfect martyrdom tramping along wet fields with thin boots, one of which I nearly leave in a morass that we are compelled to cross.

But in spite of all the terrible discomfort of it I go through, in spite of returning I eat sore, wet to the skin shivering and ill, and with all the premonitory symptoms of a violent cold—in spite of all this, I say, I am very glad that I went, for it has enabled me to have Miss Vyse to myself for the greater part of the day, and to gain a thorough insight into her character, tastes and peculiarities. What I might have been weeks in finding out in the stray and interrupted conversations that one has in a country house, I have ascertained during our walk; and having speedily gathered that Miss Vyse is of a somewhat jealous disposition. I have played my cards accordingly. I soon drew the conversation round to the subject of her intended

"I was never so surprised in my life, my dear, as when I heard that Mr Balfour was going to be married, but all my surprise vanishes when I look at you

"Indeed" she answered "and how was that I"

"That is a little secret, my dear child, which perhaps one day I will tell you, but you must not press me now.

"Oh pray, Mrs. Despard, don't let us have any mystery about this. You have been so sympathetic and kind to me that I feel I have known you for ages instead of only a few hours. I am sure that there is something about Agy that I ought to know, and which you are keeping back from me. Do tell me everything, I implore"

"There is really very little to tell, I answer, "but you must excuse my saying anything more on the subject at the present moment. Later on, if I think it absolutely necessary for your happiness, I will tell you"

This little conversation had precisely the effect that I had intended. It left Miss Vyse full of all sorts of jealous doubts with regard to the future, and has prepared the ground for the seed that I intend to sow at no very distant date—in fact, upon the first favorable opportunity. I have by this time thoroughly established myself in Miss Vyse's confidence, and I feel certain that my task will be much easier than even I at first anticipated. The only circumstance that could possibly mar the success of my scheme would be the advent of Algy himself.

But my mind is speedily set at rest on this subject.

"Is Mr. Balfour likely to come and stay here during your visit?" I ask.

"No," she replies. "He does not know the Gages, but Lady Gage has made me promise to bring him after we are married. I dare say that will be almost immediately after the honeymoon."

Miss Vyse is, therefore, entirely at my mercy, and I shall not long delay in striking the necessary blow.

On going down to the drawing-room in the evening, I am glad to see that Jack has arrived. He is talking to Lady Gage, and as far as any one can gather anything from her utterly expressionless countenance, Master Jack has succeeded in re-establishing himself in her good graces.

To-night I am taken down to dinner by the Dean of the diocese, a High Churchman with a strong bias against the Bishop. I need scarcely say I play up to his weaknesses, and before dinner is over I believe that he is almost prepared to throw to the winds of heaven his pet theory with regard to the celibacy of the clergy, and contemplates making me a proposal.

The idea of my becoming a clergyman's wife is too ludicrous for serious consideration, still if everything else failed, I might certainly do worse. I shall most assuredly keep the Dean on the hooks. He is a remarkably handsome man, about fifty years of age, with clear cut features, very tall, and a perfect figure. He has got plenty of brains, and, judging from his conversation, I should think that he might become a Prime Minister, if he did not wear a black coat. But he is evidently as weak as water in the hands of a woman who knows what she is about, and, as I said before, I have no intention of losing sight of him.

It is some time before I get an opportunity to speak to Jack, but when it arrives I say, "Get up early to-morrow morning, and meet me at half-past eight at the end of the avenue. I have got a grand scheme afoot, but you and I had better not be too confidential in public."

"Great heavens" says Jack. "Why drag me out of bed in-the middle of the night? Surely there is no occasion to fix such an ungodly hour as half-past eight?"

"Don't be a fool Jack," is my answer. "Do I ever do anything without a motive? My present game is a big one, and I do not intend to throw any chance away. It is absolutely necessary that I should have a half-an hour's uninterrupted conversation with you, and the less we are seen together the better."

"All right," he says. "I dare say you know best. Thanks, awfully, for getting me asked down here, for of course it was you who managed it. Old Frank is a capital fellow, but I am sure he would never have thought of it if you had not put it into his head "

"Of course I managed it," I say; "it was for both our advantages. I will make your fortune this time, if you will only be guided by me. But now go away, I don't want to be seen talking to you."

Then he goes, and the Dean comes up to me and never leaves me until the ladies go to bed. As we are retiring Miss Vyse whispers to me, "Come to my room, Mrs. Despard; I so much want to talk to you."

"Very well, dear," I say, "I will be with you in a few minutes."

