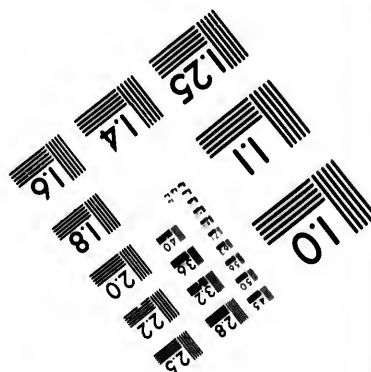
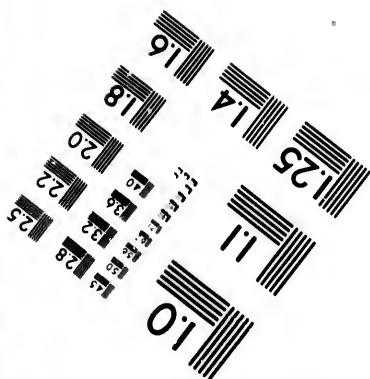
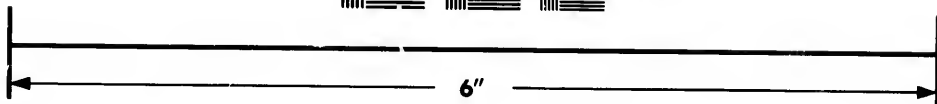
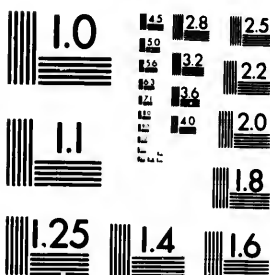


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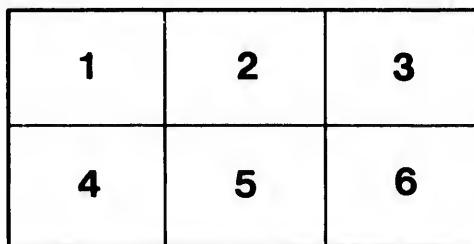
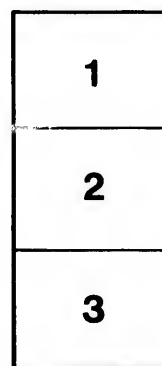
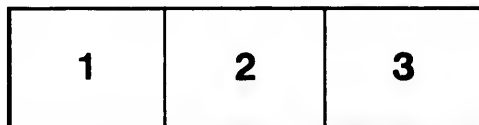
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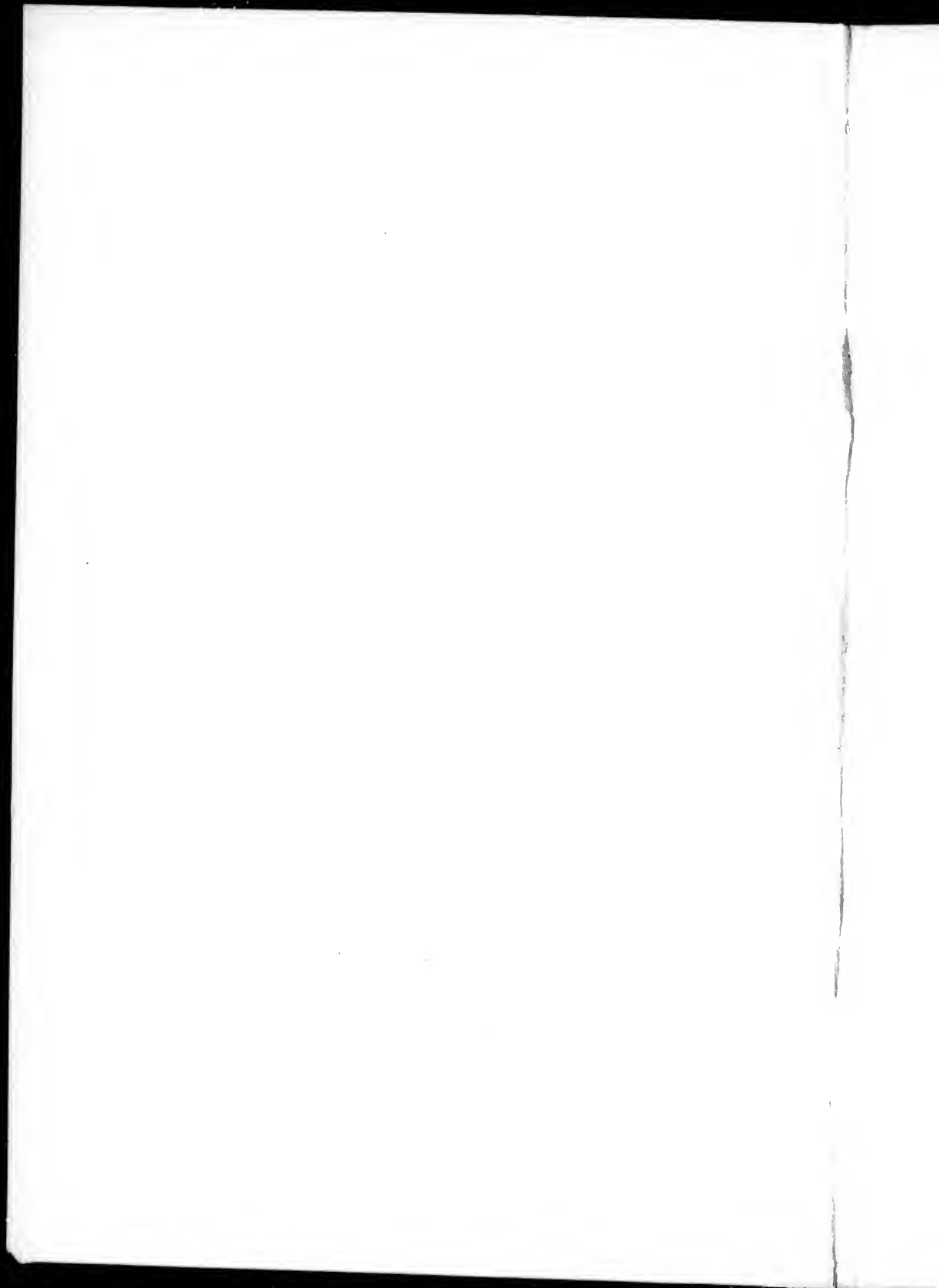
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Yours respectfully,

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A FALSE SCENT

BY

MRS. ALEXANDER, *[pseud.]*

Annie (French) Hector

AUTHOR OF "THE WOOING O'T," "A LIFE INTEREST," "MONA'S CHOICE,"

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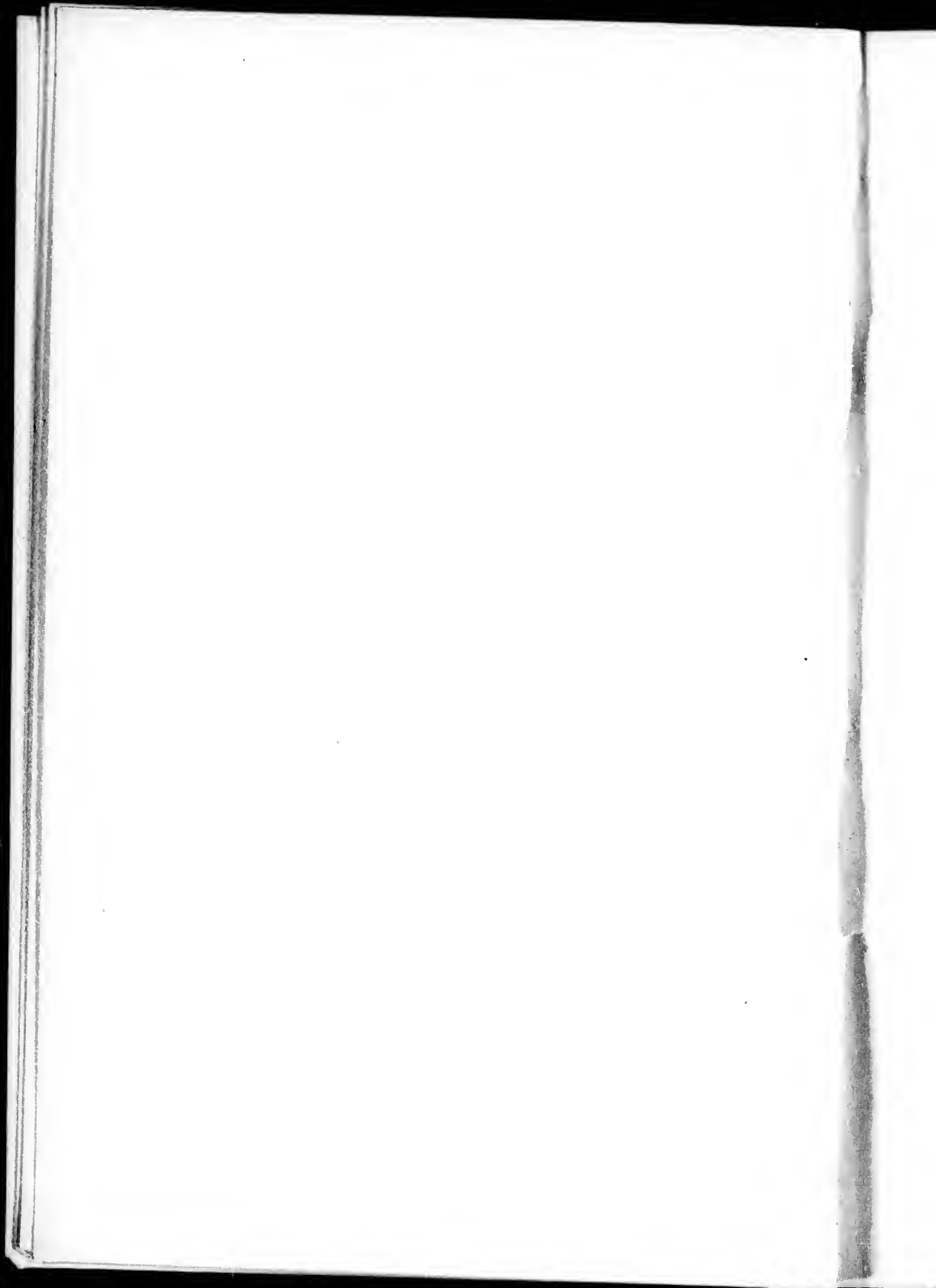
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A FALSE SCENT.

CHAPTER I.

ON THE LINE.

"THOSE confounded clocks must all be too fast. I wish Mrs. Mac would leave them alone—she plays the devil when she attempts to wind them up. We shall have to hang about for the next ten minutes before the train is due!"

The speaker was a tall, robust, white-haired man, with long moustaches and military aspect, who was in the act of turning the pair of spirited dun ponies he was driving sharply into the yard of Markborough Railway Station.

"I think the ponies are faster than the clocks, uncle," said the young lady who sat beside him in the low phaeton, "You have sent them along at a great pace."

Her uncle made no reply. He had pulled up and was descending from the carriage, while a diminutive groom ran to the ponies' heads.

A porter approached, and touching his cap, said: "I've the luggage all right, sir; but the up train isn't due till three-forty-five."

"I know; I know," testily. "Come along, Hope, let's have a quarter-deck walk on the platform to keep our blood circulating.—it's deuced raw and cold."

It was in truth a dark and drear November day, the low-lying fields about the station were shrouded in a

thick grey fog, and the hedgerows dripping from the drifting drizzle of partial showers.

The young lady sprang lightly to the ground, and followed him through the ticket office. She was tall, slender and willowy, clad in a loose grey cloak which did not hide the grace of her shoulders, nor the deer-like setting on of her head. A grey cloth travelling cap edged with sable to match her muff surmounted a delicate face, with straight features, a rosy piquante mouth, and a pair of darker eyes than might have been expected to go with so fair a complexion and such a pale golden curly fringe as mingled with the dark fur which encircled her head; but what their colour none could agree, some maintaining they were blue, some grey, some brown, and one or two evil-disposed persons even asserting they were green.

General Farrant, of Upfield, was a well-known man, and the station master drew near to apologise respectfully for the delay which had occurred in the transmission of a new patent churn concerning which the General was wroth.

"I am sure it was not your fault, Mr. Bassett," said Hope Farrant with a kind smile.

"No, miss, that it ain't" gratefully.

"Well, well, say no more!" cried the General. "I say, you havn't got the evening papers yet?"

"No, not yet, sir."

"I hope they have caught the scoundrelly Nihilists who murdered the chief of the Moscow police in broad daylight last week."

"The papers seldom come down before 4.30, General."

"No? Well, I suppose they could scarcely be here before." And drawing his niece's arm through his, General Farrant proceeded to march her up and down the platform.

"Are you well wrapped up, Sweetie? It's enough to chill the marrow in one's bones, this fog and drizzle."

"Yes, dear uncle, I can defy the weather."

"I suppose we'll not see you again for a month?"

"Oh! I only said three weeks."

"I'd lay long odds that exacting old woman will not let you off under a month."

"Uncle, she is not exacting! She is an old dear."

"Hum, well, maybe so—to you, perhaps." A pause.

"I have written to Bob," resumed the General. "He will be able to run up pretty often, there is not much doing at Aldershot just now, and you'll want a tall cousin to take you about while you are in town."

"Oh! I must not trouble him too much."

"Trouble! You know best whether he considers it trouble, acting orderly to your fanciful self."

"Now, uncle, I am not fanciful, I——"

"Here's the train," he interrupted, peering into the fog, and the next minute the engine came snorting and puffing alongside.

There was always a halt at Markborough to examine the wheels, to fill the grease boxes, and replenish the boiler, previous to the long, unbroken run of an hour and a quarter into London.

Several passengers alighted and went into the refreshment room, while others walked to and fro to restore circulation.

"You'll be all right here, for you don't stop before the end of your journey," said the General, handing his niece into an empty first-class carriage. "Send me a card to-night. Of course Lady Thornton will meet you?"

"Take your seats," shouted the guard, and every one rushed to their places.

"Oh! stay, uncle. This carriage smells horribly of tobacco. I shall have such a headache!"

"Well! look sharp! Get into this one behind; it is also empty."

The change was rapidly accomplished. The general gave his niece a hearty kiss—"Stand back!" called

the stationmaster—and they were off, the pace increasing rapidly as they went.

Miss Farrant settled herself, took a book from her travelling bag, and tried to read, but the small indistinct type, especially affected by railway literature, was too trying in the dim light. So she shut up the volume and leaned back in the corner farthest from the door by which she had entered, hoping to sleep, for her thoughts were rather troubled.

Hope Farrant was the only child of the General's favourite brother, and had a nice little fortune, inherited from her mother. Both her parents were dead, and she had been brought up with her cousins, Bob, Jim, and a little girl, May, who was much younger than any of them, the children of General Farrant.

When that officer, after honourable service in the Indian Mutiny and sundry other frontier disturbances, retired, in consequence of impaired health, and settled himself at Uplands, in a well-known hunting country, Hope took the place of elder daughter, and, as the General was a widower of some years' standing, she naturally became mistress of the house, May not being yet free from the trammels of school. Bob, the eldest son, was in a light dragoon regiment. Jim was at Oxford, and intended for the Church.

Miss Farrant attempted in vain to sleep. At length, opening her eyes, she gazed at vacancy, and let her thoughts wander where they would.

"Dear old uncle! His matchmaking, is quite too transparent. I wish I could please him! But I really like Bob too well in one way to care about him as a lover; though I am rather afraid he is fond of me. He is a good fellow; very good! but too young—only two years older than myself, as years reckon, but younger by more than that in reality. Why should I marry at all? I have enough to live upon; and I don't think I shall ever care very much for any one. I have been out quite four years! The only

man I ever liked was poor Lord Frederic; and I got tired of him. He was two awfully sentimental! Then it is so nice to have a variety about me! Yet I should like to please my dear old uncle and Bob. But it is really not right to marry a first cousin; it——”

“Oh! What’s that?” She started suddenly and dropped her book, as the window furthest from her was darkened by a figure reaching across it to the other side of the door, as if to grasp the iron rod which runs along the carriages.

Hope sat speechless—to scream was useless—the train was rushing along noisily at headlong speed—Who could hear? She watched with terror-fascinated eyes, while the door was opened and a man swung himself into the carriage and then carefully closed it. A tall man, with a huge black beard, wrapped in a cloak or Inverness cape of dark cloth, and wearing a large soft black felt hat. Between it and the beard very little face could be seen. A packet was hung round his neck by a strap. He threw himself on the seat opposite Hope, exclaiming, “My God! I thought the carriage was empty!” Then, as if struck by Hope’s pallid look of horror, “Do not fear! I would not do you the slightest injury; I swear I would not! I thought this carriage was empty when we left Markborough, or I would not have dreamed of entering it. I am at *your* mercy! I implore you to hear me—to save me.”

Hope was a plucky girl, but such a shock might well be too much for any lady-like nerves. She looked, trembling, into the intruder’s grave steady dark brown eyes and felt slightly reassured.

“What have you done? Why did you come in here?” cried Hope brokenly, and clasping her hands together.

“Believe me, I have done nothing worthy of death or of bonds,” replied the stranger in a deep but pleasant and refined voice, with an intonation which was not

quite English, as he unfastened the parcel from his neck. "Yet I am flying from the police. Not the English police; were they alone concerned I would give myself up. You are trembling! And I am overwhelmed with shame for causing you distress and alarm. Stay! The next carriage may be empty—probably is empty. I will relieve you of my presence."

"What, risk your life again! When the train is going at such speed! No, no; you must not!"

"Then will you trust me, and assist me by your silence to escape?"

"Have you murdered anyone?" asked Hope with quivering lips.

"No! A thousand times no!" Then, seeming to master his excitement, he said more deliberately, "You hold my life in your hands! My only chance of escape lies in my appearing in different guise from the man sought for. A word from you when we reach our journey's end and I am lost! May I trust you?"

Hope could not speak. Her strange companion had removed his hat, displaying a good broad forehead, strongly marked brows, and large earnest eyes. He certainly did not look like a criminal.

"Whether you are guilty are not, I will not speak, you may be sure," said Hope at length, "I am too frightened," and she was horribly ashamed to feel the tears of excitement and terror filling her eyes, for she had been brought up in a somewhat Spartan school as regarded courage.

"Do you believe that I am infinitely pained to have given you such a shock! You must have all the pluck of your nation not to be in hysterics." While he spoke, to Hope's increasing dismay, he removed his thick beard, threw off his cape or cloak, and stood before her tall, slight, well-knit, decidedly distinguished in air and bearing, with short, thick, wavy dark hair, and long carefully-trimmed moustache. His face looked refined,

and he had a strong, indented chin. Hope gazed at him in speechless wonder, all conventionality merged in her sense of the extraordinary position. Yet she was insensibly comforted by observing that he looked like a gentleman.

Then he rapidly opened his parcel and took out a light overcoat and a deer-stalker cap made of the same checked cloth as his admirably-fitting shooting suit. Next he rolled up the discarded hat, beard, and cape together, opened the door, and flung them out. Closing it, he burst into a laugh, a frank, pleasant laugh, and putting the deer-stalker on his head, took his seat on the opposite side at a little distance from Miss Farrant.

"In granting my prayer, I assure you, you commit no sin against society! I have done nothing to deserve punishment."

