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# **THE DUCHESS OF POWYSLAND**

**A Novel**

**BY GRANT ALLEN**

**AUTHOR OF 'IN ALL SHADES,' 'THIS MORTAL COIL,' 'THE TENTS OF SHEM,'  
'DUMARESQ'S DAUGHTER,' ETC.**

**IN THREE VOLUMES**

**VOL. III.**

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# THE DUCHESS OF POWYSLAND.

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## CHAPTER XXXIII.

### DOUBTED!

Next morning it was authoritatively announced to the fashionable world that the Duke of Powysland had gone off to Norway alone for six weeks' salmon-fishing, and that the Duchess would remain by herself for the present in her temporary home in Onslow Gardens.

But in the servants' hall unofficial voices whispered freely how, the evening before, while Ruggles was arranging the flowers in the dining-room, and William attending to the gas on the stairs, the Duchess had swept out of the library, where she had been with the Duke, for all the world 'like a play-actress,' as the butler phrased it; and how his grace's voice had been heard calling loudly after her, in no measured tones, 'I know where I stand now, then. I know how you've betrayed me.'

There's no place on earth like a servants' hall for the evolution of gossip; and in less than three days those ominous words, in all their possible bearings, had been discussed and threshed out half a dozen times over by the whole household, while endless varying interpretations had been put upon them by every one of its individual members. For the Duke had found out that her grace had betrayed him!

Meanwhile, the Duchess remained in solitary state in Onslow Gardens; and Elizabeth Woodward, slimmest and discreetest of lady's-maids, waited assiduously upon her in her temporary widowhood.

The more Linda saw of Elizabeth the better she liked her. There's nothing a capable woman admires so much as capability in others; and the new maid was almost as capable in her own way as Linda herself. She moved about the room so noiselessly; she saw what was wanted so quickly; she anticipated every contingency so intelligently and well, that Linda felt something very like real friendship for her dove-eyed attendant. The Duchess, of course, stood in need of sympathy. Strong and self-reliant though she was, she was still a woman, and it was no small trial to her that her husband should have thus gone off, in the first year of her marriage, on an insufficient pretext, in a fit of jealous anger, and left her alone in that dreary town house, to be a subject of whispered gossip for half the inquisitive quidnuncs of London. She was too proud to show it, of course. Linda could never wear her heart on her sleeve, no matter what happened; but she felt the slight none the less bitterly in her own inmost soul, and often on evenings when she didn't dine out she sat by herself in that dainty little boudoir, absorbed in thought, and wondered what end it might all portend—what sort of married life might henceforth be in store for her.

Now, all these things Elizabeth Woodward divined with silent attentiveness; and though she never said a word to her mistress that might seem overtly to acknowledge the trouble in which Linda was involved, she gave her none the less that quiet and soothing sort of mute sympathy which is expressed only by gentle action, soft speech, and the constant instinctive avoidance of anything that could suggest unhappy trains of thought or unpleasant reminiscences.

'Elizabeth,' Linda said to her new maid one day, in a sudden access of gratitude for her unspoken kindness, 'I declare, I like better to be up here alone in my own room with you than with anyone else in all London. You're a lady at heart—that's what makes me like you so.'

A hot flush rose red on the maid's cheek as she answered, bending low over her mistress's hair to hide the tears that filled her eyes, 'Thank you very much, Duchess. You're far too kind. I don't know how it is, but I somehow feel as if I'd never met anybody in the world I could take to as I've taken to you. You make me feel better than anybody else ever did. You make me feel I should like to be like you, you're so good and kind and considerate to everybody.' And she held her breath hard, and fell for the rest of that evening's work into a silent reverie.

During those six weeks while Bertie was away, Linda went out but little, and that little only just enough to save appearances and prevent scandal. If she were to shut herself up in the house altogether, and refuse all invitations from no matter what quarter, people would say something had gone wrong internally in the Powysland family. *Noblesse oblige*, and if you are a Duchess you must 'behave as such,' by bearing your fair share in the festivities of society. So Linda accepted a few unavoidable engagements, and drove out from time to time in that horrid recurrent treadmill of the park, just to make a show of being still in London, and of not being ashamed to appear openly. On two or three such occasions when she quitted the house, her eye happened to fall upon an idle-looking man in a gray felt hat, loafing loose about the

gardens; and her attention being once directed to him, she observed at last from the drawing-room window that this man was pretty constantly lounging close by, in the roadway outside; nay, more, that he seemed to be relieved at intervals by another unpleasant person in a rough pea-jacket, to whom he nodded distantly and unobtrusively when they passed one another at the street corner. She noticed also with some surprise that one or other of the same two seedy-looking men turned up accidentally now and again in the park whenever she was driving there. In itself, this little recognition didn't at first disturb her equanimity; but two small episodes that occurred shortly after gave an unexpected importance in her eyes to the shabbily-dressed strangers.