"Don't be long," she replies, "I am dying to speak to you."

Directly I come in she returns to the attack on the subject of Algy—she is sure that there is some mystery about him, something that she ought to know, and that I am keeping from her.

Her manner is so excited, and she appears so thoroughly determined to sift to the bottom my vague innuendoes on the subject of her lover, that I feel my hand being rapidly forced.

"Dearest Mrs Despard I will not let go until you tell me what it all means. From a motive of mistaken kindness you are keeping something back fr m me.

It can worry that by an unguarded slip of the tongue I have been so unfortunate as to raise your suspicions, my dear

What has Algy done Mrs Despard? If it is anything disgraceful or dishonorable although it were to kill me, I will never speak to him again

My sweet child if these are really your views, I think it is my duty to let you know that Mr Balfour was engaged to me at the time he proposed to you

My heart sinks me as I look at the young girl. She turns ashy pale, and murmuring in choking accents. "Oh, Algy, Algy sinks almost senseless on the floor.

After considerable difficulty I succeeded, in some measure, in pacifying the unfortunate girl; and I finally left her, having comforted her as best I could.

"I will never speak to him again," she said. "I will return all his letters. And, dearest Mrs Despard, how much I grieve for you! What you must have suffered! How ignoble has been his conduct" she ejaculated. "Just imagine his daring to propose to me when you were his promised wife! How truly noble of you to keep all this back from me until your sense of duty compelled you to reveal it! I can never be sufficiently grateful to you"

"Good night, darling. God bless you," was my reply, as I left her to go to my own room.

My conduct has certainly been most Judas-like. But what I have done was absolutely necessary to carry my point, and to effect a rupture between Algy and Miss Vyse. The match will now, of course, be broken off, and I must see if I cannot find another husband for this charming young girl.

"Felicie, you are to call me at seven o'clock to-morrow morning," I say, on dismissing my maid for the night, and recollecting my early rendezvous with Jack.

"Yes, madame," Felicie replies; and, to do her justice, I am convinced she would make the same answer if I told her to cut my throat, or to get ready to start for China at an hour's notice.

Felicie has one good point, and that is that nobody shocks, nothing astonishes her. And although I occasionally give her notice, I have not the slightest intention of parting with her, for she thoroughly understands me and acts accordingly.

When I am awakened at that fiendish hour in the morning, I wish that the whole affair was buried in the bottomless pit. I have had a somewhat uneasy night, and have only got into a really comfortable sleep about an hour before I am called. However, in these matters it is useless to prolong the agony, so I make a dash for it, and jump out of bed.

By half-past eight I am at the end of the avenue, and find that Jack has already arrived at our place of meeting.

"And now Lena, what's all this about?" he says.

Then I tell him, dear diary, just what I have told you, and the state of the game up to the present point.

He listens attentively and does not once interrupt me. When I have finished, he says, "I don't much like all this. Of course I don't care a rap about that brute Balfour; and, in fact, anything that I could do to upset him I would do. But I'm very sorry for that poor girl. I took her in to dinner last night, and she is a little ripper"

"Since when, may dear Jack, have you begun to be so squeamish," I answer, "If report does not belie, you have not always posed as a champion of our sex. But I am so delighted to hear that you have taken such a fancy to Miss Vyse, for, my dear boy, I intend you to marry her. That is part of my plan."

"By Jove, Lena! that alters everything," blurts out Jack, fairly thunderstruck at the magnificent future I have mapped out for him.

"She has lots of money," I continue, "and like me, you will be able to settle down into quiet respectability."

"What a splendid idea," he says. "How admirably you have planned everything! You are a marvel!"

"Don't waste your time in paying me compliments, my dear Jack. This is probably your last chance. No one knows better than you do how to make love to a young girl Now, I noticed that you were getting on well with her last night. Keep the ground up, and never leave her when you can prudently be with her. She will probably announce to Lady Gage to day or to-morrow that her marriage is broken off After that is done the more you show yourself with her the better. Miss Vyse may possibly consult me with regard to you, and this time I won't give you a very bad character."

"I know what to do," says Jack. "There is no one here except Frank Fairfield and Lady Gage who knows anything against me, and neither of them is likely to say anything Frank is the least mischief-making person in the world, and I have persuaded Lady G. that I have become a very white sheep."

"So much the better. Now, my dear Jack, be off at once There is nothing more we need say at present; and when it becomes necessary, I can easily find another opportunity of having another conference with you."