"You look like a gentleman," said Hope gravely, still studying him. He raised himself with easy self-possession. "And you, if there be truth in a face, like a woman that may be trusted. Let me trouble you with a brief explanation. I am a Russian, and suspected of being actively concerned in the murder of Ivan Adrianoff, the head of the police at Moscow. This is not true. I *am* acquainted with some of the Nihilist party, but they never confided their plans respecting this crime to me. Early in the afternoon of the murder I started, as pre-arranged, for England, to visit some relations (my mother was an English woman), and for some reasons too long to be now detailed, the police have chosen to identify me with another man engaged in Adrianoff's murder. I had warning late last night from a faithful friend that the police, both Russian and English, were on my track. I came to the nearest station this morning disguised as you have seen, hoping to escape recognition in London. But, on reaching the station, I observed a Russian whom I guessed must be on my track. I told

my friend and host, who managed by a *ruse* to prevent his getting into the train with me. I had the satisfaction of seeing my pursuer left behind. It is only a momentary respite, for of course he has telegraphed my description, as he saw me, to his colleagues who will await me. I fortunately thought of carrying with me the means of changing my appearance, and thus I hope to escape the police who, no doubt, are on the look-out for my arrival in London. It is a desperate game, but well worth trying! If—if you only knew what a Russian prison is, you would understand that a man would face a thousand deaths rather than submit to incarceration in such a hell of misery and degradation!" He paused and drew his hand over his brow. "Fortune has smiled upon me to-day," he resumed, "My companion left at Markborough, but another man got in; he fell asleep, or seemed to fall asleep—at any rate, he made no movement to prevent my leaving the carriage—and here I am! The only drawback is, that I have shocked and startled you! Now, do you believe me?"

"Yes!" said Hope reflectively. "What you say sounds true. But do you expect to escape?"

"To expect failure is to ensure it. They shall never drag me alive from England—that I am resolved. My plans are laid. If I can ensure three hours' start of my pursuers, I can defy them."

"Three hours!" cried Hope, now thoroughly roused and interested. "Oh, you will surely be able to manage that."

The Russian looked at her earnestly through the gathering darkness, and smiled slightly. "All depends on the first five minutes after I leave this carriage. If Petrovitch, the detective, has only described my clothes, I may pass the police; if he knows my face—and describes it—I am lost. I am not sure he knows me. I must not show anything like haste. Once out of the station and in a hansom, I think I may defy my pursuers."

"But afterwards? Must you always be a fugitive?"

"No! When the trial is over, the affair thoroughly investigated, I hope my innocence will be proved—though in Russia I shall be always 'suspected.'"

He fell into deep thought—a sad stern look settling on his face, which Hope decided was extremely interesting. All her fear of him faded away—and was replaced by an eager desire that he should baffle the police. "What a terrible moment it will be when we reach King's Cross," she thought. I shall be so inclined to scream if they stop him—and what *would* Lady Thornton say, if she knew I travelled all this way with a suspected murderer. I do not believe he would do anything of the kind, except in self-defence." While she meditated in silence, her strange fellow traveller watched her in some anxiety.

"I trust you are recovering from the fright I gave you?" he said at length. "I cannot express my surprise at finding you here! I believed I had certainly observed this carriage was empty the moment before we left Markborough."

"I changed into it as the train began to move."

"I almost wish you had remained where you were—yet no!—for me it is better you are here. I think you kindly wish for my escape. Your unspoken sympathy encourages me. I earnestly hope the shock to your nerves will soon pass away."

"My nerves are not very delicate," said Hope, with the swift soft smile which had earned her the appellation of "Sweetie" from her uncle. The stranger made no immediate reply, but in a minute or two exclaimed, "How wonderful it all is! How is it I have not met you in London, for I know many people in the society there?"

"We may have met in some of the crowded parties, yet not recognise each other," returned Hope.

"I should not have forgotten," said the Russian,

"at least I shall never forget now," he added emphatically, "I trust implicitly in your silence and good faith."

His manner was grave and earnest—not a trace of levity or mere compliment in his words—then with a slight change of tone he began to talk brightly and shrewdly about the different aspects of life in London, showing an intimate knowledge of the "Upper Ten" and their ways, but never naming a name.

Hope listened amazed, how could this man—flying for his life—talk with so much spirit on indifferent subjects? His next words, however, showed the current of his thoughts. "I must ask you to let me know how the time goes. I did not dare to carry my own watch, my initials might lead to mischief."

Hope held out hers to him—somehow she could not speak. "Ha!" he said, "In a quarter of an hour I shall know my fate. They stop to take the tickets a little before reaching the station, do they not?"

"Yes!" faltered Hope. Her companion pondered for a moment. "Am I too audacious if I ask should you care to hear what has become of me?"

"I should like to know very, very much."

"Then you shall. I will write, when I can without risk to you."

"How shall you know where to write?"

Her fellow traveller smiled and pointed to a roll of plaids and wraps lying beside her, to the strap of which was attached a label fully addressed, "Miss Farrant, 32, Carrington Place, W." "I have committed that inscription to memory," he said. "Ha! the speed slackens, the next carriage must be empty, I will go into it, then you will not be troubled by any questions about your fellow traveller. Will you give me your hand in token of your good wishes?"

Hope held out her hand at once.

"We are stopping, oh pray, pray, make haste," she cried.

"Farewell for the present," he returned pressing it gently. "We shall meet again!"

Almost before the train came to a stand, and as the porters began to call out "All tickets ready," he opened the door and disappeared into the darkness, which had now closed in.

In a few minutes more, which seemed strangely long to Hope, the collector came with his lantern and took her ticket, passing on to the next carriage. Hope, who was listening nervously, overheard him say to the inmate or inmates, "That's a bad business, sir! but I fancy if the thief is in the train, he will be caught!"

"Thief! what did it mean?" thought Hope, who was now quivering with anxiety. The police were no doubt ready to pounce on her strange companion—would he escape them? The next moment they had glided into the well-lit station, and Hope recognised Lady Thornton's trusty old servant and factotum on the look-out. He was soon opening the door. "My lady has a cold, miss, and was afraid to come out, for it's a bad night. The brougham's waiting. I suppose you have your usual luggage, miss? I can get it as soon as you are in the carriage," and he proceeded to charge himself with the wraps and a small basket.

"Thank you, Stubbs! take care of the flowers," returned Hope, stepping out and looking anxiously round, for while Stubbs was speaking, a passenger had rushed from his carriage towards one of the railway officials, loudly exclaiming, "I have been robbed! robbed of a large sum!"

A crowd gathered round him in a moment, on the outskirts of which Hope perceived her late companion pause quite near a policeman, of whom several were hanging about the carriages. He seemed in no hurry, his overcoat was on his arm, and a cigarette between his lips. He moved leisurely towards the exit, and

turned for an instant to look in the direction where Hope stood before he vanished.

"Was he safe? Would he really escape?" she thought, while her breath came fast, and she followed the servant to Lady Thornton's carriage. "Try and find out what is the matter, Stubbs," she said with a gesture of the hand towards the small crowd which excited her curiosity, and she threw herself into a corner of the brougham, feeling somewhat giddy from the excitement of her strange journey.

Now that the refugee was out of sight, that his persuasive voice no longer sounded in her ears, doubts of various kinds arose in her mind. Russians were almost proverbially *rusé*. Suppose he really was the criminal in search of whom the Russian detective had been employed? How frightful to think of having been shut up for more than an hour-and-a-quarter with a murderer? If his story were false, she would never hear anything more of him—if true, it was exceedingly improbable he would remember his voluntary promise! In any case her lips should be sealed—for every reason she would avoid avowing her *tête-à-tête* journey with a fugitive felon perhaps!

Here Stubbs returned, and touching his hat, "It's a serious robbery, I believe, miss," he said. "A very respectable party as travels for a city firm had a large sum on him and was robbed between this and Markborough. He was in the carriage with one other passenger, and being tired, fell fast asleep. When he woke up, a little before the train stopped, the other man had disappeared, and his pocket-book and watch were gone. It is very curious, miss! as there is no stop between Markborough and here! The luggage is all right, miss—Home, John!"

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CHAPTER II.

"MR. KEATING AT HOME."

THE centre of attraction to the crowd was a very neat, sleek-looking man, below middle height, remarkably well-dressed, yet not quite a gentleman. He was naturally pale, and looked even paler than usual from fright and excitement, his rather thin fair hair standing up just as he had rumped it in his first distress, his innocent-looking light blue eyes staring wide open.

At his first outcry an employé called one of the policemen who seemed to be examining the carriages, and he, after a few words with the victim, fetched his superior officer, the inspector.

"Now, sir," said the latter civilly, but in a commanding tone, "Try and give as short an account of the matter as you can, for I suspect it is mixed up with another and a bigger affair."

"Bigger it can scarcely be!" exclaimed the complainant. "Why between notes, cheques, and gold, I had nearly eleven hundred pounds in my pocket-book. I collect for the firm of Shears and Judkins. I had been round my district all yesterday and to-day, all round Lynesbridge and finished up with Markborough just in time to catch the three-forty-five quick train to town. I had to run for it, and just jumped into a carriage as it began to move. There was one man already in the compartment, huddled up in a corner as if asleep, he was wrapped in some sort of cloak and had a big black beard with a soft felt hat crammed

down over his eyes. As I was very tired I soon fell asleep too."

"Where did you put your money?" asked the inspector sharply.

"In a large note-book in my breast pocket; feeling warm, I remember unbuttoning my top coat before I went off to sleep."

"Did any one know you had so large a sum about you?" said the police officer, who seemed eager and interested.

"No. I gathered it here and there. No one knew at Markborough how much I had; besides, I found the man in the carriage. How long I slept I can't tell, but I woke up feeling cold, and found the door was open and the man gone. I thought I was dreaming, for we were still going at top speed, and I know there is no pause between Markborough and London. Then as I came to myself I remembered my note-book, felt for it, it was gone! All my employers' money, that's the sting of it."

"Did this man look like a foreigner?"

"I scarcely know. Yes, I think my impression was that he didn't look English."

"This is a curious complication," muttered the police officer. "Any trace, Deacon?" as a constable approached and saluted.

"No, sir, none whatever; I fancy he never came further than Markborough."

"I suspect he did. For the present we can only have the line carefully examined right through. I must see the station master. Will you be so good as to give me your name and address, sir?" to the defrauded passenger. "We will look closely into the matter, and may be able to find out the thief; whether we can recover the money is another matter; at any rate the cheques can be stopped."

"Yes, but that is only a small part. My name is Joseph Keating, No. 9, Caroline Place, Islington. I

shall go direct to Mr. Shear's private residence, and tell him of my misfortune."

"Ay, you had better!" said the officer, entering the name and address in his book. You had better call at the police office in good time to-morrow."

"You may be sure I will," returned Keating, who spoke in a slightly complaining treble voice, and went off quickly in search of a cab.

"Well, I do wonder how chaps like that ever get trusted to take care of money," said the constable, looking after him.

"Hum! Shrewd man of business for all his whining, I daresay," returned the inspector. "Wait for me here. I must direct the search to be made down the line. If the Russian chap didn't break his neck in the attempt to leave the carriage while the train was going at such a speed, and got off with the cash into the bargain, why the devil must have taken care of his own."

* * * * *

While Mr. Joseph Keating, with a heavy heart, was carrying the evil tidings to his principal, his comfortable sitting-room in No. 9, Caroline Place, Islington, was being prepared for his reception.

No. 9 was one of several solid old-fashioned houses. A row of melancholy poplars stood before them, and lent something of distinction to the place.

The abode of Mr. Keating was perhaps the most genteel of these habitations. Its steps were always clean and white, the brass handle of the front door and the plate inscribed with a request to knock and ring were always brilliantly bright, and the parlour window had a wire blind, which bore the imposing words "Madame Allen, Court dressmaker & milliner." Lace curtains of snowy whiteness hung over it veiled the sacred mysteries of this temple of fashion.

The generally grand effect of this array was somewhat diminished by a small card suspended from a long

red ribbon attached to the frame by a pin, which informed the passers by that apartments might there be found for single gentlemen.

Within was a good-sized hall and staircase, the latter neatly covered with linoleum, and in what had been the drawing-room, now furnished like a study and dining-room combined, Madame Allen was [on her knees before the grate coaxing the fire to burn up.

The room was dimly lighted by the single candle which stood beside the operator on the hearth-rug. She was a small woman, with grey hair, covered by a neat cap, her black alpaca gown was well preserved and well made. A small woollen shawl covered her shoulders, and a pair of housemaid's gloves protected her hands. As she fed the struggling flame with scraps of coal and splinters of firewood, a plump good-looking girl of perhaps twenty-five came with a kind of rush into the room, "Why, mamma! haven't you got that fire to burn up yet? You'll break your back! Let me try! I can always make a flame!" She laughed gaily. "Havn't you a candle end to put in."

"No, Augusta! You must do nothing of the sort. You know he'd just go mad if he saw grease spots on the hearth!"

"Oh! I know what a particular Bessie he is," returned the young lady. "Just give me your gloves." She took Madame's place as the former rose stiffly. A poke or two with a piece of firewood, a lump of crushed newspaper between the bars, a liberal application of matches, and the obstinate coals began to kindle, soon blazing and crackling satisfactorily.

"Well, Augusta! I suppose the young people have it all their own way, even with the fire, said the mother."

"Why, of course! Fire is more in our way than yours." And the lively Augusta, or Gussie, laughed a ringing honest kind of laugh, and looked well too, when

she showed her fine large strong white teeth. She was an abundant brunette, with flashing black eyes, marked dark eyebrows, and rich colouring. "We had better hurry up, and get the supper ready," holding the candle to a black marble and bronze clock, "Why, he ought to be here now."

"Dear, dear," cried her mother, "it's a mercy he has only cold beef and a rice pudding for supper, it is all ready too. Light the lamp Augusta, and lay the cloth, I'll send up Eliza with the things."

Augusta was far too energetic to do anything deliberately, so the lamp was lit, the table spread, the fire stirred into a ruddy mass, in a very short space of time.

"That will do, Eliza, go down and make the toast," said the young lady, adding as she left the room, "He is wonderfully late to-night, and he is generally like clockwork. I hope he has not been smashed up, the fog has been terribly bad this afternoon."

"God forbid!" ejaculated Mrs. Allen (as she was called in private life), "for I should lose a good lodger and a good friend!—that considerate and kind! and like a father to Ned."

"Oh, he ain't bad," said Augusta in a patronizing tone, "but *he'll* turn up all right. Let us get a cup of tea ourselves. I daresay he'll be here before it is poured out."

But the hopeful Augusta was wrong. An hour and more passed, and still the wanderer was absent.

Poor Mrs. Allen could not eat. She drank her tea in a semi-conscious way, she was profoundly uneasy, whereas her lively daughter made a meal which was indicative of complete composure.

"Well, I do really wonder what keeps him," she said at length, rising from her needlework, "I will go and see to his lamp and the fire. Why it is a quarter to seven, he ought to have been here nearly two hours ago."

She had still time, however, to give many final touches to Mr. Keating's apartment before that gentleman made his appearance.

"Dear, dear, Mr. Keating!" cried his landlady as he came into the hall with a tottering step and blanched cheeks, "What *has* happened? we have been awfully frightened about you! Here, Eliza! fetch in Mr. Keating's luggage. Shall I pay the driver?"

"Yes, do, please," said Keating with a sort of moan, "and I think I must have a little brandy and water." As he went slowly upstairs Eliza followed, carrying a small portmanteau and a parcel. "Take them to his room," exclaimed Mrs. Allen, and she ascended rapidly to minister to her highly valued lodger.

But her daughter was before her, and she found that young lady mixing the desired beverage, while Mr. Keating reclined limply in his easy chair, his hat and gloves thrown recklessly on the floor.

"Law! Mr. Keating, you must be bad, sir. I don't know as I ever heard you ask for brandy and water before."

"Well I need it now," sighed Keating, "for I have had a providential escape."

"Oh! do tell us all about it!" cried Augusta.

Keating swallowed the brandy and water, and began his story, adding to the particulars he had given the police inspector that when he woke from his heavy slumber he perceived a peculiar odour which induced him to believe that the robber had chloroformed him.

"Had I not been stupefied how could he have extracted the note-book from my breast pocket?" he exclaimed in conclusion.

"It was to this, under Providence, I owe my preservation," he resumed solemnly, after a few further sips of the brandy and water. "Had I awoke to the fact that I was being robbed, I should have felt bound

to fight in defence of my employers' property." Here he sat up with a determined air, "and the ruffian was of a truculent and powerful aspect," he added with a shudder.

"I am sure it was a good job you *were* asleep," cried Augusta (familiarily "Gussie"), "for he would have made mince-meat of you." She took his glass and set it down.

"Oh dear, Mr. Keating," murmured her mother, wiping her eyes, "to think of how near we were to losing you. I feel as if you could knock me down with a feather."

Mr. Keating used his own handkerchief freely, and having asked in a feeble voice for a little more brandy, proceeded to recount how he had to report the terrible event to his excellent principal, Mr. Shears, at his residence, Park Square, Regent's Park, who was very kind about the matter, though hurried, as he was going out to dinner, and how he, Mr. Keating, had felt faint and dizzy, and was obliged to remain awhile, after Mr. Shears had gone, to recover himself. "If I had been able even to strike a blow in defence of the money," sighed the little man as he sank back in his chair.

"I'm sure it is ever so much better you did not," repeated Gussie, "you wouldn't be here to tell the story if you had. But what a desperate villain the thief must have been to leave the carriage when the train was flying along at such a rate! Depend upon it his dead body will be found upon the line, and the money on him or beside him."

"Heaven grant it! That is, I do not wish the unhappy miscreant to be hurried from the midst of his iniquities into eternal punishment, but—but——"

"Well I think he just deserves it," exclaimed Gussie heartily. "Now Mr. Keating, you must want something hot and tasty for your supper. I'll go and make you a nice Welsh rarebit before you can say 'Jack Robinson,'" and she turned to leave the room.

"Stay, stay, my dear Miss Allen," he called out, "I could *not* digest it, weakened as my gastric nerves must be by such a shock, I must not overtask them."

"Nonsense, Mr. Keating! You know nothing you like disagrees with you."

"You are wrong, my dear young lady, quite wrong; a poached egg and a delicately fried rasher of bacon I might 'manage.'"

"All right! Ted has just come in, I will send him for a couple of real new laid eggs," and she left the room.

"I'll ge' you your slippers, Mr. Keating," said the obsequious widow, opening the door which led into his bedroom, a large, airy, well-furnished chamber.

"You are too good. I would rather not trouble you."

"It is no trouble."

"Excuse me!" he interrupted rising. "I can never rest until I know my things are unpacked and put away. I shall have all arranged by the time supper is ready." He walked into his bedroom and closed the door.

"Well!" murmured his admiring landlady, as she went off through the other, "Of all the neat, precise, painstaking, punctual-paying, considerate men I ever came across, he is the best. If that foolish girl was of my mind, she'd be ready to marry him to-morrow!—and she might if she liked."

Mr. Keating was as good as his word. He had emptied his valise, put away his parcel, unlocked and arranged some papers in a handsome old-fashioned bureau of dark polished wood, which stood between the windows, and locked it again—putting the key, which was attached to a fine steel chain, carefully in his pocket—before Gussie made her appearance with supper.

"I am sure, Miss Augusta," cried Keating with a

pleased smile, "it is too good of you to take this trouble! I'm sure it rewards one for any risk to life and limb I may have run."

"Bless me, Mr. Keating, that is a large order!" she returned, with a coquettish toss of the head, as she set the dish on the table and proceeded to cut a slice of bread with rapidity. "There," she said, "that's better for you than all those dry chips of toast. Now your tea is just right; the kettle was on the top of the boil, so let me pour out a cup at once."

Having done this she covered up the teapot with a smart cosie, and continued—"I'll send up Eliza in a quarter-of-an-hour to see if you want anything."

"I wish you would sit down with me," he returned, looking wistfully at her. "You don't know how it would increase my appetite."

"Law, Mr. Keating," putting her hand before her face. "That wouldn't be proper, you know," and with a nod and a laugh she left him.

