

CHAPTER IV.

Miss Mornington did not close the drawing-room door fast behind her, and as soon as she had opened the entrance one a masculine voice was heard to exclaim, "Still blooming in secret, my lily of the valley!" after which the strained ears of the artist caught the sound of a kiss given and returned. An involuntary frown contracted his brows, and his impatience to behold the person who seemed on such familiar terms with his young hostess was further tried by a long whispered conversation carried on between them in the vestibule.

When at last Ellice ushered her visitor into the drawing-room, Delgardie was struck dumb at the appearance of a handsome, elderly man, known in certain London circles by an altogether different title to that of "General."

Mrs. Mornington received this enigmatical person as if he had been a brother, and then addressing the artist, whose countenance probably expressed his conflicting suspicions, said, "I d-resay two such well known people as 'our general,' and Mr. Delgardie are acquainted with each other."

"By reputation I know Mr. Delgardie exceedingly well; but this is the first time I have the pleasure of seeing him face to face," responded the old gentleman, with a smile and bow, that were meant to be of the friendliest.

The artist said nothing; for it did not suit him to reveal that his acquaintance with the supposititious officer was one of sight; and his return bow was decidedly stiff; for the fact of the new comer having been presented by an alias, suggested that there was something to conceal in his relations with Mrs. and Miss Mornington; and the singularly contradictory character he bore in the world, left room for all sorts of conjectures.

Delgardie was not more prone than most people to think ill of his neighbors; but he knew that though one half of society lauded this bearer of aliases to the heavens as the champion of right against might, the other half shrieked at him as a vile and self-seeking Pecksniff; and the circumstances of their meeting being what they were, he leaned naturally to the less favorable of these opinions.

If this influential man were the disinterested friend of Mrs. Mornington and her granddaughter, why did he leave them pining in this dreary isolation of shabby gentility?

"With all his *Homes and Retreats* and charitable institutions, nothing could be easier for him than to create a suitable position for these two women, if friendship were the only tie between them," thought the painter.

Yet Ellice's pure and serene face, and those limpid eyes, that seemed never to have rested on anything base, were powerful arguments against these doubts.

Delgardie did not know what to think; but he was inexpressibly irritated at the evident good understanding which subsisted between the Morningtons and their elder guest.

To see this dangerous old widower—for the "general" had the reputation of being such—pat Ellice's cheek as he took one of those egg-shell cups of tea from her hand, robbed that fragrant decoction of all flavor for Delgardie. Suddenly remembering that politeness requires the first uninvited guest to retire when the second is installed, he swallowed his tea, choked down the Marie biscuit, which had served him for a five minutes' plaything, and made his adieux with all the rapidity of offended pride—or jealous passion.

"Bah!" he muttered as he slowly mounted to his own story. "If I paint them that portrait I shall have purchased the right to claim her as a model—and what care I for anything else!"

But the very ill temper which exploded in this exclamation was the clearest proof that Mr. Alick Delgardie *did* care, and that he was beginning to be aware of the fact.

His dinner was ordered at the hotel for seven o'clock, but it was past eight when he returned to the *Burghley Arms*. He had waited an hour and three quarters at his studio window watching for the departure of the general, and when the unconscious object of his suspicion brought his long call to a close, Delgardie followed him to the station and saw him take a train for Peterborough.

CHAPTER V.

About nine o'clock of the self same evening a gentleman sat in a handsome room in Claridge's hotel with a bottle of Hochheimer on the table beside him. He was alone and engrossed in thoughts apparently the reverse of agreeable, for his brows projected broodingly over his eyes, which had an evil gleam in them; while his lips, voluptuous and cynical, but well cut, were compressed in a manner that was a tacit menace to the person who motivated their compression. A face in fact on which was written in capital letters, legible to every reader of character, the word "Beware!"

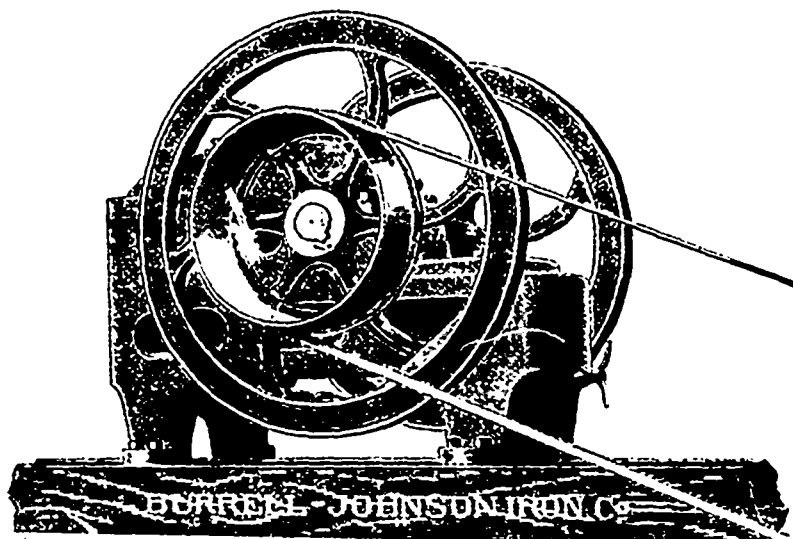
The owner of this dubious physiognomy, at the time of our introduction to him, was leaning his cheek on one hand whilst the other hand played idly with the twisted stem of his empty wine glass. Every ten minutes or so he broke away from the reverie which seemed to have so little sweetness in it to go to the window and peer impatiently up and down the street. "What does she mean by this dilly dallying—confound her!" he muttered, more than once as he turned away disappointed.

It was nearly ten o'clock when a servant knocked deferentially at the door, and, being bidden to enter, approached his master with the noiseless tread of a well-bred spaniel, of the two-legged sort, and softly pronounced five words. At the sound of them a subtle change passed over the brooding face—a change that could only occur in a face that was always on its guard against self-betrayal, and whose expressions were therefore too intangible for the coarse meshes of language to grasp.

(To be Continued.)

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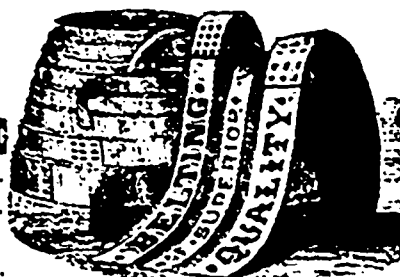
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