"Stop one moment," says Jack. "Suppose Miss Vyso will have nothing to say to me, which is highly probable after the facer she has just had. Suppose, for some reason or the other, I cannot work this game, what am I to get for assisting you?"

"How like that is of you, Jack! You were always so unselfish."

"I think that we'repretty well matched," he answers.

"Well, Jack, if you fail (which, by the way, you can only do by crass idiotcy), I will get three thousand pounds out of Algy Balfour after I have married him, and you

shall have it from time to time as I manage it."

"Make it five thou says Jack I will go in hard and deal

"I might not to require much in two with the prospect of marry a heiress like Miss Vyse However I do as you say, and make it five thou

"How shall I be sure that you will it to me" says practical Jack

"You would make it pretty warm if I did not, is my answer

Jack, apparently well satisfied slew returns to the house, followed at a d distance by his fellow plotter.

I manage to get back entirely un served, and go in to breakfast All the men are extremely civil to me, and at least three of them in love with me so if I had not a better game on, I might have a very good time of it As it is, I don't intend to let my visit here be entirely fruitless. Whenever he has an opportunity, poor Sir Thomas throws affectionate glances in my direction, but hitherto I have not thought it wise to give him any encouragement This afternoon, however, I happen to be in the conservatory when Sir Thomas comes in and sits down new to me

I have noticed you a good deal to day, Mrs. Despard," he says. "and you seemed to have something on your mind You are not looking so well as you did at Ostend Pray regard me as an old friend, and if I can possibly do anything in there any anxiety that you may be suffering, tell me, I beg "

"I am a little worried, dear Sir Thomas, but I could not possibly ask you to help me

"Oh, if only you would!" says Sir Thomas, giving me an unutterable glance It is now or never and I risk it.

"Well, Sir Thomas, since you must know, I am foolish enough to be persuaded to embark two thousand in a speculation that has turned out badly, and I fear that I have lost my money. I am much pressed for the moment for five hundred pounds, and as my man of business is abroad, and my bankers must unaccommodating, I don't know which way to turn

"How glad I am that you have confided in me, dearest Mrs. Despard, replies Sir Thomas, squeezing my hand. I will go and write you a check at once. You can pay me when you like or not at all." (This latter is most likely.)

Sir Thomas goes away, and returns in a few moments with a check made payable to bearer. I at first refuse to take it, but Sir Thomas crams it into my left hand and seizing my right hand kisses it passionately.

"Good Heaven! Sir Thomas," I say, suppose Lady Gage was to come in"

"There is no fear of that, he says, she has gone out driving, and won't return for two or three hours."

Sir Thomas remains in the conservatory for half an hour, and I am now convinced that, come what may, I shall always have a true friend in this benevolent old gentleman.

CHAPTER VIII.

I EMBRACE the first opportunity that occurs to get Miss Vyse in a corner by herself, and to have a little quiet conversation with her.

"Have you done anything yet, my dear child, with regard to Mr. Balfour?"

"No; but I intend to write to him to-night, and break everything off."

"Upon the wisdom of that step," I say, "I shall not presume to offer any opinion; but if I were you, I should be very careful what I wrote. If you like, I don't mind writing the letter. Come up to my room, where we shall be quite undisturbed"

"Thanks, so much," she replies; "how kind you are! And we are so busy concocting the epistle that is to put an end to Algy's dreams of happiness.

"Now my dear," I commenced, "I strongly advise you not to let Mr. Balfour know what you have discovered. A man such as he deserves to be punished, and it will touch his pride much more if he thinks you are getting rid of him because you care for him no longer, than if you were doing so from a mere fit of jealousy. There is another point I wish to impress upon you, and that is, give no one down the true reason for what has occurred. I need scarcely tell you that I don't want my name dragged into the matter.

"I will place myself entirely in your hands," she says. "I will do whatever you may think best "

"I don't mind writing the letter for you myself if you like, and you can copy it afterwards."

This is arranged, and the following is my production, which is re-written by Miss Vyse, and duly forwarded to Algy—

"That is plain enough," I tell myself, "and very much to the point But it won't deter a man like Algy Balfour from coming down here to see what it really means He must receive another crusher at the same time, and which will prevent his putting in an appearance at this juncture."

(To be continued)

A FEW days ago, during a thunderstorm near Gordon, Ga., a buzzard which was attempting to soar above the clouds was struck by lightning and fell dead to the ground, an apparent distance of 300 or 400 yards. The body of the bird was found to be badly burned and its feathers singed.