But Mr. Keating was not long left to himself. Miss Augusta was succeeded by her brother, a red-cheeked, plump, fair-haired boy of twelve, who knocked modestly at the door, and receiving permission to come in, entered with an unusual expression of interest on his somewhat heavy countenance. The beneficent lodger was something of a hero to him, in right of his strange adventure and narrow escape.

"I thought you wouldn't mind my coming in, sir," said the youth. "The vicar gave me this note for you, and says he do hope you will be able to attend the practice on saturday, sir," concluded Ted, who was a choir-boy in the neighbouring parish church, where Mr. Keating, who had a sweet little tenor voice, also officiated.

"Ah!" said the latter, shaking his head, "I greatly fear it will take more than two days' rest to enable me to get out a note after the shock I have had. "I must call on the vicar, if I can manage it, and explain, but I

fear I shall have more to do than I can well manage in the next few days."

"Yes, I daresay, sir. Did the fellow hurt you in any way?"

"No, Ted, I can't say he did. But he certainly chloroformed me or some such thing. I noticed a peculiar smell when I woke up, and my head is still quite queer."

"I suppose the p'lice will get him—they mostly do, don't they, sir?"

"I am not so sure. This desperado did not seem to me like an Englishman, and I can't help thinking the police were already on the look-out for him. It has indeed been a most providential escape."

"That it has, sir. Maybe he got killed leaving the train?"

"Very likely, Teddy, my boy. To-morrow we shall know if his remains have been found. Now please send Eliza to clear away, I really cannot eat. And please ask your sister to step up. I should like to speak a few words to her before I try to take the rest I so sorely need, for I must be away betimes in the morning."

"Good-night, sir. I hope you'll be none the worse," and Ted descended to the back parlour occupied by his mother, where he found her seated on a low chair by the fire, too excited by the events of the evening to attend to any of her usual avocations. Gussie was sufficiently composed to bestow very close attention on a hat which she was transforming from comparative dowdiness to the height of the fashion.

"Guss! the guv'nor wants you upstairs to say good-night, or some such thing."

"Well, he must just wait till I have fixed this bow."

"Law, mother, don't he look bad," continued Ted, "he has had an awful fright."

"And no wonder. Why it was enough to destroy his nerves for ever to wake up and find his money gone,

and to think of a desperate murderer rumaging his pockets, and him asleep and helpless," said Mrs. Allen rocking herself slightly. "If he had spoke or moved my rooms would have been vacant," and she wiped her eyes. "Do go up to him, Gussie, my girl! You are a comfort to him."

"I should think I *was* just," holding out her hat, and putting her head on one side to get a better view of her composition. "I think he about knows my value! I wonder what he had in that brown paper parcel," she added, thoughtfully laying down her hat with care. "I shouldn't wonder, ma, if he had a present for me! You know he has been in Manchester and Leeds, and he can pick up things at trade price. Suppose it's a nice winter's dress? and a jacket, maybe, with fur trimmings, I do want one so bad. Oh! there, the hat can wait," pushing the materials, new and old, into the crown, and shaking the threads off her dress, "I must say he is a good open-handed little creature, and I believe as you say, ma, I might do worse than take him for good and all."

"I suppose Shears and Judkins won't come down on *him* for this money," said Ted meditatively, as he slowly rolled up a much tangled length of twine, drawn from his pocket."

"Why, bless your heart, no! What put that in the boy's head?"

"Good gracious, Ted, what an idea!"

"Well, I dunno, but I suppose they might."

"What a tiresome boy you are," cried Augusta, pausing and looking both cross and puzzled. "Why that would ruin him."

"What would they care for that as long as they got their cash back?"

"It is uncommon hard to know what to do for the best," returned his sister in a tearful voice. "If his 'House' fleeced him of eleven hundred pounds, why he'd have to go into another sort of 'House.'"

"I'm not so sure. The last time the vicar was speaking to me of Ted and the choir and all that, he said he believed Mr. Keating was richer than people knew, he was so simple and unpretending," quoth her mother.

"Anyway, I'll go and see him," said Gussie, coming to a sudden decision. "I am quite sorry for the poor little fellow, and I'd like to know what is in that parcel!" and she whisked out of the room with her usual rapidity.

"I'm sure I hope the dear child will be guided aright if it be the will of Providence," sighed Mrs. Allen.

"Any how *she'll* guide him pretty sharp, if she takes him," said Ted, irreverently.

"I hate to hear you talk in that nasty vulgar way of your own sister, as looks *and* h'acts like a real lady! A boy brought up as you are—singing in church Sundays and festivals, noticed by the clergyman, and highly favoured in so many ways—ought to know better," said Mrs. Allen solemnly.

"Why? What have I said?"

"There! If you don't know I can't make you," was her emphatic reply. A pause ensued, while Ted got out his books and cleared away his sister's belongings.

"You know," resumed Mrs. Allen, speaking evidently out of her thoughts, and seeming to address the fire, "if *he* was obliged to go I'd be ruined; the business has gone down to nothing; it never was much. And those top rooms have never let well; they have been empty close on two months, and I can't make up my mind to lower the rent—twelve and six a week, with table-linen, cooking, and kitchen fire ain't much. But it is just luck; one day you will get twenty shillings straight off for the same rooms as no one will take at eight the week after! The ins and outs of life are that unaccountable no one can get to the bottom of them." There was an impressive pause,

unbroken by any remarks from Ted. Then Mrs. Allen stirred the fire softly, and resumed in a low tone as it to herself, "Thirteen weeks at twelve and sixpence a week—that is, let me see, eight pounds twelve and sixpence—that well-nigh breaks the heart of the rent. I wish someone *would* take those rooms—it would be a great ease to my mind."

After this ardent exclamation she dozed awhile, and then roused up, exclaiming, "How long he is keeping Augusta! Have you done with your books, Ted?"

Before he could answer his sister came into the room with an unusually thoughtful air. "Not off to bed yet?" she asked.

"No; but I am going. Well, what's in the brown paper parcel, eh, Gussie?"

Oh! *I* don't know"—crossly. "Nothing for me. He never said a word about it."

"Good-night, mother! I'm off."

As soon as the door was safely closed Gussie drew a chair beside the fire and exclaimed in a low tone, "I say, mother! We must have given him his grog too stiff. He has been and gone and asked me to marry him!"

"And, my precious child, *what* did you say?"

"Say? Oh, that I would think about it. If what he says is true he has managed to scrape a good bit of money together. Still, I should like to know what he had in that parcel!"

CHAPTER III.

"COUSIN BOB."

THERE has seldom been a ruder shock to the sympathetic fancy of a bright imaginative girl than Hope Farrant sustained, when the faithful Stubbs explained to her the cause of the crowd, and the robbery which had occurred. To have the refined and persecuted refugee suddenly transformed into a sordid thief, just a little more daring and ingenious than usual, was a cruel blow. She was shaken and distressed, but above all desperately anxious that no one should know that she had been shut up for more than an hour—in confidential conversation, too—with a criminal of so deep a dye.

No! For every reason she would keep his secret and her own. After all, he might have needed money for his escape, and meant to return it when safe, for she could not doubt that he had taken the money. Something profoundly opposed to the belief that he was a mere swell mobster forced her to suspend judgment. He seemed so thoroughly a well-bred man of society that it was impossible to credit the most accomplished cracksmen with an imitation so perfect. At one moment Hope blushed for her own credulity for the sincere sympathy the interesting fugitive had excited in her heart. The next she asked herself if acting so exactly like nature could exist. At all events, she could not and would not believe that he had taken the money from any low motive. It was the pressure of a

tremendous necessity for which he would atone—not the greed of a thieving money-grabber. She must wait to see what would be the outcome of this strange adventure.

Sir Peter and Lady Thornton, a childless couple, lived in an unpretending but comfortable house in Carrington Place. Here was their headquarters, from which they frequently wandered in search of health and variety. Had Lady Thornton not been so much occupied with her own indisposition she would probably have noticed her young guest's pale cheeks and disturbed aspect; but although far from being a selfish woman—especially in larger matters—Lady Thornton loved her own ease, comfort, and amusement, and was much taken up by any of her small ailments. She was, therefore, full of her own sufferings and Sir Peter's indifference to them, though she received Hope with warmth and affection.

The evening which succeeded, and, indeed, the day following, were somewhat triste and unoccupied, as Lady Thornton did not dare go out, and her husband, who was a good deal older than herself, was very deaf, and something of a professional invalid, rarely ventured forth when there was no sunshine. Hope then had the brougham to herself, and managed to occupy some hours in shopping for herself and for the Upfields household. The evening passed somewhat slowly, and Hope went to bed somewhat disappointed at not finding any notice of the "Robbery on the Markborough Line" for which she had sought in the morning papers. Lady Thornton had roused up and promised to be better next day, and Sir Peter had rather enjoyed beating Hope in five succeeding hits at backgammon.

All this time there was little or nothing to draw Hope's thoughts from dwelling constantly on her curious adventure of the day before. Then she dreamt uncomfortably all night. The refugee or robber's expressive face and appealing eyes were

vividly before her, then she was struggling vehemently to save him from the man he had robbed, who had suddenly turned into an octopus, and was clinging to his neck.

After so unpleasant a night Hope was greatly cheered to find her cousin Bob Farrant awaiting her in the dining room when she descended to a late and solitary breakfast.

He was a strongly-built, sandy-haired young man, with a broad, good-humoured face, honest grey eyes, and a soldierly look. Well-dressed and smiling, he was a welcome sight after the visions of the night, and it was with an unusual degree of cordiality that Hope held out her hand, exclaiming, "Oh! Bob, I am so glad to see you! How did you manage to come here so early?"

"Oh! I managed to get leave yesterday till Sunday, so I ran up by the ten-forty-five train last night and came on here, hoping Lady Thornton would excuse so early a visit," returned Bob in joyous tones.

"Poor Lady Thornton! She is not up yet! She has a frightful cold, and Sir Peter always breakfasts in his room."

"Sensible old boy!" cried Bob as his cousin took her place at table. "Old fellows like him are better out of the way in the morning."

"Do sit down and have some breakfast with me Bob! I hate eating alone!"

Bob promptly obeyed. "This is rather doleful for you, Hope! You are looking pale and haggard. Let us go and have a spree somewhere! Seriously, I think you must have caught the cold, you are not like yourself!"

"Bad dreams and an evil conscience," she returned lightly.

"Oh! by the way, did you see or hear anything of this curious affair on the Markborough line the day before

yesterday, about the time you must have been *en route*?" and he reached over to take up *The Times*, which he had put down when his cousin entered. "Where did I see it? Oh! yes, here it is: 'A daring robbery was effected on Wednesday afternoon in a first-class carriage on the Markborough and Aldenham line. A gentleman in the employment of Messrs. Shears, Judkin & Co., of Laurence Court, was travelling by the London express, the only occupant of the carriage besides himself being a foreign-looking man, who was wrapped in a cloak, and seemed asleep in a corner. The gentleman, who had a considerable sum of money in a note book, after leaving Markborough became himself drowsy, and fell fast asleep; on awaking he found the stranger gone and also his note-book. As is well-known, the run from Markborough to London is unbroken by any stop and one of the quickest on any line. How the thief therefore managed to leave the train is almost inconceivable. On the arrival of the train at King's Cross the victim of the daring exploit gave the alarm. The police inspector of the C division happened to be on the spot, but no trace of the offender was to be found.' I hope you were not frightened? Did you hear anything of this?" added Bob.

"Oh, yes! I saw the poor man who was robbed, in a frightful state, and quite a crowd round him. I got Stubbs to find out what was the matter!"

"By Jove! It's lucky he didn't try his little game on *you*! Why you would have died of fright! It's not right of the general to let you travel alone! I could have got a day's leave and gone down to fetch you!"

"Oh, nonsense Bob! Women are never supposed to carry much money about, and of course your father saw me safe into a ladies' carriage at Markborough, so I was quite safe!"

"I am not so sure of that, and I know you have had a horrid fright, I saw you shudder as you spoke,"

"Nonsense, Bob! I am rather cold, that's all."

"You are an indifferent correspondent, Sweetie! Here are three letters for you which you haven't looked at!"

"I didn't see them, Stubbs put them away there at the end of the table!" and she stretched out her hand for them.

"And Bob," she continued, "I will not have you call me Sweetie! That is my uncle's name for me, and no one else shall use it."

"I am sure I ought not! You are never sweet to me!"

Hope shook her head at him, "This is from your father, Bob!" and she opened one. "Dear uncle! He is in a great state lest I should have been frightened on Wednesday. There have been frightful reports about the robbery at Markborough."

"I hope he sees that he ought not to have let you travel alone!" observed Bob, with much solemnity.

"Why, this is from Mrs. Menteith! It is very kind of her. She heard from you that I was in town, and she writes to ask me to dinner next Thursday. Lady Thornton was going, but I am afraid she cannot now."

"Oh, yes, *you* must go at any rate, Hope! The dinners at Emperor's Gate are first-rate in every way! and Mrs. Menteith took a great fancy to you when you met at that place in Switzerland last summer!" Bob reddened while he spoke.

"Did she! It is ungrateful of me, but I do not reciprocate."

"Nonsense, Hope! Mrs. Menteith is one of the jolliest women going, and deucedly clever into the bargain ——"

Hope did not answer at once; she had opened the third letter, and after a swift glance at its contents, stooped to pick up her napkin, an exertion which naturally brought the colour to her cheek. She

thrust back the letter into its envelope, and began to drink her tea.

Her cousin noticed that she made no remark upon this missive, but wisely held his tongue, resuming after a moment's pause the question of dining with Mrs. Menteith.

"I cannot give any reply till I know what Lady Thornton is going to do" replied Hope. "You had better wait and see her."

"I suppose so, though I daresay she would rather have my room than my company," said Bob, laughing. "It is pretty evident she never took a fancy to me."

"That is your fancy."

"No! Sweet — I mean Hope, she hates me!"

"Nonsense, Bob! You are too good a fellow to be hated!"

"Ay! Just so, too good to be hated or loved, eh?" a little bitterly.

"Why you are absolutely cross!" Hope was beginning, when Stubbs the stately entered, and standing with the door in his hand, said in slow, precise terms, "If you please'm, her ladyship is in the drawing-room, and would be glad to see you before Mr. Farrant goes."

"I will come directly," said Hope, while, as Stubbs retreated closing the door, Bob exclaimed, laughing, "I told you so! But I shall not be done out of an expedition with you, I can tell Lady Thornton."

"I shall come back soon," said Hope, finishing her breakfast quickly, "and report proceedings." So saying she took up Mrs. Menteith's note and the unread letter, and with a nod and a smile to her cousin, left the room. Before she reached Lady Thornton's presence, however, she had consigned the letter to her pocket, her brows slightly contracting as she did so with a puzzled look.

Lady Thornton had never been a pretty woman.

Indeed, few had had a narrower escape from being ugly. Yet, with such slender materials as a fairly good figure, a pleasant good-humoured mouth and fine teeth, she contrived to be almost attractive. She had had little more of money than good looks, and in her girlhood had led something the life of a free lance amongst friends and relatives, till fortune gave her one chance, which she was not the woman to lose. Sir Peter Thornton, the son of a successful, energetic City man—himself, by nature and grace of circumstances, an idle *dilettante*, selected her as a suitable and intelligent helpmate, and from thenceforward the struggles and difficulties of life were over for Lady Thornton—*née* Harriet Duncombe. One of her earliest and best friends had been Hope's mother, who, considerably her junior, looked up to and loved her. In her home there was always a welcome for the orphan girl who fought for her own hand, and, to Lady Thornton's credit be it said, the sunniest side of her nature was always turned towards her old friend's daughter. Hope found her seated by the fire, huddled up in a Shetland shawl, a small table covered with opened and unopened letters at her side—the fire-place full of glowing wood and coal at the other.

"Oh! Where is the paper, Hope?" was her ladyship's salutation. "Larkins tells me there is something about that extraordinary robbery in it this morning. I wonder she has the face to let me know they presume to read the papers in the servants' hall before they are brought to me—wasting their time, too—which is *mine*."

"I will go for it, Lady Thornton," said Hope, turning.

"No, no! Not now! I want to know what brings that cousin of yours here at such an hour?"

"I really don't know. He seems rather ashamed of himself, and begged me to apologise. He has leave for a few days, and came to know if he could do any thing for me, or take me anywhere."

"Hum! I do not want to be uncivil, but he is *not* a young man who amuses *me*. He is just the typical young dragoon officer."

"If all young dragoon officers were as good fellows as Bob the army would be in a better condition," said Hope.

"My dear child," began Lady Thornton crossly, "don't let us discuss your cousin's perfections now! I only want to beg you will not desert me till after luncheon. I want you to read to me. I like your reading. Afterwards, go and walk or drive, or do what you like with this Paladin of yours. But my eyes are aching and running, and I am altogether a miserable old woman."

"My dear Lady Thornton, of course I will stay with you."

"Very well. Go and tell your cousin to come back to luncheon, and you can do what you like after. You can bring him to dinner, too, if you choose; but go somewhere after. I cannot spend the evening making conversation for a young man of that stamp."

"Very well," said Hope, laughing as she hastened downstairs to deliver Lady Thornton's message, considerably modified, to her much-enduring cousin.

"Come! She is not half bad," he exclaimed joyously. "I'll go off and try to get stalls for the 'Mikado,' and after luncheon, as it is so fine, suppose we walk across the park and have tea with Mrs. Menteith? She is almost always at home at five at this time of the year."

This plan was adopted, and Hope returned to her task of reading to her very much "colder" hostess (to use a Scotticism).

It was not until a few minutes before the luncheon hour that she found time to peruse the letter, a glance at which had disturbed her so much at breakfast time. Turning the key in her door she opened the missive and read as follows:—

"I feel I am somewhat presumptuous in availing myself of your scarcely-granted permission to write. I believe, however, that had you even a faint idea of what I have escaped your womanly heart would be pleased to know that any fellow creature was saved from so much mental and physical torture. I had, indeed, a hair's-breadth escape, as I almost touched shoulders with the man who had, I believe, a warrant for my apprehension. But once out of the station I was tolerably secure, and had certainly five or six hours' start. I have now reached an asylum where I can wait in safety until my innocence is proved. Where it is I will not say; not that I distrust you, but because the knowledge of my whereabouts might be an undesirable burden. Now let me say how warmly grateful I am for your courage and sympathy. This latter, I could see, was doubtful—hesitating. How could I expect anything more? breaking in upon you as I did; but like a generous woman you gave me the benefit of the doubt, and, therefore, I am still a free man. Believe me, I never cease to regret having given you such a shock, and I can hardly restrain myself from craving for a few lines to tell me if you have recovered the fright I so unfortunately caused you. I burn with the most intense impatience for the moment when I can stand before you and tell you my unsullied name—to see your eyes clear of suspicion and hear your voice once more! I hear it often in my waking dreams, as the hours of enforced idleness pass slowly by, and I live over again that strange hour between life and death into which you infused such unexpected sweetness. I shall see you again! Oh, yes! I shall see you again! Meanwhile, I dare not ask for a word—even if you were disposed to write it, which is most unlikely. Kindly instinct may induce you to believe I am not a criminal, but your reason must suggest that appearances are against me.

"I must intrude no longer. Give me a kind thought,

a friendly wish. I will not put my name to this, that you may be free from any knowledge that would be of use to my pursuers. I am ever your devoted servant."

Hope read this with varying colour and a beating heart. She was touched—she was indignant—she was even tempted to laugh at the idea of receiving a semi-sentimental wholly confidential letter from a daring thief! Then a vision of the man's proud, refined face rose before her, and for a few moments her heart acquitted him of the vulgar crime. But he was too audacious! There was a tone in the letter that was quite insufferable. Could she have dreamed that eventful Wednesday afternoon when she stepped into the pony-carriage to go to the station, that she should encounter such an adventure, which entailed the opening of a clandestine correspondence with a felon. "No, not a correspondence," she thought energetically. "I shall of course never write a line to that man. It is bad enough to think there is a secret, and an important secret, between a total stranger, not to say an extremely disreputable stranger." No, she could never breathe this secret to mortal. It would be too extraordinary a story to tell, and having suppressed it, it must never be hinted at. I wonder if there is any truth in his assertions after all? How strange it would be if we were to meet again. But that is most unlikely. I must not let my imagination run away with me. I wonder if he stole that money (and I suppose he did), will he return any of it or all, when he proves himself innocent? Well, he did not look like a murderer, and even less like a thief."

Here she paused, re-read the letter, and carefully tore it into small pieces, finally putting them into the fire.

"There, I hope that will be the last of my strange adventure. Yet does anything ever remain a secret?"

What would my uncle say if he knew? and Bob?—how furious Bob would be!”

The luncheon-bell put an end to her reflections, and she hastened down in time to find Sir Peter being put in position by his valet, while Lady Thornton was shaking hands with Bob Farrant.

As luncheon progressed, Hope could not help observing how the consciousness of not being in Lady Thornton's good graces put her cousin at a disadvantage. He was silent and awkward, so she came to his rescue in various difficulties with tact and readiness that filled Bob with pride and delight.

But while assisting Bob she was keenly conscious of being “on guard,” a new, and to her an extremely oppressive sense. She began to think before she spoke, lest some careless word should lead to the subject she wished to avoid, and it seemed that every chance expression led straight to the forbidden ground.

Sir Peter, however, did her good service. As he found great difficulty in hearing what other people said, and small gain from their speech when he did—he limited himself to the expression of his own observations, opinions and discoveries, and having a small appetite he held forth unceasingly during luncheon. This “weak, washy, everlasting flow” masked Hope's silence very successfully, and young Farrant also availed himself of the excellent cover thus afforded to eat in peace, untormented by Lady Thornton's efforts to entertain him.

The discovery of some British remains not far from Markborough, respecting which Sir Peter had been reading in the morning papers, formed the subject of his discourse, and he bestowed much learning and wisdom on his listeners. At last he paused for breath, and then began with a fresh idea—“apropos of Markborough—though I seldom read those preposterous illogical police stories which generally turn out mares' nests—

I was struck by a curious story of a robbery on that line in to-day's paper. The thief must have been a shrewd bold fellow, but it remains to be seen whether he has broken his neck or not. Did you read it, my lady?"

Lady Thornton bent her head with a very bored expression.

"I have heard of nothing else," she said in an undertone to Farrant. "My maid raves of it."

"Extremely curious," continued Sir Peter. "Now I have a theory, that this man never left the carriage. He probably crouched under one of the seats, and when the unfortunate bagman was bellowing about his loss, and everyone running to and fro, the thief slipped out and walked off."

"By Jove!" cried Bob Farrant, much struck with this suggestion. "That is quite possible."

"You agree with me, hey?" cried Sir Peter, watching the young man's face with sharp, watery eyes.

"'Tis a capital idea!" shouted Bob.

"Eh! What does he say?" putting up his ear trumpet, then in what he imagined was a whisper, "extraordinary way young men mumble their words nowadays."

Hope who was next him gently took the trumpet and managed to convey Bob's approval.

"It was quite a providential escape," observed Lady Thornton. "I mean Hope's escape. Suppose he had followed her, imagining she had jewels of great price."

"My looks do not so far belie me," said Hope, smiling.

"They say at the Club that his disguise was found on the line where he had pitched them out, about six or seven miles this side of Markborough. A wig and cloak, a big beard, a hat, a knife, and God knows what——"

"What's that," said Sir Peter, and Hope epitomised the information as best she could.

"They are blockheads! That was all a blind."

"It is thought the police have an idea the robbery is mixed up with some political mischief," said Farrant.

"Fenians probably!" remarked Lady Thornton with a sneeze.

How ardently Hope wished she could change the subject; she dreaded at every moment some point-blank question to which her face would reply more truthfully than her lips. Unconsciously she cast an imploring look at her cousin, who immediately responded.

"I say, Hope! if Lady Thornton would excuse us we ought to be off. It will be dusk before we can walk across the park."

"Very true! You had better go."

"Eh? Where? Where are they going," asked Sir Peter, but no one replied—a prayer from Lady Thornton to keep the door shut were the last words they heard.

Hope was never long dressing. She soon rejoined her cavalier whom she found waiting in the hall, while Stubbs held parley with a man who had apparently just come to the door.

"I don't think Sir Peter will see you, sir," Stubbs was saying.

"Pray have the goodness to give him my card," urged the stranger, who was thin and rather more than middle height. Hope glanced quickly at him, but could make out little more than an angular figure, a shabby-genteel and somewhat foreign aspect; of his face she could see little or nothing, as there was a strong light behind him.

"Sir Peter never sees no one without an introduction," returned Stubbs sternly.

"If you present my card he will not refuse," returned the visitor, "when he sees the nature of my

business. I am an antiquarian and dealer in curios—
and ——”

Here he broke off, and seeing that Hope was waiting to pass he lifted his hat, and bowing, not ungracefully, stood aside.

“I hope Stubbs will not leave that fellow alone with his master,” said Bob Farrant, as he came up alongside. “There seems to be a lot of swindlers about.”

“I don’t think he looks like a swindler,” said Hope.

“I daresay you do not,” he returned laughing. “Come, let us see if we can get to Emperor’s Gate in forty-five minutes. It is just the sharp, crisp weather for a brisk walk.”

CHAPTER IV.

FRIENDS IN COUNCIL.

MESSRS. Shears and Judkins held high council together on the morning of this remarkable robbery in the private room of the superior partner.

Shears was a somewhat sententious personage, accurate in speech and dress, and represented the mercantile integrity element in the concern. Judkins was a type of the modern, perky, pushing man of business—one was tall, portly, slow, the other, short, sharp, pug-dog like in appearance, and staccato in manner.

“It is altogether a most extraordinary affair,” said Shears, “and I shall feel exceedingly disappointed if the police cannot unravel the mystery.”

“Well, I don’t know,” returned Judkins with a snap. “If the fellow has got off alive, I suspect it will be uncommon hard to catch him. If it’s not done to-day or to-morrow—why, there will be small chance.

"Unless he is fool enough to cash some of the cheques."

"Oh! he'll know better than to thrust his paw into the trap! I hope Keating has a list of the sums paid. He's late—half-an-hour behind time."

"Ah! Overdone very likely," began Shears, "he was much excited when"—the door opening interrupted him.

"Shall Mr. Keating come in, sir?" asked a clerk.

"Yes, by all means. Ah! Good morning, Mr. Keating!" as the little man came in. He was well and neatly dressed as ever, yet had a drooping air and a distressed expression in his honest blue eyes.

"Good morning, sir."

"Rather late, Keating!" was the salutation of Judkins.

"I fear I am, sir. I have had a very poor night, but fell heavily asleep towards morning. In truth my head feels queer—very queer. I feel convinced that my brutal assailant used some drug or something to stupefy me. Besides—though I scarcely like to mention it in face of such losses as yours—my watch, rather a valuable watch—the gift of my brother in New York—has also been taken."

"And serve you right," exclaimed Judkins, with a short laugh, "for going to sleep with your coat unbuttoned, and such a sum in your breast pocket."

"Still, sir, it is a sort of thing you or any man might do," said Keating with spirit.

"Quite true. I feel sure Mr. Keating is not the man to neglect his duty in any way," observed Shears kindly, "and in this I have no doubt Mr. Judkins agrees with me."

"He would not neglect his duty intentionally I've no doubt. However, we had better be off to the Police Court. We had a message requesting one of us to attend this morning," he added to Keating. "Shall you go, Shears?"

"Well, no! I expect one or two people on important business. You had better go, Judkins. I shall expect your report with impatience. Arrange to offer a reward and by no means stint it."

"Call a cab, Timms!" said Judkins, opening the door and speaking into the clerks' office, "and here, run up to my room and fetch my overcoat, will you,"—he went in to speak to one of the employés.

"Mr. Shears," said Keating, taking the opportunity, "your own honourable mind judges me more justly than Mr. Judkins. I am overwhelmed with the sense of my misfortune. To think I lay like a log—stupefied by some horrible means, and unable to strike a blow in defence of my employers' property."

"My good sir! do not distress yourself. I should be sorry to know you had risked your life. Mr. Judkins belongs to a different school, a somewhat different social class from myself, and has perhaps less of the amenities—a— Oh! you are ready, Judkins? then you had better lose no more time—good morning, Mr. Keating."

At the police office they were evidently expected.

"Oh!" said the Inspector, "we've been looking for you, but I am sorry to say we have not much news. The thief has got off; we have found his disguise, there it is." He lifted a bundle on the table, and opening it, displayed a wide-brimmed soft felt hat, a large black beard, and a capacious Inverness cape.

"That's it! Those are the clothes he wore," cried Keating eagerly. "Where were they found?"

"About six or seven miles this side of Markborough, but there was no sign of an accident, no mark of a heavy body having fallen on the earth, which was soft and damp. They lay on the right side of the up line, which shows the fellow took care not to get out on the side where a down train might have caught him."

"But how the deuce did he manage to escape

being dashed to bits going at such a pace?" asked Judkins.

"It's hard to say! In short, it is a deeper affair than is thought, and," with an air of mystery, "though I cannot say much on the subject at present, I may remark that we have a clue."

"Indeed," cried Judkins, "that's better than I expected, and much to your credit."

"Well, sir, the police are obliged to keep their eyes pretty wide open!" Then to Keating, "Do you happen to know the number of your watch, sir?"

Keating shook his head, "I never took any note of it, it was not an English watch."

"Hum, that's a pity. Now, there's more people than us wanting your man, and if you be so good as not to speak of it outside these walls I don't mind telling you that we've been looking out for him. He is a foreigner, concerned in the murder of that Moscow police officer. You've had a narrow escape, sir! He is a regular desperado. One of the Moscow men went down the day before yesterday to track him somewhere near York, and stumbled on him at the station. He knew him, because the gentleman at whose house he had been staying was with him, and behaved rather curious, I think, for a gentleman. The officer was just going to get into the same carriage (he must be a plucky one) when the gentleman as was speaking to his friend stepped back, sudden like, knocked against him, and they both rolled down together on the platform as the train steamed off. I suppose there was enough seeming accident in it to get the gentleman off. I think he ought to have been run in. Any way the Russian officer telegraphed to Scotland Yard that the man they were in search of was in the train, dressed so and so; and constables were on the look out for him at King's Cross so soon as the five-ten train was due, but no such person was there, nor did the ticket-collector observe any one answering to the description,

only, here was this gentleman robbed, and the Russian got clear away. He must have had the devil's own pluck and luck to drop from the train, and it going full speed."

"Most extraordinary!" ejaculated Judkins.

"He'll not escape, though;" added the inspector, with an air of conviction. "Every port is watched; these fellows generally try to escape to America, and if he makes for the Continent, why, it will be out of the frying pan into the fire."

"Do you think there is any chance of recovering the money?" asked Keating eagerly.

"The gold? Certainly not. The notes may be stopped, and the cheques he will hardly venture to cash. Do you happen to have a list of the property lost, sir?"

"I am ashamed to say the list was in the note-book with the money, but I think I can remember most of it; of course, not the numbers of the notes. I am pretty sure that most of the men who paid their accounts to me took the numbers of the notes. Most of the small country shopkeepers paid me in gold. They were glad to dispose of it without going into the bank, which takes time. I had about three hundred in sovereigns and half sovereigns, and two hundred in notes, the rest in cheques."

"Who were the cheques on?" asked the inspector. "They had better be warned."

"These I can remember," said Keating, and pausing for a moment as if to collect his thoughts, he added, "There were but three, one on the City Bank for 260, one on the Imperial for 70, and one on Foster and Caldwell's, they do a lot of Northern business."

"Ay! that is close on eleven hundred pounds," said Judkins with a groan. "Here Keating, just put down the names of the drawers and amounts, for the inspector!"

"Yes, certainly! Let me have pen and ink, please."

The inspector supplied them, and while Mr. Keating wrote very deliberately, continued to address Judkins: "We are making a strict search through the cottages round the neighbourhood where these things (pointing to the bundle) were found, but we have no report as yet. Of course the fellow would have a pretty long tramp to any point of possible departure. Moreover he must ask his way. Now, the dullest clodhopper would notice the speech of a foreigner."

"Whether you catch him or not is no great matter to me," said Judkins. "But I'll give a hundred pounds to the man that brings such information as will lead to the recovery of the money."

"Very good, sir! I am at liberty to mention this generally?"

"Oh, ay! publish it, placard it; and, I say, if it will save you any trouble I will send round to the banks and warn them. We have frequent dealings with all three."

"If you will, sir, we should be obliged, and now, gentlemen, you may depend on our doing our very best to discover the plunderer and recover your property. We will let you know as soon as we get any reliable information."

"Thank you! I suppose that means it is time to go. Come along, Keating. I'm afraid we have but a blue look-out as regards the cash. Good morning!"

"That was an unfortunate snooze of yours, Keating," said his principal, as they stood outside the police-court looking for a cab.

"Extremely fortunate for myself, probably," returned Keating, with some irritation. "Had I been awake and resisted, I should no doubt have fallen a victim to——"

"Bah! Do you fancy the runaway would have attempted to rob you if you had kept awake? Why, it was seeing you slumbering and hearing you snore, probably tempted him to examine the contents of

your pocket, and he found more than he bargained for. Why, the whole thing was an accident. Didn't you find him in the carriage when you jumped in in a hurry? But as you looked like a fat and greasy citizen he thought he would try his hand. I can't think how the beggar got off. He must have got hurt and may be hiding in some cottage. Hi! cab, come along! You might go round to these banks and explain matters."

"Who? me?" asked Keating, as soon as they were seated and rumbling along. "I am quite ready to go, though I must say I am fitter to be under medical treatment. I do not suppose that a shock such as I have received can be expected to pass away without leaving some bad effects."

"Oh! we all know the value you put on your skin."

"It is of value to me," returned Keating loftily, and Judkins taking out some letters to read, they spoke no more till they reached the office.

Here Judkins proceeded to order Keating to lose no time in going round to the bankers, and to return as soon as he could to report to Mr. Shears.

The little man turned obediently to leave the room. When near the door he staggered, and would have fallen, had not one of the younger clerks coming in caught him.

"Poor little chap! This business will be the death of him," said the cashier, who was on friendly terms with the hapless Keating.

"He is a confounded little idiot!" growled Judkins. "Here, get him a glass of water. He is coming round again. Grainger, *you* run round to the banks, and show this list of cheques. Tell 'em not to cash any, but to stop presenter, if possible."

"Yes, sir," cried the young man addressed, reaching down his hat with alacrity. The robbery was a source of much excitement, an agreeable variety in the monotony of their existence.

The messenger departed, and Mr. Keating began to recover. The kindly cashier producing some sherry, he partook of it and a little colour came into his face.

"Judkins is a beast!" said the cashier indignantly. "If old Shears drops off, I'll not stay here. Shears is a gentleman. He is pompous and long-winded, but not half bad. He does you justice, Keating."

"I am unfortunate, but not to blame," said Keating, row quite himself, "and I am quite sure Mr. Shears is my friend."

Here a lad announced that Mr. Keating was wanted in Mr. Shears' room, as soon as he was better.

"*I am* better," said Keating, standing up with an effort. "No, thank you. No more wine."

Mr. Shears expressed his regret that Keating was suffering so much from the shock he had received, and then plunged into a discussion on what they had gathered from the inspector.

"Hum!" said Shears, when they had spoken for some time, "it just comes to this. The sum in gold is irretrievably lost, and there is small chance of recovering the notes, especially if the fellow can afford to keep them. By the way, Judkins, you ought to advertise the numbers as soon as possible! Telegraph to the various customers to send numbers, but I believe that we may save the five hundred odd represented by the cheques, particularly as we have warned——"

Here the door was thrust open unceremoniously, and the clerk, who had been despatched to warn the bankers, came in excitedly.

"Too late, sir" he exclaimed, "too late at Foster and Caldwell's. The cheque was cashed about ten o'clock this morning. The clerk who cashed it says it was presented by a queer Jewish, German-looking man, who spoke broken English. The clerk, who knows most of us, remarked that he had never seen him before, but he is coming over to see you himself."

"This is very extraordinary!" cried Judkins. "It

shows that the thief has accomplices. The mystery grows thicker. We must warn the police."

"Gentleman from Foster and Caldwell's wishes to see you," said an employé, putting in his head.

"Show him in," returned Mr. Shears impatiently; and a young man with a pale, frightened expression entered.

"Well, let us hear all about it," cried Judkins, whereupon the young man with some agitation recounted how a man of middle height with blue spectacles, and long red hair and moustache, clad in a loose sort of frock and a tall hat, had come into the bank early, and presented a cheque drawn by Sykes & Co. of Lynesbridge on Foster & Caldwell in favour of Messrs. Shears and Judkins. The clerk was accustomed to cash cheques in favour of the firm, which were generally presented by employés with whose appearance they were slightly acquainted. The young man looked at the signature of "Shears and Judkins" which seemed quite right, and observed, "I don't think you have been here before," to which the foreign-looking messenger replied: "No, I have just been taken on as foreign correspondent," adding, that he could write well in four languages, and would be glad of occupation in the evening, if the clerk would permit him to leave his card. "He gave me this," continued the young man, "and added in his lingo, 'Sherman, French, Italian, Roussian, I can do all.'" He gave the card to Shears, and went on. "Our manager has blown me up awful for not going to him before I cashed the cheque, but it seemed quite right, and when he offered me *that*, I had no doubt at all."

"*That*," was a small card, "inscribed 'Jacob Gustenberg, 21, Burton Street, Whitechapel. Foreign Correspondent and Translator of Languages.'"

While Mr. Shears studied this through his double glasses, the unfortunate clerk poured forth a torrent of

apologies and regrets. He would not have had it happen for all he was worth, etc., etc.

"And pray how much might that be?" sneered Judkins.

"Russian!" exclaimed Keating, gazing at the card in the hand of his "worthy principal." "This must be an accomplice of these Nihilist scoundrels. No time ought to be lost in acquainting the police of this—this complication! Pray, how did he take it?—the cash, I mean?"

"Oh, he wanted a lot of gold. But he took notes too. I gave him a hundred and thirty sovs and the rest in tens and fives. It took some time to note the numbers. He didn't seem in a hurry."

"Let this be a lesson to you, young man," said Mr. Shears gravely. "Now the sooner these particulars are in the possession of Inspector Brown the better. Who shall we send, Judkins? We must request Mr.—Mr.—Your name, sir?"

"Tilton," murmured the crestfallen clerk.

"Yes, Mr. Tilton!—to go to the police-station with——"

"If you will permit me, sir," said Keating, "I will accompany the young man. I intend to devote myself to this search, and thus the time of your other employés will not be broken up."

He spoke with firmness and decision, and seemed to have made a successful effort to pull himself together.

"Very good, Keating, very good," said Mr. Shears encouragingly. "The sooner you go the better, and I should like to see the cheque and the signature. How can a Russian or German Jew have got hold of our signature? It is most extraordinary. Now, Mr. Keating you had better lose no time."

* * * * *

Evening was closing in when Keating knocked and rang at the door of his lodging. A fog—less dense, but as raw and chill, as that of the previous evening

—was gathering over the poplars and deepening the gloom. Keating shivered while he waited for the door to be opened, and earnestly hoped that his good landlady and her attractive daughter would have things ready warm and comfortable for him when he went in.

His knock was not answered quite so quickly as usual, and he was beginning to feel a little impatient when the door opened and he beheld Mrs. Allen, a candle in her hand, ushering out a stranger—a man—a tall, thin, well-dressed, *genteel*-looking man, in a be-frogged overcoat with a fur collar. Mrs. Allen was smiling as she seldom smiled on anyone, save on Keating.

"Very well, sir," she was saying, "about eight I'll have a good fire, and you may be sure of your bed being well aired. My sense of dooty—Oh! Mr. Keating! I beg your pardon, sir!"

"Thank you," said Keating, stepping in with a dazed, bewildered look, staring at the stranger, who, raising his hat, thereby showing thick, grizzled, wavy hair, repeated, "At eight then," and with a bow descended the steps.

"I am glad you are in, Mr. Keating," ejaculated Mrs. Allen, stepping nimbly on a chair to light the gas. "It is a bad night to be out. Your supper is ready, and I am happy to tell you I have just been and let my upper rooms, after all these weeks! And it was all done of a minute. A nice civil-spoken gentleman, in the artistic line."

"I trust and hope, Mrs. Allen, that you have been careful about references?" returned Keating sharply and nervously.

"Yes, indeed, sir! I made it a particular point, and he said I was quite right, only as he was in a hurry he begged leave to pay a week in advance, and to continue to do so while he stayed, which showed, I think, that he was a real gentleman, and highly respectable. He agrees to pay fifteen shillings a week

for the rooms, with gas, sitting-room fire, kitchen fire, washing of linen, boots, *and* cruets extra"—this in a triumphant key.

"I trust he may not prove a swindler," said Keating gloomily.

"Why, law bless you, Mr. Keating, what have we to be swindled out of?"

"You have a daughter, ma'am, and these foreigners are dangerous."

"A foreigner? Why, he's a regular Englishman just like yourself!"

CHAPTER V.

"DINNER AT MRS. MENTEITH'S."

HOPE FARRANT dressed for the little dinner at Mrs. Menteith's with small anticipations of pleasure. Indeed, her visit to Town had hitherto been a failure. Lady Thornton's indisposition had made her a prisoner, and slightly ruffled her temper, while it threw Hope on the good offices of Bob or the society of Sir Peter, whose conversation was apt to develop into long harangues or lectures on the particular hobby which occupied him for the time.

Bob was provokingly attentive and devoted, and Hope was tormented by the dread of being drawn into an engagement with him through compassion and regard, while she felt more than ever averse to the idea of accepting him as a lover.

She blushed for herself—she raged at herself; but between the honest, good-natured young Lancer and her imagination the vision of her fugitive fellow-traveller perpetually intervened. The strong face, the dark, appealing eyes, the clear, decided tones, and the cool daring with which he effected his escape were ever present with her, though she told herself twenty times

a day that in the face of the evidence against him she could not doubt he was guilty of a contemptible theft. Then the sense of sharing the secret of such a man oppressed her, and made her nervously uneasy. She had common sense enough to perceive that the fact of her silence would make the whole affair look very bad for herself if it ever came out, and things had such a way of coming out. If this man *was* a thief she could not count much on his sense of honour to keep *her* part in the drama. Oh! she would try not to think about it. It was all so annoying and unfortunate.

"You will tell Mrs. Menteith how vexed I am I cannot go to her," said Lady Thornton, as Hope came into the drawing-room to say good-bye. "Her dinners are always pleasant, but I must not venture. Do you know I think I shall run away for a week or two to the Isle of Wight—nothing but change will cure me. You must come with me, dear! Are you well wrapped up, my love? I cannot have you catching cold!"

Mrs. Menteith had a small but charming flat in South Kensington, where she resided from time to time when tired of Paris, sick of Rome, or displeased with Berlin. Mrs. Menteith was the young widow (some people asserted *not* so very young) of an ancient general, who had left her a fair fortune. She was connected in some remote way with the Farrants through Bob's mother, and she was very friendly with that young officer. There was a choice little party of eight, and a very perfect and simple dinner, to say nothing of wine well calculated to gladden the heart of man.

It is a remarkable fact how much the "treatment" of a widow differs from the "system" of her unmarried sister, the latter assumes a tone of spiritual and intellectual superiority to the grosser pleasures of our many-sided nature. She undervalues the epicureanism of the table, and aims at a tone of tenderness or

heroism, of high-aims and generous self-devotion, her topics are poetical, or didactic, or devotional, or even lively and droll, though even in this there is a tinge of sweetness and unworldliness.

Now, whether it be that contact with the earthlier portion of humanity develops a new class of perceptions, a widow's charm largely consists of the surroundings in which she is set. Warm, cheerful rooms, full of photographs, books, trifles provocative of talk, a *piquante* table, equally provocative to the appetite, its fleshly attractions disguised and adorned with refined prettiness, a general air of relaxation and welcome, of repose and sympathy, which converts an unassuming South Kensington flat into a civilised subdued Venusberg, where the wandering Tannhäusers of Society are not sorry to escape from the exalted standards of our maiden Elizabeths.

Mrs. Menteith was a very soothing sort of a woman, and immensely popular, especially with men, though she was far from considering a woman as unworthy of fascination. She welcomed Hope very warmly, and made her feel quite at home. She assigned her an elderly, well-preserved, agreeable, travelled diplomatist as her cavalier, but she ordered Bob Farrant to take herself in to dinner. A certain Marchesa, American by birth, but almost Italianised by an early marriage, a woman who had been everywhere and seen everything, the editor of a well-known Review, a Hungarian attaché, and an English country gentleman, much sought by mothers for his large estates and high position, made up the party. The talk was bright and easy, while to Hope it seemed bold and original, and the moments flew fast.

Returning to the warm, softly-lighted, gracefully-decorated, flower-perfumed drawing room, Mrs. Menteith and the Marchesa fell into a profound disquisition, touching the truth or falsehood of certain stories affecting certain persons, total strangers to

Hope, who retired with a large book of photographs to a table in a corner. A succession of faces, male and female, amused her for some time. They all had more or less of character, and she speculated on what and who they might be. Suddenly she started; turning a page, she beheld a portrait of her strange travelling companion, a large vignette showed him leaning against the side of a French window, across which stretched a balcony.

It was impossible to suppose it a chance resemblance. There was the peculiar alert, upward look, the stately turn of the throat and head, which had struck her as so remarkable.

Her cheeks flushed, her heart beat! She turned to ask a string of questions, but she dared not—a word, a look, might arouse the suspicions and provoke the queries she dreaded. Anxious, curious, disturbed, she sat gazing at the photograph. So striking was the likeness, that she could almost fancy she heard the voice which had expressed such faith in her sympathy and fidelity. She would try to command herself sufficiently to ask, in a careless, unobtrusive way, a few questions respecting some of the other photographs, and so come round to the face that fascinated her. "I am growing frightfully deceitful and *rusée*," she thought "How horribly demoralising it is to have anything to hide ——"

"So you are reduced to studying photographs, Miss Farrant," said Mr. Clavering, "the squire of high degree," who had sat beside her at dinner, and who was the first of the gentlemen to come in from the post-prandial *séance*. "What terrible schemes have Madame La Marquise and our fair hostess been concocting, that they left you out in the cold?"

"I retreated here of my own free will," returned Hope, looking up with a smile, but laying her hand on the open book. "Faces interest and amuse me."

"Yes, there is a certain degree of fascination in the

human countenance—let me see who Mrs. Menteith has here.” Hope turned the book to him, and he immediately exclaimed with surprise, “By Jove! It is Vescilitzki! It’s the image of him. I say, Mrs. Menteith,” to his hostess who was crossing the room, “you have Vescilitzki here?”

“Yes! Is it not good? Just as he used to look out of the centre window of the Imperial Hotel. What a curious, unsatisfactory creature he is.”

“Rather visionary, but not a bad fellow. I liked him the best of the lot—of men I mean—in Berlin that winter. What has become of him?”

“Oh, I have not heard of him for an age!” indifferently. “But I have a great idea he is the Vescilitzki who was concerned in that Moscow plot. I feel sure he would take refuge in England, and you know that extraordinary affair in the train about a week or ten days ago? They say a Russian refugee was the robber, or was mixed up in it.”

“Oh! come now, Mrs. Menteith! that is being a little too hard on your old favourite! I fancy Vescilitzki was touched by Nihilism, but he was too much a gentleman to soil his hands with theft.”

“I am not so sure! Very few Russians have any sense of honour! Besides, if he were flying for his life and wanted money, he would be quite ready to ‘take the thing that lieth nearest,’ and shape from it a way of escape. Of course he *might* mean to return the money some day!”

“But Vescilitzki always seemed well off!”

“Seemed! Oh! he was a desperate gambler, I believe.”

“They say Vescilitzki was absolutely tracked to the train which he took to London from some town in the North, and he never was seen after,” observed the attaché.

“Except by that unfortunate fellow he robbed,” added the diplomatist.

"If he robbed him," said Clavering.

"Who else could have done it?" cried Mrs. Menteith.

"They were alone in the carriage together, for I feel quite sure the Russian they missed, Vescilitzki, and the robber were one and the same man! Then remember, the train never stopped between Markborough and London."

"Still, if Vescilitzki was the sort of fellow to thieve, I don't fancy he would be such a friend and favourite of that curious chap, Dacre, who is a man of high character. They say that when he was seeing Vescilitzki off, he stumbled against the detective, who was going to follow him into the carriage, threw him down and rolled over him! Dacre is a great athlete, and could have held the other probably with one hand, but I suppose he wanted to give an air of accident to the encounter."

"I believe it is the Vescilitzki you knew that the Russian police want," said the attaché, "and I believe that they are at their wits' end to know what has become of him. He has vanished completely."

"I am very glad!" cried the American Marchesa. "I saw him frequently the last winter we were in Rome, and we liked him immensely. He was as poor as a rat then, and studying art. He paints very well! But I don't know what he has been doing since!"

"Oh! I like him very much too, but I fear he is an adventurer," said Mrs. Menteith, sadly.

"I must say the case is very strong against Vescilitzki," quoth the diplomatist.

"You know my cousin was in the train when the scare took place," explained young Farrant.

Hope flushed up in terror. What dreadful disclosure was going to be torn from her. Bob's next words relieved her a little. "She knew nothing about it till she saw a crowd round the unlucky chap that

was robbed, and she sent the servant to find out what was the matter! Sir Peter Thornton's idea is not a bad one. He thinks that some swell-mobsmen followed Keating, the clerk who was robbed, and knew that he had a considerable sum about him, that at Markborough he appeared to leave the carriage, but hid under the seat to watch his opportunity, and probably would have chloroformed his victim. When the Russian got out of the carriage—which he certainly did—and then as the poor devil of a clerk was sound asleep he got his chance! In the scrimmage of the arrival he might get out unnoticed."

"That might be!" said the diplomatist. "No doubt the police have thought of every possible solution to the mystery. The complete disappearance of the man is not to my mind half so wonderful as his escape from the flying train!"

"The detectives will find him some time or other!" said the hostess, as if tired of the subject. "Do sing us some of your beautiful Hungarian airs," she added, addressing the attaché, "or Madame di Bellaggio will sing a duet with you!"

Music ensued, and Vescilitzki was forgotten.

Mrs. Menteith carried off young Farrant to a distant window to show him a model of a favourite race horse, and they remained in conversation. Clavering occasionally whispered remarks to Hope, who also contributed her quota to the music, having a rich, sweet, well-trained voice, but her thoughts far away. She had been immensely interested by the discussion and surprised at the pleasure with which she listened to the opinions favourable to Vescilitzki, and above all to what seemed a very possible solution of the mysterious robbery. The rest of the evening passed quickly. Clavering bestowed most of his attention on Hope, who liked his conversation and decided in her own mind that he was a man of sense and discrimination.

"I can put you down at your hotel, Bob," she said to her cousin when her carriage was announced.

"Thank you," he returned, his face brightening up.

"Staying in town?" asked Clavering.

"Yes, for the present."

"At Lady Thornton's? I used to know her some years ago at Cannes. Would she remember me were I to go?"

"I daresay she would. Good night."

"What an awful flirt you have grown, Hope," said Bob indignantly, when they had driven some way.

"A flirt! pray, with whom did I flirt to night?"

"Why, you never looked at any one but that conceited fellow, Clavering."

"Nonsense, Bob! Good manners oblige one to answer when spoken to! *You* flirted pretty steadily with Mrs. Menteith!"

"Flirted with Mrs. Menteith! Why, she was talking of you nearly all the time! You are an ungrateful monkey! She was asking if I thought you would like to stay with her for a while, instead of being carried off by Lady Thornton, as she threatens, to vegetate in the Isle of Wight!"

"Well, I beg her pardon! It is very good of her, but I cannot forsake Lady Thornton! She is very fond of me, and with all her spirit and self-assertion she is very lonely; she feels her loneliness too, and I will not leave her, unless my uncle wants me."

"But just think what fun we might have at Mrs. Menteith's. I could run up so often! though," with a change of tone, "I don't suppose you care much for *that*, Hope."

"Yes, I do, Bob! I should be a 'good-for-nothing' if I were not glad to see you. You were always so good to me."

"Good! Ah, dear cousin ——"

Here the brougham stopped, and Bob was obliged to say good night. "I may come and hear what you are

going to do to-morrow morning. I do not return to Aldershot till the afternoon."

"Yes! come by all means. I daresay Lady Thornton will be prompt about her trip to the Isle of Wight, now she has made up her mind to go."

This dinner, and the unexpected light thrown upon the history and character of her very remarkable fellow-traveller by the discussion respecting him, gave Hope Farrant ample subject for reflection. Though a man of Society, and a gentleman, it was evident that some of his acquaintance did not consider him above the dastardly deed of which he was accused, while others gave him the benefit of the doubt. Bob's suggestion, or rather Sir Peter's, seemed to her the best solution of the strange affair yet offered. She would give a great deal to be able to believe it. This she could not quite. Then she turned her thoughts to Mrs. Menteith. She was pretty, interesting, caressing, yet somehow Hope was not attracted to her; something she could not tell what, gave her a vague sensation at once repellant and distrustful.

"I would not stay with her if I could possibly help it," Hope mused, "even if Bob would not be there constantly. I do not know what to do about Bob. I cannot put him off always, and he is such a good fellow, I hate to vex or distress him; yet I must not let myself be drawn in to marry him; it would be bad for us both."

With wise resolution in her heart, Hope descended to breakfast, where, somewhat to her surprise, she found Lady Thornton before her.

"Yes, my dear," said that lady, in reply to her greeting, "the idea of going away has quite roused me. I should have died if I had stayed on here. I have telegraphed to the Beach Hotel, near Shanklin, a charming, sheltered, quite comfortable place. I fancy Miss Vignolles is staying there just now—a very amusing woman. We will go down to-morrow by the

eleven-thirty quick train, and get settled by dinner-time. I will take Smith and give Stubbs a few days' holiday. Sir Peter wishes to stay here, but his own man can look after him, so——"

"If you please, m' lady, the—the person has called again about those h'antiques," said Stubbs, entering with a solemn air.

"That's right, Stubbs; show him in. I shall soon get to the bottom of *him*. This is a new pedlar of rubbish who has managed to fasten on Sir Peter," to Hope, "and I want to see what rubbish he has to sell."

Here Stubbs returned with a salver, on which lay a card. Lady Thornton took and read it, "Eugene Lisle."

"Indeed, quite aristocratic, I protest. Well, Mr. Lisle," as he entered the room, "so you have called by appointment to see Sir Peter? He is not quite ready yet, and I should like to have a peep at your treasures."

Eugene Lisle was a slight upright figure, with iron-grey, crisp hair, brown complexion, high, bony temples and thin, sunken cheeks. He would have looked old, but for the fire and vivacity of his small, dark eyes, which looked keenly out from under thick, bushy eyebrows.

He bowed low, rather a foreign bow. "I am very glad to have an opportunity of showing them to your ladyship," he said, and he took from a breast pocket a small leather case, which he opened, and in which lay the miniature of a good-looking man in an old-fashioned uniform, a ring, and two or three coins. The miniature had no setting.

"This," said the visitor, handing the picture to Lady Thornton, "is an original portrait of the celebrated Prince Potemkin. It was given by the Prince to a French officer in the service of Catherine, and preserved with care in his family. The last possessor

of it has fallen into reduced circumstances, and asked me to try and dispose of it."

"It seems a good painting," said Lady Thornton, handing it to Hope.

"I wonder was this really like him," she observed. Raising her eyes, she met those of Lisle fixed on her with so searching and keen a gaze that she felt almost startled. "We must suppose it had a resemblance, since it was given by the prince himself."

"And these coins?" asked Lady Thornton.

"Ancient Jewish shekels, found near the Caspian—very rare and curious."

"What is the price of the miniature?"

"Twenty-five pounds, madam."

"What, without any setting?"

"Without any setting. The diamonds which were round it have been disposed of, and *this* would not be offered at so low a price but for the poverty of the owner."

"Well, I am no judge of such things, but, as a matter of common sense, I must say that it might be the portrait of any young officer in a foreign uniform of the eighteenth century."

"That is true, madam; but should you think seriously of purchasing the picture, I would furnish proofs——"

"The proofs, my good sir, are necessary to make one think of the purchase."

The dealer in curios smiled a peculiar smile—a little contemptuous, a little sad.

"You are right," he said, "and if you will allow me to call to-morrow——"

"To-morrow we leave for the Isle of Wight."

Here the interview was interrupted by the entrance of Sir Peter's valet.

"If you please, m' lady, Sir Peter has asked—if—if—the gentleman had come; he wishes to see him at once."

The "pedlar of antiquities" closed up his case and took up his hat.

"I don't fancy Sir Peter is likely to buy either picture or coins," was Lady Thornton's parting shot. "He has heaps of these sort of things, and is no mean judge."

"I should like, for my own credit's sake, to satisfy your ladyship, who has, I see, a critical eye. If you would let me have your address, I would gladly send you a memo touching the history of this picture."

"It would not be worth the trouble, my good sir. I have no money to throw away on historic relics." Then, turning to Hope as Lisle bowed and left the room: "That sounded like an attempt to keep up the connection, didn't it? There is something peculiar about that man."

"He interests me. What eyes he has. He gave me such a look; it made me shiver!"

"Nonsense! I cannot have you giving way to nerves, you who were always sensible and healthy—mentally healthy, I mean. Now I have a dozen things to do, and a list of commissions for you. Your cousin is coming here, you say? You really ought not to encourage that young man so much. He is no match for you in any way. Ring the bell, dear."

CHAPTER VI.

LISLE MAKES A BARGAIN.

BUT Lisle did not succeed in disposing of either the portrait or the coins to Sir Peter Thornton. That astute gentleman offered half the sum asked, and desired the agent to consult his principal and return to him.

In going out, the dealer in curios asked the valet where he should write to Lady Thornton, who wished

to be furnished with some information concerning the antiques, but she had omitted to give her address in the Isle of Wight.

This the valet furnished unhesitatingly.

"Then I shall not be able to see Sir Peter again," said Lisle, "not till his return."

"His return! Bless you, *he* is not going, only her ladyship and Miss Farrant. Sir Peter he sticks to Town till it is too hot to hold him!"

Leaving the house, Mr. Eugene Lisle directed his steps to Scotland Yard and was there admitted to the private room of one of the higher officers, who received him cordially.

"Well, and have you any news for us to to-day?" was his greeting.

"Nothing very distinct," returned Lisle, in the same gently grave tone and manner with which he had addressed Lady Thornton. "But I have a trace, and I am inclined to believe Vescilitzki never left London."

"Nothing more likely. There is no harbour for criminals like our great metropolis—but what have you found?"

"You see my knowledge of Vescilitzki's personal appearance enabled me (in examining the cabmen who frequent the Great Northern Station) to describe it pretty accurately; and yesterday, I hit on a man who recognised the description. He remembers the row about the robbery, and while it was going on, a man very like Vescilitzski jumped into his cab, and told him to drive to an address in Hackney to which he took me.

"It was a small, respectable house and a little girl let me in. Soon her mother came and I told some story about seeking for a relation whom I understood lived there, but I could get nothing out of her, she was silent and stony, yet she gave me the idea of having something to conceal. I shall watch the house."

"It is very unlikely that a runaway would drive straight from the station to the house where he expected to find shelter; he would have driven in another direction, got out, walked a bit, and taken a fresh cab."

"Well, our quarry apparently did not," returned Lisle. "I shall keep the house and its owner under surveillance. You see, none of us know him except myself, and I should like to handle the reward."

The officer smiled.

"I daresay you are keen enough about that, keener than in following the scent, it strikes me, considering the character we had with you."

Lisle looked at him with a steady piercing glance, and in a quiet and significant tone said:

"Wait!"

"We *have* waited, Mr. Lisle, and I confess I am growing impatient, not to say despondent; every day that passes over us the scent grows fainter. What do you say to the clever dodge of getting that cheque cashed before the news of the robbery got wind? Do you believe the same man did all?"

"I do. Vescilitzski had no jackal." He paused. "The only difference I see, was that the man who presented the cheque was not so tall as Vescilitzski. I should like to bag the price set on the man, and the reward for the cash."

"We'll both have a try for it," said the police officer, with a grin. "Now I'll tell you another knowing dodge of your countryman. He went straight from Foster and Caldwell's Bank to all the nearest money-changers' and changed nearly twenty or thirty notes of various values into gold."

"It was a deep dodge, and daring! but *I* am not a Russian!"

"What are you then?"

"I am of mixed nationality. My father was English, my mother Polish, and I was born in Russia. I

“speak several languages, and I entered into the service of the Russian police.”

“Well, if you succeed in luring this shy bird into our clutches, why, I’ll say you are worth something. I do not think he has passed through any of our ports, they have been pretty well watched, by men, too, who knew Vescilitzski in Moscow.”

“Ah! he is a sharp fellow, very sharp. But——” an expressive pause ensued.

After a little professional talk they parted. Lisle in deep thought bent his steps to Piccadilly Circus, and there took an omnibus to the wilds of Kilburn, where he walked down a road still boasting some trees and some neat gardens.

At one of the larger houses, the door of which presented a brass plate bearing the words “Establishment for Young Ladies,” he paused and rang. He was speedily admitted and ushered into a scrupulously neat, but somewhat depressing drawing-room, and before he had time to examine the sketches which adorned the walls, or the elaborately worked cushions which enriched the sofa, the door was burst open and a little girl of perhaps ten years old, with golden hair and bright, keen eyes something like his own, darted into the room and bounding into his arms, exclaimed:

“My own, dear, darling father!”

* * * * *

Meanwhile, prosperity smiled upon the somewhat struggling household in Caroline Place. The new tenant was in every respect a model lodger, even surpassing the hitherto incomparable Keating, being as punctual, as friendly, as gracious, as that gentleman, while he was free from the fidgety fads which caused a certain degree of irritating trouble in the service of the latter.

Of late, too, Mr. Keating had dined every day at home and stayed in doors a good deal. Having suffered considerably from the nervous shock he had sustained,

he thought it well to place himself in the doctor's hands, and had been advised to refrain from business, to take a tonic, and to seek change of air and scene.

The first suggestions he accepted, the last he declined.

Still he improved slowly in spirits, especially as the charming Augusta grew more and more gracious, even hinting that she might listen to reason, if he would take a house with bay windows and furnish the same on a liberal scale. To this her suitor did seriously incline.

Meantime "the Upper Floor," as the new inmate was termed until they grew familiar with his name, rarely asked for more than breakfast and tea, for which he generally brought in some little dainty. He was, as Mrs. Allen expressed it, as quiet as a lamb, and that considerate that you wouldn't know there was a second man in the house!

Mr. Keating however did not at first appear too well pleased to have a rival so near the throne. He had somewhat pooh-pooh'd Mrs. Allen's praises, and more than once expressed a fervent hope that his respected landlady might not regret her too ready confidence.

Little by little however the mild and well-bred "upper floor," gained on the "igh and 'aughty," dweller in the drawing-rooms. When they met on the stairs, the new-comer saluted the established inmate, and remarked on the weather, &c., and one evening as Keating was coming in and the other going out, the latter observed, "You'll excuse me sir, if I take a liberty, but your door happened to be open and my eye was caught by a rather remarkable picture which hangs between the windows."

"Oh, ah, yes! It is an old thing I picked up at a broker's in Wardour Street. The blue drapery makes a bit of colour, and I was tempted."

"Ha! you bought it on your own judgment?"

"Oh! law bless you, yes! Music is more in my line than painting, though I am fond of art too."

"Would you kindly permit me to inspect it by daylight, when you happen to be at home. I have an idea I know the painter. In fact, I am a connoisseur. It is my profession; allow me to present you with my card."

"Ahem, thank you," glancing at it. "I am sure Mr. Lisle, I should be very pleased to hear your opinion of the picture, and I have one or two bits of china, that you would probably know about, so if you care to look in to-morrow on your way to business I shall be happy to see you. I am taking a rest myself by the doctor's orders. You may have heard that I have had a great shock lately?"

Mr. Lisle had heard of the unfortunate circumstance with great regret—more civil words and an appointment to meet next day, and they parted.

"Your mother's new lodger seems a superior sort of man after all," observed Keating to his *fiancée*, who sometimes took up her work and honoured him with an evening visit, which he preferred to paying his respects to her in her mother's shabby parlour, to the accompaniment of Ted's scratching and squealing on his slate.

"Oh! he is quite the gentleman, just see the way he bows. I am sure he has been used to the best of carriage company some time or other."

"Then I should like to know what brought him down to an 'upper floor' in Islington?"

"There is something like a foreigner about him," said Gussie. "He speaks beautiful English though, and what a nice voice he has."

"Do you call it nice? Why it is down in his boots."

Gussie laughed and Keating changed the subject.

"Do you know I saw an uncommon nice house to-day my dear! in a nice new terrace they are building to the north of Primrose Hill, capital rooms and a good garden. I should enjoy a garden."

"Oh, law! Don't take me amongst bricks and mortar. I'd hate to be in a place where I'd be over my ankles in slush every time I stepped outside my house."

"Oh! you are a particular puss!" and he tried to inflict a kiss, which was promptly rejected.

"You are a cruel, hard-hearted girl! Now what do you say to travelling about a bit, before we settle down? Travelling is very pleasant and amusing. I've been as far as Boulogne myself. It would make you die laughing to see them all bathing there higgledy-piggledy!"

"Oh for shame, Mr. Keating! but doesn't it cost a heap of money travelling abroad?"

"Well! no, not so very much, and haven't I been scraping and saving for years, and investing and buying in and selling out, and now I ask nothing better than to spend it all on you, my dear! We'll go on the Continent, perhaps further, and take a nice house after."

"I'm sure Mr. Keating you are very kind," returned Gussie looking most amiable, her eyes lighting up with exultation at the idea of such a life of amusement and ease as seemed to open before her. "And though I can't talk nonsense as other girls do, I'll show you I'm not ungrateful."

"Then, my precious dear, why put off the happy day?" and the little man launched into lover-like raptures which Gussie was pleased to accept graciously.

"I'll tell you what it is," said Keating, returning to commonplace topics "I shall see if I can't be my own master in future and cut all business but my own. I know a thing or two about shares and stocks, and by devoting my whole attention to manipulate my little capital, I might fill up my time and make my fortune!"

"That *would* be nice," cried Gussie, her admiration rising as he unfolded his ambitions. "I shouldn't wonder if you got into Parliament."

"Worse men than me, with fewer wits, have sat

there before! Must you go? Augusta my love! Oh! if you only knew how cold and dark and lonesome the place seems when you have left it; but never mind. 'There is a land of pure delight,' where we shall dwell together in unity." Mr. Keating's knowledge of literature was chiefly drawn from hymn books and the daily papers.

Mr. Lisle did not fail to present himself on the following morning. Keating was sitting in his slippers reading the paper, but the table beside him was covered with letters and writing materials.

"I take you at your word, sir," said Lisle.

"You are very welcome," replied Keating, rising and drawing forward a chair.

"Thank you, I will not sit down. I only want to look at the picture. Thank you; there is a very good light here. Ha! it is a fine head—a *Mater Dolorosa*, and by Domenichino, or I am much mistaken. That ought to fetch a good price. The blue drapery over the head is splendid. May I ask where you found this?"

"In Wardour Street. I had had my eye on that escritoire under it for some time, but the old Jew I bought it from would not come to terms. At last he threw in the picture. I had rather a fancy for it, and—ah! let me see—it stood me in about thirty shillings. Stay; I'll get it down for you." He stepped up on a chair and took it down.

"Take care," cried Lisle. "You will knock that bureau of yours, which seems a good piece of work."

"Oh! I'll take care. There it is. Let me get a duster (I always keep one) and wipe it a bit."

The picture was moved to and fro, and turned and examined. Then Lisle produced a small magnifying glass from his pocket and pored into one corner; then he exclaimed: "I can make out a '15' and some marks and a 'D.' This corroborates my idea. I should like old Crusius to see this."

"Who may he be?"

"One of the keenest dealers in London. Knows more about pictures than all the scribbling art critics put together. Now suppose, to save time and trouble, you sell the picture to me for ten pounds."

"You are very good," said Keating, with a grin, "but if you are right, why it's worth a good many tens."

"I don't deny it may be. But that is all the money I have about me at present. If you will trust me to act as your agent and let me show the picture to one or two dealers I might get you thirty or forty pounds for it."

Keating again dusted the picture and then said candidly:

"Well, to tell you the truth, I would rather not—if you don't mind."

"Mind? No, of course not. I respect your caution. Then shall I bring a dealer to look at the head?"

"No; I am not fond of strangers coming about my place."

"Then I am at a loss what to suggest."

"I'll tell you, Mr. Lisle. Just give me thirty for it yourself, and make what profit you can."

"Ah, that is another matter," and he began to re-examine the head. "Do you know, I wish I could—I believe I should make a decent profit on the transaction. I wish I could. But, in truth, I am rather at low water mark just at present. Ah, let me see. I expect some money soon. Suppose I pay you £30 in £5 instalments; you holding the picture in the meantime?"

"Hum! I might think about it. How long would it be before you complete the purchase?"

"Ah!—seven or eight weeks."

"That's too long. I am going to be married, and I want to be off on my wedding tour before that."

"Ah! indeed. Accept my congratulations. May I guess the young lady's name?"

"Yes; get along."

"The charming and brilliant Miss Augusta Allen."

"Why, how do you know?"

"Ah! my dear sir, I have seen much of human nature, and before I had the pleasure of knowing you, I recognised the secret of the young lady's heart by the way she uttered your name."

"Oh, come now," cried Keating, his pale, plump cheeks flushing with pleasure. "You are sharp—but about the picture?" A good deal of haggling ensued, and it was finally arranged that Lisle was to make two payments of five and two of ten pounds, within a month.

"I'll just go and fetch you a five-pound note to begin with," said Lisle. Leaving the room he soon returned. "There," he added, placing it beside Keating. "You'll kindly give me a line of acknowledgment and please state terms of agreement."

"Certainly," and Keating proceeded to write. Lisle occupied himself in examining the escritoire or bureau with an admiring expression.

"Ah, thank you," receiving the paper from Keating and putting it in his pocket-book. "You really have a very good eye for *les objets d'art*. This is a very good piece of eighteenth century work. French, I think. If I could see the inside I could tell the date, or about the date, and——"

"Oh, thank you," returned Keating, drily. "It is a sound useful article, but its date is of no importance to me. Come, let us hang the picture up again. It is pretty safe here."

"Ah, yes; I shall often look at it as I pass the door. "I have a passion for Domenichino's masterpieces. Perhaps I may receive a sum due to me next week, when I shall certainly give you a large instalment. Ah, I see you are looking at your pens and ink. I will not occupy you any longer. Can you tell me the time?"

"I think I can," drawing out a shabby old silver watch. "It's not quite half-past eleven. I am not too sure of this old turnip. I bought it merely to serve a turn. My own gold chronometer with a handsome gold chain was taken at the same time my employers' money was stolen; but that was a small trouble compared to the loss of another's property."

"A most unfortunate affair," said Lisle sympathetically. "I suppose the Russian refugee was the culprit."

"Why, of course. Who else could have done the act? We were alone in the carriage," cried Keating.

"I have heard it suggested that someone who knew you had money about you secreted himself under one of the seats and took advantage of the other man leaving the carriage to——"

"It might be," interrupted Keating, "but it is highly improbable. Anyhow, the money is gone and I see little chance of its recovery; nor shall I ever feel quite the same man again. My employers do me justice, but I cannot look for the same favour I used to enjoy. It's not in human nature to be the same to a man who has lost your money."

"Perhaps not. Good morning, Mr. Keating."

"Well, I never thought that woman in the blue hood would fetch so much money. I think luck is with me," mused Keating, as he took up his pen and drew the blotting-pad to him. "I certainly have eyes in my head. I dare say that fellow Lisle will make a pot of money out of my picture. But it can't be helped. Time is more than money, and I don't want to hinder my marriage hunting up old Jew dealers. Thirty pounds will buy a fine present for Augusta, and leave a trifle in my pocket besides."

The supposed "Domenichino" had evidently a great fascination for Lisle. He frequently turned into Mr. Keating's room in his absence, to gaze upon it, and on

one or two occasions, finding Gussie there, he enlarged upon its beauty, and treated that young lady to a disquisition on the Bolognese school of painting.

Keating, however, though civil enough, showed a decided inclination to keep himself to himself.

A week had now elapsed since the incident of the picture. It was a soft drizzling night, more like the beginning of October than the end of September, when Lisle came into the house somewhat earlier than usual. Gussie opened the door to him, and they conversed for a few moments.

"I suppose you enjoy a good book of fiction, like most young ladies? Permit me to present you with this new volume of the Railway Library—'The Buccaneer's Curse'—it will draw tears from your bright eyes."

"Oh! how very kind and thoughtful of you! I do enjoy a good tale—ever so many thanks," etc., etc., and she ran on volubly.

"Pray is Mr. Keating at home?"

"Yes; he came in some time ago with a bad headache."

"Indeed! He has had a very severe shock, I fear."

Mr. Lisle mounted the stair, laid aside his hat, and opened the door noiselessly, having knocked softly.

The gas was not lit, and the room was partially illuminated by a bright fire. Keating was standing with his back to the door, beside the bureau, the front of which was semicircular and revolving. It was open, and a lighted wax candle stood upon it, displaying a variety of articles, papers, letters, small books, etc.

These Keating seemed in the act of arranging, with his accustomed neatness. So absorbed was he in his occupation, that he did not hear Lisle enter.

"Good evening," began Lisle, pausing near the door.

Keating started, and, taking the candle in one hand, closed the front of the bureau before he spoke.

"You came in like a thief in the night!" he said with a laugh, as he set the candle on the table, and advanced to meet him. "I never heard you!"

"Yet I knocked," returned the other. "Excuse me—your thoughts naturally turn on robbery and violence! I was anxious to tell you that I fear I shall not be in funds to make a further payment on account of the picture till the week after next."

"Oh, indeed! Then, my good sir, if you are unable to pay up to time, I think you must forfeit that first fiver."

"Certainly, Mr. Keating, you shall have it if I do not pay you in full."

"In the meantime," said Keating, "I believe my supper is just coming up—stay and share it!"

"You are really too good!—but I have a lot of work to do to-night, and must deny myself that pleasure."

"Another time, then, I hope?" A few more words on a late Stock Exchange scandal, and they parted.

"I can't quite make that fellow out," said Keating to himself as he looked after his retreating visitor. "He seems simple enough, too, yet I don't think I'd care to offend him. I'd be the better of a nip, and more light."

CHAPTER VII.

"IN THE TOILS."

"I BEGIN to think you are not so great a goose as I imagined," said Lady Thornton.

"I am greatly flattered," returned Hope, laughing.

They were sitting in one of the windows of their hotel, looking out on the shallow bay, from which Shanklin Chine slopes up, narrowing landwards, among the bosky thickets and larger trees which clothe its sides and fringe the beach. It had been misty, with a shower or two in the morning—now the noonday sun

had broken through and dispersed the clouds, both sky and sea looked bright and blue, as if it were May instead of one of the last days of dreary November.

"To what do I owe your improved opinion?" added Hope.

"You see, my dear, when Mrs. Menteith thought fit to show her dread of London fogs, and her great liking for our society by coming down here with Bob Farrant two days after our arrival, I very soon understood her little game. She has a caprice—and more than a caprice—for your cousin. I suspected it before—before you came up to Town—and his preference for yourself gave solidity to the whim. She did not like to leave him helpless in your hands. I feared the natural impulse of the female heart would incite you to hold what you had got, and so you would be entangled into a most unsuitable engagement—worse, into a marriage with your cousin. But I was pleased to see that you were quite unmoved by the fascinating widow's little tricks."

"I was hardly conscious of them," said Hope. "Do you really think that so clever and worldly a woman as Mrs. Menteith could be in love with anyone—especially with a simple-minded honest boy like Bob? younger than herself, too."

Lady Thornton smiled. "The attractions of contrast are very strong! I think vanity prompted her to begin the game, and love sprung up after, then the wheat and the tares grew together."

"How dreadfully bored she would have been if that telegram had not come, and politeness had obliged her to remain on here."

"Oh, but of course she took care the telegram should come. Such a woman does not stick at trifles."

"Dear Lady Thornton! do you believe she sent that telegram herself?"

"Yes, I do."

"Then I hope poor Bob will not marry so deceitful a woman. I am really fond of Bob—he is such a good fellow."

"My dear, Mrs. Menteith will marry Bob if it so pleases her, and he will be a lucky fellow. Mrs. Menteith may not be a model of exalted virtue, but she is a clever woman, by no means without heart, and very amusing. You'll see she will push Bob into a Major-generalship before any of his cotemporaries."

"Her amusingness is a little ill-natured sometimes."

"Pooh! nonsense. You cannot do her justice, because she is drawing your admirer from you."

"Lady Thornton!" indignantly; then, seeing the absurdity of her indignation, she laughed gaily. "Well, I may not like her, but if she makes Bob happy and comfortable, I shall put up with her."

"That's right, Hope! How fine it is now. That's the advantage of the seaside in winter; given an hour of sunshine, and there is nothing to remind you of November. Look how charming that yacht is with the white sails."

"Yes. It was sailing to and fro all yesterday," said Hope, taking up a glass to examine it. "I suppose it is a yacht."

"A yacht, evidently. Now I am going to put on my bonnet, for I promised to drive with Miss Vignolles before luncheon. What shall you do, my dear?"

"Oh, I shall take Pogie and Midge for a run on the beach. It looks so tempting this morning; quite like spring."

"Remember luncheon is at 1.30."

A few minutes later and Hope, with the two pet Skye-terriers, descended some steps from the garden of the hotel on to the beach, which was there firm, sandy, and free from shingle, and walked with a free elastic step towards the promontory which curves out beyond the chine.

She felt unusually light-hearted. If she could be saved from offending her dear uncle by positively and in so many words refusing his favourite boy, what a relief it would be. But if the worst came to the worst, she had within the last three weeks, less than three weeks, been in some way enlightened as to the requirements of her own heart, and she knew, with a certain knowledge, that Bob Farrant was not the man she could love. Then she thought of her home and how happy it was, and how she would try harder than ever to make it comfortable and bright for the good old general, and an earthly paradise for her young cousin, May, when she came home for the Christmas holidays. Having reached the point of the promontory, she sat down on a bench conveniently placed there, and continued to reflect :

"I am too selfish. I quite forget the feelings and wishes of others. How amiable a sense of relief makes one. Ah! little darling, did it want to run after a stone?" to one of the terriers, who barked a violent affirmative, and the next moment both little creatures were tearing over the sand like animated bundles of long hair after a stone thrown as far as Hope's strength permitted. How smooth and blue and peaceful the bay looked; and that pretty, graceful yacht. It had stood in quite near, and looked larger than Hope thought it was. A small boat with two oarsmen were pulling to the shore. Hope watched its progress, listening to the measured sound of the oars in the rowlocks. What a delightful change from London, though probably the weather was better there also. The boat made for the beach almost in front of the place where she sat. A few strong strokes of the oars and she floated half her length upon the beach. The bow oarsman sprang out and held the prow, while the other followed more deliberately. After a word or two to his companion, this latter walked slowly towards

Hope, who watched him with an odd growing sense of uneasiness. He was tall, and dressed very unpretendingly in yachting costume. Yet he was certainly distinguished looking. He drew near, he raised his sailor hat, he smiled. Good Heavens! it was her fugitive fellow-traveller in that never-to-be-forgotten journey.

Extreme fear was her first impression. It was near luncheon-time, and the beach was deserted. But he was beside her.

"I humbly beg you to forgive me for presuming to address you," he said, standing hat in hand, looking and speaking earnestly—impressively. "I have watched and waited for this chance ever since I heard you had left London for the Isle of Wight. Will you hear me?"

"How—how did you know, how could you know that I was here?"

"I took measures to ascertain your movements, for I did not dare to write to you again. It might have been an offence—it would certainly have been presumptuous. Now I may not have many moments to speak, let me first thank you for your loyal silence; it has been most useful in puzzling the police. I see by your eyes—your face—that your faith in me has been shaken. You have, no doubt, heard many exaggerated, absurd stories, but surely instinct must have told you that I was not guilty of robbing that unlucky bagman?"

"To speak the truth," returned Hope, who had flushed and then grown white, though she felt her fears fade away as she listened to and looked at him, "I did not know what to believe. You only were in the carriage with this man, and—what was I to believe?"

"Do you believe it now?" fixing his eyes on hers.

"N—no—not while you are speaking. You seem too much a gentleman. But, oh! do tell me how did

you escape; and don't, pray, don't stay long here. There are two or three rewards offered for you."

"Yes, I know all about it; but I am not in immediate danger here." He took the seat beside her, saying: "Will you permit me?"

The dogs came up, panting, barking, and sniffed about his legs, finally settling down in a friendly manner at his feet.

"You see," he said smiling, "your dogs do not growl at me with any instinctive recognition of villainy."

"I do not know what to think," repeated Hope. "I cannot believe you robbed that poor man," and she slightly knit her brows with a pretty, puzzled look of distress, glancing round in evident fear of an approaching policeman. "If you *can* venture to stay, do—*do* tell me how you managed to escape after you left me."

"After I left you," he repeated slowly, "I went out into the dark—in every sense. Well, I walked quietly for, perhaps, a quarter of a mile, took a cab, and drove to Waterloo, and so reached Portsmouth. There, as I had been told, a friend awaited me, an American, the owner of that yacht," pointing to the little vessel. "Once on board the *Fairy* I was safe. If I could keep out of the way until the real conspirator, the man for whom I was mistaken, was found, I should escape the horrors of a Russian prison, out of which, with my reputation for Nihilism, I should find it difficult to extricate myself. I thought myself at rest when I trod the deck of my friend's yacht."

"But the papers, which reached us with tolerable regularity, soon showed me what fresh difficulties had cropped up. If I am cleared of the suspicion of murder, I really cannot see how I am to clear myself of the charge of theft. For the present I dare not appear and deny the accusation, when I can do so, time will have made the effort to disprove it more difficult. I do not despair, however. I have never

been cut off from communication with some useful friends in London, and I still hope to get some clue to the real offender. Meanwhile, what I could *not* bear was that you—you who have been before my eyes ever since you forgave the shock, the terror I caused you, with such womanly courage and kindness—that you should think me a mere vulgar, common felon! I would have risked anything to implore you to suspend your judgment. I managed to get tidings of you—to hear of your movements, and to ascertain you were at Shanklin."

"But how—how could you hear of me?" cried Hope, quivering with fear and excitement. "It seems miraculous!"

"It was not difficult—one day I hope to explain matters, if you will listen. We were cruising up and down the south coast, putting into the different little ports for letters and papers, I had no difficulty in landing occasionally here and loitering about, but I could never find you alone. I have watched the beach through my glass for hours in vain till this morning. And now, let me beg you to give me the benefit of your doubts. I am a gentleman, and incapable of acting in so dastardly a fashion! My name——"

"I know it," said Hope, with a charming smile and blush. "You are Count Vescilitzki."

"How do you know?" gazing at her with soft admiring eyes.

"Because I found your photograph in Mrs. Menteith's book, and she spoke of you."

"Not too well, I am sure. I am out of favour with her."

"Are you not staying too long?" said Hope. "I wonder you dare to land."

"I would dare much for the sake of a few words with you. I know I must seem presumptuous, but this is too precious a moment to be lost! I live in the hope of meeting you again—in—the ardent desire of showing

you my heart, my nature good and bad, that you may form some idea whether I could one day be worthy of offering my life to you. Yes—yes—” as Hope rose in some agitation. “I see, you think me mad—I think I am, to venture to speak to you so openly—but just picture my position! I may yet be trapped, and, failing to prove my innocence, I may vanish from the world for years before the King of Terrors frees me from a living death! Even in such a tragic destiny I should like you to know the profound impression you have made upon me—that you will promise not to believe me a thief save on better proof than any hitherto brought forward. It cannot hurt you to hear these words. I ask no reply, unless indeed the forgiveness you might bestow on some offending wretch under sentence of death.”

“Yes, they do hurt me!” exclaimed Hope, deeply moved, “they distress me infinitely! It seems such insanity! How could you be seriously affected by one short interview? I do hope you will get away and be very happy, and then you will forget about me, and we may meet and be good friends—but now do go! I am dreadfully anxious——”

“One word, Miss Farrant, that is if you will be so gracious as to answer it,” he interrupted. “Are you engaged to be married to the man I have seen walking about with you?”

“No, certainly not! I am not going to marry anyone!”

“Thank you. You are better than I deserve. What can you think of me for such an outbreak?”

“I shall not think about it if you will *only* go away. *I am* so sorry for you! I do hope everything may come right! Why don’t you go to Spain, where people cannot be caught?”

Her eyes were full of tears, her red lips trembled. Vescilitzki looked at her steadily. “Yes, I will obey you at once. But if I hear the good news that

my guilty 'double' is found, may I come and tell you?"

"Oh, yes! I shall be so glad."

"Though the charge of theft still hangs over my head?"

"I do not believe a word of it."

"Thank you, you give me new life, so farewell for the present."

He raised his hat, and bowing low, walked quickly to the boat, followed by Pogie and Midge. Once more he turned, waved his hat, then sprang into the boat, the sailor in attendance shoved it off, and they were soon pulling rapidly back to the yacht.

* * * * *

Lady Thornton had twice "wondered" what kept Hope, before that young lady made her appearance at luncheon.

"I warned you, dear, not to go so far," said her ladyship, when she at last made her appearance, looking exceedingly pale. "You must have walked half round the island, and you look like a ghost."

"I have been in my room for some little time," murmured Hope. "I felt a little giddy and head-achy! I suppose the sun was rather strong—for

"The sun, my dear!" screamed Miss Vignolles, who was also at table. "Why you have been wandering on the beach thinking 'of the lad that's awa', till you mistook the 'warmth of your own heart for the summer sun.'"

"Indeed I was not," said Hope, laughing a little tremulously. "I was too much absorbed in the present to think of the absent."

"Here's a discovery, my dear Lady Thornton! Your young friend seems to have picked up a '*locum tenens*' for poor Mr. Farrant. "Oh, '*les absents on toujours tort*.'"

Hope blushed vividly.

"Oh! Mrs. Menteith will console him for any forgetfulness on my part," she said, trying to laugh.

"Ah, the spell works!" cried Miss Vignolles, with a significant nod to Lady Thornton.

"Nonsense," she returned sharply. "Bob Farrant would be a lucky fellow if he succeeded in pleasing the pretty widow."

"Really, widows have too large a share of this world's goods," said Miss Vignolles, and to Hope's relief the conversation flowed on in a fresh channel.

The interview with Vescilitzki produced a profound impression on Hope. In spite of the resistance of common sense, the remonstrances of propriety, she was haunted by the sound of his voice, and the expression of his soft brown eyes. He was reprehensibly precipitate, and far too audacious yet—if—if he were caught and carried to a Russian dungeon, why—she could not bear it! She wanted to go home—she wanted to stay—she hoped he would not try to see her again—she burned to know what news he would have to tell.

Perpetually agitated by these thoughts Hope's rest was broken, and her natural healthy appetite impaired. Lady Thornton grew quite uneasy about her, and began to think she had been premature in forming so high an estimate of her wisdom. Meanwhile Hope spent much time in the balcony with the telescope. The white-winged yacht flitted in and out the bay; the owner came on shore frequently, and even dined at the *table d'hôte*. He was an amusing, much-travelled man, full of dry Yankee humour, and made himself very agreeable to Lady Thornton, taking little or no notice of Hope.

It was four or five days after Hope's startling interview with Vescilitzki when Bob Farrant again appeared, to pay a flying visit from Saturday to Monday evening. Sunday was a trial, for both Lady Thornton and Miss Vignolles observed the day of rest by dozing

over their respective novels, and keeping indoors. Hope, therefore, had Bob on hands all day. But she took him with her for a long walk, in which, to her infinite relief, they were joined by a hypochondriac old colonel, who spent his days revolving from one health resort to another.

The following morning was rainy and overcast, and Bob could find no excuse for persuading his cousin to come out with him. Time was slipping past, and at five in the afternoon he was to start for Aldershot.

Lady Thornton had gone to show some letters she had received from mutual friends, and Hope was sitting by the fire, more unsatisfied with herself and all around and more depressed than she had ever felt before in the course of her smooth life. Bob had gone off in the sulks to the billiard-room.

To Hope enter the German waiter with a grinning face and a salver in his hand, on which lay a card. Hope took it, and with curiously mingled pleasure and fear read the words "Count Loris Vescilitzki."

"You vill see the shentleman?"

"Show him in," said Hope, rising and feeling herself tremble. The next moment Vescilitzki was before her in the most correct morning dress. Handsome, distinguished, aristocratic—who could for a moment believe that he would put his hand in a poor clerk's pocket?

"I have ventured to come in person, as you were so very good as to say you would be pleased to hear my Russian news. I am glad to inform you that my character has been cleared, though, I regret, at the cost of my kinsman's life. The traitor who turned informer discovered him still lurking in Moscow. Alexis Vescilitzki would not be taken alive—he knew what awaited him! The informer, who had confused him with me, recognised him as having been the man who shot the chief of the police, and, backed by several others, made an onslaught, but Alexis defended himself

desperately, wounded several of his assailants, and fell dead himself under their fire. An old friend of my father, and a man of influence, writes that he has taken care that my innocence shall be recorded and all proceedings against me stopped."

"This is, indeed, good news. I congratulate you!" cried Hope, stretching out her hand frankly. He had hardly taken it when Farrant came into the room, exclaiming excitedly: "Do you know they say that Russian scamp is in the house, and the police are after him!"

Vescilitzki, whose back was to the door, turned sharply at these words and faced Bob, who almost staggered with amazement. "Vescilitzki, by Jove!" he said.

"I am Vescilitzki," returned the count calmly.

"What the deuce is he doing here, Hope?" cried Bob angrily.

"What matter?" said Hope, desperately, and wringing her hands. "Help him to get away, Bob, dear Bob! See! If you will go out on the balcony—there are steps at the end—go through the garden on to the beach. Your boat is there! You can escape! Do go! It is not safe for you to be taken—think of——" She spoke brokenly and breathlessly, laying her hand on his arm. Vescilitzki looked down into her eyes for a moment with a radiant expression and said gently and respectfully, "Pray do not distress yourself. I will not fly! I do not fear the justice of any English tribunal. It grieves me——"

The entrance of the German waiter, followed by two policemen, interrupted him.

"There!" cried the waiter, pointing to him, "there he is! I swear to him! He is Vescilitzki, calling himself a count! I have waited on him many times this spring in the Hotel Continental. He passes himself as a great rich man. He is the murderer and the thief!"

"I have a warrant to arrest you, sir!" said the superior of the two policemen, "on the charge of murder at Moscow and of robbery on the Great Northern Railway."

"I am quite ready to accompany you," said Vescilitzki, "and we need not annoy this lady longer with our presence." Then turning to Hope, "I regret infinitely that such a scene should take place before you."

"If you have no pistols or knife," said the policeman, eyeing him curiously and hesitating to exercise his full powers, "I will not put on the handcuffs."

"I am unarmed," said Vescilitzki, "you can examine my pockets if you choose."

"Why, gracious Heavens! Where is that poor, dear child?" cried Lady Thornton, rushing in. "Has he tried to murder you, or to rob only? How was it that you allowed so desperate a character to approach Miss Farrant?" This to the master of the house, who now joined the assemblage in Lady Thornton's room.

"I'm very sorry, my lady, but I don't see how——"

"Take him away—don't stand talking about it!" shrieked Miss Vignolles, in the background. "Don't you see she is ready to faint?"

"No! I am not, Miss Vignolles," said Hope bravely, though she was as white as a sheet and trembled visibly. "I am not afraid of Count Vescilitzki. I do not believe he has done any harm!"

Vescilitzki stepped forward, bowed profoundly, and said quietly, but distinctly, "I thank you." Then, turning to his captors, he added, "Come!" and walked from the room.

"What does it mean?" cried Lady Thornton and Bob Farrant in chorus. "How did you know——?"

"An accidental acquaintance—travelling! Oh! do not ask me any questions! Let me go to my room—I can hardly stand!" and she fled from them abruptly.



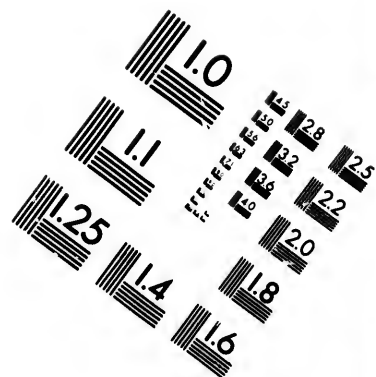
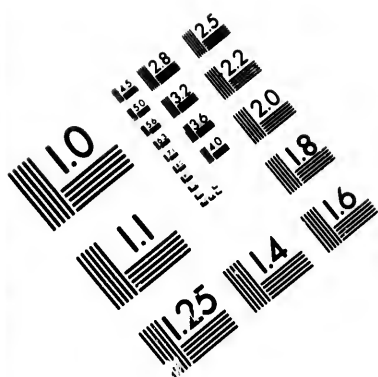
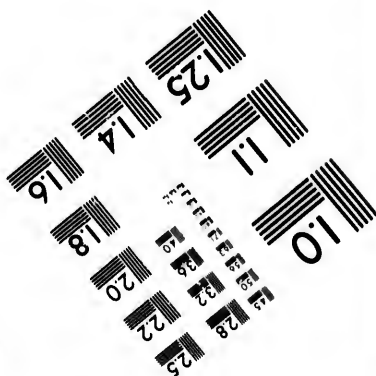
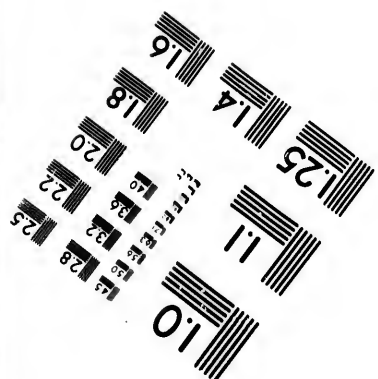
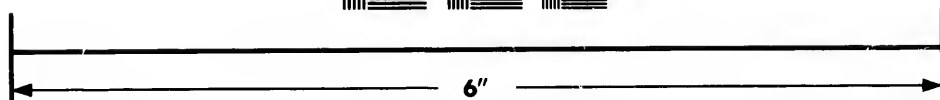
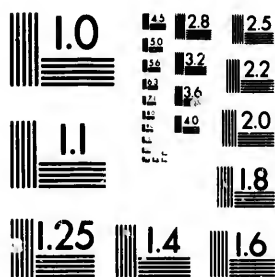


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"There is something extremely wrong here!" said Miss Vignolles, solemnly. "The sooner you return that young lady to her legal guardian the better for your own peace of mind!"

CHAPTER VIII.

"MURDER WILL OUT."

MR. KEATING'S love affairs prospered well. His *fiancée* grew more and more gentle and yielding. He made her many presents, even reaching the height of a small diamond locket. After which he proposed that their honeymoon travels should be directed across the Atlantic, to visit his kind and generous brother, who was ready to receive them with open arms, and was a rich old bachelor into the bargain.

To do Gussie justice, her only objection was, that if they were both away, and Ted left to his own devices, "Mother would go to the workhouse." Fired with love and generosity, Keating made a promise to settle something handsome on the old lady, and Gussie undertook to be ready within a fortnight for the wedding festivities, and an immediate start for the New World after.

Still the lover remained in the doctor's hands, and though he visited Shears and Judkins' from time to time, he did not go regularly to business. Indeed, he told those gentlemen that he was strongly recommended to go abroad for a complete change, and Mr. Shears would have given him some commissions for the house, were it not for his ignorance of foreign tongues.

It was a day or two after Lisle had explained that he could not pay the second instalment for the coveted "Domenichino," when, shortly before the

midday dinner time, Lisle knocked *and* rang. "Miss Augusta," as he always called her, deferentially opened the door.

"Very sorry to trouble you," said Lisle, taking off his hat. He was accompanied by a tall, broad-shouldered and heavy-looking man, who wore a long overcoat. "Is Mr. Keating at home?" continued Lisle.

"He is not come in yet, and I think he will be late. He is gone in to Shears and Judkins'."

"Very unfortunate! This gentleman, a great picture fancier, is anxious to inspect the Domenichino. Do you think Mr. Keating would mind our inspecting it in his absence?"

"Oh! I should think not."

"Thank you. Will you walk upstairs, sir?" Then, as his companion proceeded to mount the stair, Lisle said "sotto voce" to Gussie, "Rather think I shall make a good thing of this for both of us. Keating ought to buy you a handsome *cadeau* out of the profits!"

"That's right! Make him shell out," and Gussie retired to assist her mother in making out one or two bills, which cost more trouble, as the young lady remarked, than they were worth.

"I wish you were quit of all this rubbish, mother," she said, kindly, "and settled in a couple of tidy rooms. Ted might go for an odd boy to uncle's, who would not refuse him now I am going to make a good match."

They talked on at intervals of their plans and projects till Ted came in for dinner, and Gussie remarked, "My goodness! I believe those men are up there still!" and as she spoke the sounds of feet descending the stairs made themselves heard. As soon as the front door was heard to close Mr. Lisle tapped at Mrs. Allen's, and entering, said: "He is a very cautious customer, but seems inclined to nibble,

only he wishes to see Mr. Keating first. I should not be surprised if we got a hundred and eighty to two hundred out of him!"

"Law! only think of any one giving such a sum for an ugly woman, who looks as if she had been crying her eyes out, and a blue shawl over her head."

"When you return from your wedding tour, my dear Miss Augusta, you will have a truer appreciation of art. As I am obliged to go out, will *you* tell Mr. Keating that I brought a well-known amateur to inspect his picture. Thank you! May I have the latch-key? I am going to a conference on artistic progress, and may be late."

Gussie promised to deliver the message, and went contentedly to her dinner. But the afternoon passed and the greater part of the evening, and no Keating returned. Gussie and her mother grew terribly anxious. Indeed, the former was on the point of going to Mr. Shears' private residence to seek tidings of her missing lover, when a note reached Mrs. Allen, brought by a commissionaire, in which Mr. Keating stated that he was going to spend the night at a friend's house, and to request that certain necessaries which he enumerated might be sent by bearer. This was accordingly done, but the messenger was quite impervious to all Gussie's questions, and departed, leaving her in a rage.

While this portion of our little drama was being enacted in London, Lady Thornton and Miss Vignolles did their best to make Hope Farrant's life a burden to her in the Isle of Wight.

Her resolute retreat to her own room only secured her a short respite. She was persecuted with queries as to how, where, when she had met that desperate villain Vescilitzki. To these she replied vaguely, that she had met him travelling somewhere some time ago, that he had been very civil, and seeing her in the hotel, he had taken the great liberty of

calling. Pressed further, she simply declared her intention not to utter another word on the subject, and to this she stuck.

The strain upon her nerves had been rather too much, and she was so feverish and restless, at least in Lady Thornton's opinion, for Hope stoutly denied there was anything the matter with her, that her ladyship declared she would take her back to Town immediately, and consult a specialist as to her health.

The day but one, therefore, after the catastrophe, described in our last chapter, saw Lady Thornton and Miss Farrant dining in the Carrington Place "salle à manger."

"I will not say a word about your extraordinary and mysterious acquaintance with this dreadful Russian to Sir Peter. What with his deafness and queer crotchety views, he would wear out every soul in the house with his efforts to get at the bottom of it."

For this, Hope was thankful. Privately, after much self-commune, she wrote to her cousin Bob, begging him to come to see her at an hour when she would be alone. She had determined to confide her strange adventure to him, and consult with him how best to keep it dark from the rest of the world.

She was greatly agitated, for *The Times*, on the morning of their return, had a short paragraph stating that a Russian of rank had been brought before the magistrate at C—— Street, accused of having been concerned in the late murder of Adrianoff at Moscow. The chief officer of the Russian detectives sent here to trace him had come forward to inform his honour that he had just received news of the capture of the real murderer, who bore the same name as the accused, from whom, at the command of his Government, he withdrew the charge.

"The Russian was, however, remanded for further examination respecting the share he had had in plundering the clerk of Messrs. Shears & Judkins, who was so mysteriously robbed on the Great Northern Railway about a month ago. A fuller report will be given in our next."

How was Vescilitzki to clear himself from this hideous, degrading accusation? He could bring no witnesses—no proofs of any kind; and who in London would believe the word of a Russian as against an Englishman? Even if ultimately by some miracle he was proved innocent, the fact of having been committed for trial would leave a stain! She was eager to tell all to Bob—it would be such a relief to have some person to speak to of this secret which had been tormenting her. She could, of course, easily keep the spice of personality which had deepened the interest of the curious story so profoundly, out of sight. It was an awful trial, the opening of her tale! However, secure in the fact that Lady Thornton had gone out with a long list of commissions for a friend in India, Hope summoned up her courage and plunged into the subject.

Bob listened with immense surprise and breathless concern, interrupting only with exclamations sometimes slightly profane.

"Now, dear Bob!" she concluded, "I want you to tell Lady Thornton that you know all about everything, and that you quite think I ought to keep silence for the present. And do help me to keep it from the dear general! He would go wild about it! Think of its all coming about from my having changed carriages to get away from the smell of tobacco! You see poor Monsieur Vescilitzki was sure the carriage next him was empty, or he would not have come in and frightened me!"

"Well, I am not so sure! But I will tell you what I am sure of—that your Russian robber has made an impression that you do not even try to shake off.

Good God, Hope! You surely would not give your heart to a fellow who, though he may not be a murderer may——"

"Give my heart to a man I only saw twice in my life?" interrupted Hope, crimson with indignation, "What a contemptible doll you must think me! How dare you, Bob?"

"There, you are furious! But don't you see, Hope, my darling, that I don't know exactly what I am saying? I am so awfully jealous! No! I will not stop! I will tell you how desperately I love you—but I see you don't care for me. Will you never give me any hope that you will be my wife?"

"No, dear Bob! she returned, gravely, gently, "I must tell you the truth. I have known and loved you too long as a brother to think of you as a husband! I *am* so sorry to grieve you and vex my dear uncle. But do try and put it out of your head, Bob! There are so many nice, charming women who, not having been brought up with you, would fall in love with you if you made love to them!"

"How is it then that I didn't come to look on you as a sister?" asked Bob gloomily.

"How can I possibly tell? Don't look so cross and wretched! You will still be my friend and help me?"

"Oh! You know I'd do anything in the world for you," cried Bob, tears standing in his eyes.

"Oh! dear cousin! I wish I could fall in love with you!" sobbed Hope, desperately, "but I can't—I cannot!"

"Well, say no more about it—tell me what I am to do?"

"Nothing, unless Lady Thornton speaks to you. Then just say solemnly that you think I had better say nothing about it at present. Will you stay to dinner, Bob?"

"I think it would be kinder if you did not ask me!" reproachfully.

"Then just do as you like."

"I will go and try to hear something of the examination—it must be going on to-day. So, good-bye! Good-bye to Hope, indeed! Couldn't you give a fellow a kiss for once?"

"Oh yes, Bob!" cried Hope, with enchanting frankness, holding up her fair face. "There!" she said, the next moment, "that will do! Let me go! You are very disagreeable!"

"Good-bye, sweetest cousin, good-bye," and he rushed away.

It was some time before he reappeared, for Hope, resolutely rejecting the suggested visit to the specialist, insisted on returning to her home and carrying with her all the papers in which any mention was made of the extraordinary Vescilitzki case.

To this, in the dead season, the attention of all London was attracted for the traditional nine days' wonder.

On Vescilitzki being brought again before the magistrate, the court was crowded by a fashionable audience, who evinced the deepest interest in the proceedings.

The circumstances which told so damningly against the count were duly set forth, and his case seemed hopeless, but before he could answer any questions the magistrate desired that Inspector Sharp should make his statement. Then a small, neat, pale, miserable-looking man was brought in and charged with the robbery of which he had accused Vescilitzki.

In support of his statement the inspector called as a witness—Eugene Lisle—and in the examination which followed the following facts were elicited:—

Lisle, an Englishman, born in Russia, and employed occasionally by the police, had been in England on his own business when the famous Moscow murder

took place. He was sought out by the Russian detectives to aid in tracking Vescilitzki, with whom he was acquainted. They had some difficulty, however, in finding him at the outset. "From the first," said the witness, "I doubted that Count Loris Vescilitzki had anything to do with the murder, and I worked diligently, because I hoped to clear him. I am under the greatest obligations to the count. He saved me from great misery—he rescued my only child from drowning. When I heard that he was accused of robbing this man"—pointing to Keating—"I felt convinced that such a thing was impossible, and I determined to unravel the mystery.

"I found where Keating lived, I took lodgings in the same house and found him a model of punctuality, respectability, religiosity; *but* I felt certain *he* was the thief. It was this conviction that guided me. For if he had taken the money he must have it in the house with him.

"I found it difficult to get up any intimacy with him; he was curiously cautious and watchful. I managed at length to get up negotiations about a picture, and that opened a sort of acquaintance which entitled me to go in and out. I thought a certain bureau was the most likely place for him to conceal the money in, and I observed he once, and only once, unlocked it in my presence and then with a key attached to a chain worn round his neck.

"I tried the lock with a pick, but it was of superior make and I feared to betray myself by failing and leaving marks. At last chance favoured me. I came in one evening, unheard by Keating, and saw him standing in front of the bureau, which was open, and on the desk part lay several papers, a large roll of notes and a gold watch and chain. This one of the employés in the house of Shears and Judkin will identify as that worn by Keating up to the time of the robbery. I at once gave information to the police and obtained a

search warrant. A detective officer opened the bureau and found the notes, the numbers of which corresponded with those entered by the country dealers as paid to Keating, a large amount of gold and the watch and chain."

This was the substance of Lisle's evidence, given in answer to numerous questions in the course of his examination.

It was listened to with breathless interest by all present, to many of whom Vescilitzki was personally known, and a loud buzz of talk arose, everyone discussing with his neighbour the tremendous risk run by the Russian in creeping from one carriage to another when going at such tremendous speed. "Deuced plucky thing to do."

"Gives one a pretty strong idea of what imprisonment in Russia must be."

"Horrid shame that a man of honour should be suspected of such villainy, and taken up as a thief."

"Shrewd little scamp, that clerk! He very nearly nabbed the money. Not a soul suspected him."

And so on, till "Silence!" was shouted, and the magistrate ordered Count Loris Vescilitzki to be set at liberty, assuring him that he left the court without the smallest stain on his character, or breath upon his honour.

"By George! You have *had* a narrow squeak," cried a tall, "country-gentleman" looking man with a weather-beaten face and red whiskers, shaking Vescilitzki's hand violently. "I stumbled to some purpose when I rolled that infernal, sneaking, detective fellow over. Where is Lisle? Ah, here you are. Let me shake hands with you. By Heavens! he'd be in for five or six years' imprisonment with hard labour, but for you, to say nothing of your sending him that warning to my place."

"Pray sir, say nothing about it," returned Lisle in a

low tone and with a warning look. "Were that little fact to be whispered, I doubt if I should be safe even in this tight little island, out of which I do not intend to trust myself."

"Ah, my dear Count Vescilitzki," exclaimed Mrs. Menteith, "let me claim acquaintance with, and congratulate you." Her eyes were shining through her tears as she put out an exquisitely-gloved little hand, over which Vescilitzki bowed profoundly, with a quick, questioning glance at the soldierly-looking, fashionably dressed young man on whose arm she leant, and who returned it by raising his hat politely, without the slightest sign of recognition. "Let me introduce my friend, Mr. Farrant, to you, Count. He *has* been so interested in you. Now you *must* come to dinner with me this evening. Do, pray, for the sake of old friendship."

"I shall be very happy," returned Vescilitzki.

"Thank you so much. Here is my card—quarter to eight. I will get some pleasant people to meet you, and oh, do please call that delightful follower of yours, Lisle, to speak to me."

Lisle, who was in hearing, removed his hat and bowed.

"How did you manage so cleverly to find out everything?"

"Madam, I was convinced that no one but Keating himself took the money, and, so believing, I concentrated all my attention on him. Still, fortune favoured me, for I owe more than I can say to the Count, who is the most generous and bravest of men."

"Well, fortune favours the brave you know. Is this tall gentleman Mr. Dacre? Yes. I thought so. Will you waive ceremony and give me the pleasure of your company at a little dinner I am trying to get up in honour of our friend's hairbreadth 'scape?" Dacre accepted readily and Vescilitzki, with his friends, left the court while Lisle was called back to give some further

evidence against Keating, which was scarcely necessary, as the wretched man threw up the sponge, confessing his act and imploring for forgiveness, for he urged that the enemy of souls had taken him unawares and triumphed over him in a moment of weakness—an explanation which by no means satisfied the magistrate.

CHAPTER IX.

"TO BE OR NOT TO BE?"

AWAY in the quiet routine of her country home Hope tried in vain to resume her old occupations with her old interest. The post and the papers seemed all she cared about. The reports of the famous railway robbery case were all absorbing, and Lady Thornton's letters worried her not a little.

That lady gave a graphic account of the scene in the police court, at which, it is needless to say, she made a point of being present. "Imagine my amazement," so ran one of her concluding paragraphs, "to recognise in that clever *rusé*, Lisle, the curiosity dealer who came to see Sir Peter, and had a talk with us the day before we went to the Isle of Wight. You may remember I thought him rather a remarkable man. Now, my dear Hope, I have been occupied ever since in the arithmetical operation of putting two and two together, and have come to the conclusion that Mr. Lisle's visit in London and the Count's visit in the Isle of Wight were not unconnected. When will you give me the solution of this mystery? I deserve it, for I have been most discreet, and never breathed a word of the burning curiosity which consumes me to mortal. Mrs. Menteith and your cousin seem inseparable—at least, he is constantly up on leave and always with her. She gave a delightful impromptu dinner in honour of Count

Vescilitzki, the day he was proved innocent, but she did not invite *me*. I have not seen Vescilitzki since. They say he is very busy arranging about naturalization, &c., &c., as he means to settle in England. Do write to me soon, &c., &c."

Hope Farrant, however, was no sickly sentimentalist; she took up all the lines of her ordinary life to all appearance as heartily as ever. She interviewed Mrs. MacGeoghan, the housekeeper, familiarly Mrs. Mac. She darned the fine old table cloths with her usual delicate skill, she played, and sang, and read, and went in and out among the overtasked mothers and rheumatic old women of her immediate neighbourhood, as cheerfully and diligently as ever; but she was less light-hearted and content, and conscious of a vague sense of expectation that set her heart beating at post time and when the sound of horses' feet were heard approaching at unusual times.

The hunting season was now in full swing and the stout old general took the field three times a week. It was a soft and rather damp December day and the scent lay strong on the ploughed fields and grass land. Hope often rode with her uncle to the meet, but did not hunt, as the old soldier though full of chivalry had a prejudice against women riding to hounds, never hesitating to declare that ladies in the hunting field were out of place and a d——d nuisance.

One dull, damp, evening, nearly three weeks after Hope's return from her eventful visit to Town, General Farrant returned unusually late from what Hope supposed must have been an unusually long run. She observed that he limped and looked a good deal fatigued.

"Dearest Uncle," she exclaimed, with some anxiety, "What *is* the matter? How late you are!"

"Don't fidget yourself," returned the general. "I feel half ashamed to tell you that I have had a spill. Why, it's years since such a thing happened to me!"

"Thrown!" cried Hope, astonished and frightened, for her uncle was a heavy man. "Oh! let me call Mrs. Mac! You must want something! You ought to see Dr. Hodge. I will send."

"Nonsense, Sweetie! I am all right. I *have* seen the doctor! This is the way it happened. We had had but indifferent sport, didn't find for ages, lost the fox down by Clayton Woods, so we turned and rode home. I was with a gentleman who has brought down his horses to Markberough to hunt the country this season. Who do you think? Why, that Russian fellow the row was about—Vescilitzki! Well, just crossing a field near the town, Brown Bess put her foot in a hole, made a desperate effort to recover and rolled over with me; my foot was under her, but I have got off wonderfully well. The Russian was uncommon civil and kind, was off his horse in a twinkling, gave me brandy from his flask, sent his groom (he does things in style, I can tell you) for a trap and to warn Hodge that I was coming, looked after Brown Bess (I am afraid it will be a bad job with her) and his own hunter, came with me to the doctor's, came with me to the stables, here. I wouldn't let them drive to the door for fear of frightening you, my puss! But he wouldn't come in, so he's gone back in the fly."

Great was the excitement in the quiet household, for the general, though arbitrary and at times a little rugged, was greatly liked by those who served him, and that evening Hope had no time to think of anything but her uncle and his needs.

The next day was Sunday. The doctor came before church time and permitted the general to move from his bed to the sofa in his dressing-room, where Hope read him the morning service, and "The Tramp Abroad" by way of a sermon afterwards.

The day went by rather slowly, for the hunt having dispersed before General Farrant's spill none of the neighbours were aware of the accident.

Hope was ashamed of the nervous expectancy which made it almost impossible for her to understand what she read, or to follow out clearly any line of thought.

She and her uncle were alone at Upfield, a very unusual thing, and she was beginning to feel a little weary between the unassisted effort to entertain her uncle all day and the feverish unrest which tormented her. Daylight was beginning to fade, and the general had fallen into a doze when his man brought him a card.

"Gentleman would be glad to see you, sir."

"Eh? What? Who?" cried the general, confusedly. "Oh, Vescilitzki? Yes, by all means, bring him up! You stay, Sweetie, and thank him for his kind attention to your old nunks."

Hope, partly agitated, partly amused, stood a little behind her uncle's sofa, while the general greeted Vescilitzki with great cordiality, then he said with a wave of the hand towards her:

"My niece, Miss Farrant, Count."

Vescilitzki bowed with much gravity, and Hope, in a slightly unsteady voice, thanked him graciously and gracefully for his kind attention to her uncle. Each treated the other as a complete stranger, and the general at once plunged into a discussion of the curious difficulties which had encompassed the Count. From this it was an easy digression to hunting and the capabilities for sport offered by the surrounding country, Vescilitzki avowing that he had some idea of buying a place which was for sale in the neighbourhood, which was partly the reason for his establishing himself in Markborough for a couple of months. As he said so, his eyes sought Hope's, calling up a sudden vivid blush, which made her very thankful that she was sheltered from her uncle's observation by being partly behind his sofa.

But the general was getting tired and wished to finish his nap. "It's a very good neighbourhood," he said, concluding a panegyric on the country round the Upfield. "As soon as I get on full rations again and am allowed to walk downstairs, you must come and dine with us, and meet some members of the hunt—excellent fellows!—Now, Sweetie, take the Count down stairs and give him some tea. She is a first-rate tea-maker I can tell you!"

"You are very kind. I have the national love of tea," returned Vescilitzki, rising with alacrity.

Hope rose also. She had scarcely spoken during the interview and now felt half pleased, half inclined to run away; but, self-respect enabled her to present a calm exterior. She led the way rather rapidly down the wide oak stair with shallow steps and broad banisters along a long passage, warmly carpetted and dim in the fading day-light, into a square tiled hall, also dim, then opening a door they came into the comfortable well-warmed drawing-room, a large room with abundant picturesque angles, recesses, bay-windows, draperies, a pleasant heterogeneous mixture of styles in furniture, plenty of books and low seats, a grand fire and overhanging mantel-shelf. Near this was set a tea-table, while the lamp on the mantelpiece made a pleasant, soft brightness round the centre of attraction.

"How charming your English houses are! I have never seen anything like them elsewhere!" said Vescilitzki, in a surprisingly easy tone as he paused beside the tea-table, while Hope sat down and took the cosie off the tea-pot and, admiring his coolness, looked up to reply. Meeting his eyes she could not resist a certain sense of the ridiculous, and laughed suddenly and merrily.

"Ah!" cried Vescilitzki drawing a chair near her. "I dare not join you—only he can laugh who wins—and I am far from the goal! When last I saw you,

I little thought when and where we should meet again."

"I am very, very glad to think you are safe," said Hope kindly.

"I thank you from my heart," he returned, in a low earnest tone. "If you but knew the immense restraint I have put upon myself to resist the inclination to leave all I had to attend to, in order to—to seek my fate, you would give me credit for some strength of purpose."

"I am sure you are very determined! And what has become of that wonderful man, Lisle!" asked Hope, to change the subject.

"He is at present in London, and we—Dacre and I—hope to get him some appointment in the British or South Kensington Museum. He is really clever and cultivated. Have you heard from your cousin, young Farrant, lately?"

"No, why do you ask in that tone?"

"Because I have heard on tolerably good authority that a marriage will shortly be announced between the charming Mrs. Menteith and the gallant Lancer."

"Impossible!" cried Hope, opening her eyes incredulously.

"I imagine there is some truth in it," said Vescilitzki, adding in a peculiar tone, "Hearts are often caught in the rebound." There was a few minutes' silence, then Vescilitzki put down his cup and looking seriously into his companion's speaking face, asked: "Suppose your uncle is so good as to repeat his invitation to dinner, would you advise me to accept it?"

"Oh pray do what you like best, Count Vescilitzki."

"That is not the question," he returned impressively. "But do you permit, and second the invitation?"

Hope hesitated, smiled, blushed, looked down and said:

"Well, perhaps you might as well accept."

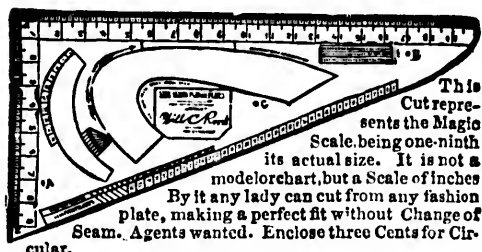
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