She was standing one morning by the window of her bedroom, shortly after breakfast, and looking out into the street, when the man with the gray felt hat passed by opposite, and was presently crossed by his companion in the pea-jacket, who seemed to be going in the other direction. Neither spoke a word, but each had a glimmer of intelligence in his eye as he passed, which to Linda's keen apprehension was as eloquent as volumes. She turned half unconsciously to Elizabeth Woodward, who stood a little away, looking out also from behind the curtains; and, to her great surprise, Elizabeth Woodward's eyelids dropped suddenly, and a very pained expression came over her features. In a moment, Linda saw her maid had observed the men—not for the first time—and she felt sure from her look that Elizabeth knew what errand they were sent upon.

The Duchess started.

'What does this mean, my child?' she cried, with a little tremor of presentiment.

'I don't know,' Elizabeth answered, trembling violently. 'But—I—I've noticed them before, more than once, that's all. They're often about, on the watch, in the gardens.'

'You don't suppose they're burglars?' Linda suggested, glancing rapidly round the room, towards the place where she kept the Amberley diamonds. 'They're not watching the house intending to rob us while the Duke's away, do you think, Elizabeth?'

'Oh dear no!' Elizabeth answered with the emphatic confidence of one who knows. 'Burglars wouldn't show themselves openly like that, of course. They're a deal too clever. They'd know better than to give anybody such a clue beforehand.... I wish to goodness I thought it was only burglars.'

'Why, what can they be, then?' Linda exclaimed, half amused and half frightened. 'What's worse than housebreakers?'

'I'm sure I don't know,' the girl answered with a faint shudder. 'But they've no right to be hanging about here, anyhow. I'd just like to give them a piece of my mind, that's all, skulking around like that where *you* are, Duchess.'

And so the matter dropped for the moment.

A day or two later, however, Linda was out in the park in her victoria, when to her immense surprise, on a penny seat by the side of the drive, she saw Douglas Harrison, drawing circles with his stick in the dust, and looking listlessly on at the monotonous stream of carriages that passed and repassed him.

It took her aback, because she knew Douglas Harrison had never been a consumer of giddy pennyworths in the haunts of fashion. He despised the park and all that appertains thereto. Indeed, to say the truth, he had only gone out there that particular afternoon on the stray chance of catching a passing glimpse of Linda. It was foolish of him, he knew, but, then, it was only friendship. Nevertheless, he felt a very remarkable bound of his heart when Linda's green and gold livery appeared in the Drive. Mere friendship seldom makes one's heart beat quite so fast as that, and when Linda herself, seeing him rise from his chair, all aglow, and lift his hat awkwardly, pulled up just in front of him for five minutes' chat, Douglas felt himself raised all at once for the moment to the seventh heaven.

Alas for the brevity of human happiness!

As he stood there, talking, beside the ducal carriage, utterly unconscious of the honour which would have turned Basil Maclaine's head, and aware only of Linda's gracious smile and her friendly presence, he happened to notice a shabby-looking man in a gray felt hat, who passed carelessly by, swinging a short cane in his hand, and whistling a tune to himself in the broad May sunshine. A keen look of satisfaction lighted up the fellow's eyes as he glanced sideways, half stealthily, at Douglas and Linda. The barrister started back with some nameless sense of disgust, and at the very same moment Linda caught sight of the unwelcome figure.

'Who on earth can that man be, Mr. Harrison?' she asked, leaning forward confidentially with a half-frightened air. 'Do you know, he's always lounging around our house in Onslow Gardens. He makes me quite afraid, he has such a jaunty manner, and yet such a hang-dog look about him. But I somehow fancied you seemed to recognise him.'

'You're quite right,' Douglas answered, immensely impressed. 'How quick you women are, to be sure, at reading one's countenance! I *have* seen him before. To tell you the truth, Maclaine and I often notice him or another man on the watch at Clandon Street. And Maclaine fancies he's observed them once or twice following him up and down from the house to the office in Whitehall.'

A horrible suspicion flashed all at once across Linda's mind—a suspicion too horrible almost for her to believe or realize. Could Bertie have set on these hateful men to dog her steps and spy out her actions? But no, no, no! She could never believe it. Bertie, whatever else he might be, was at least an English gentleman. He would surely never expose his innocent wife to such an unspeakable, such an unthinkable, indignity.

Nevertheless, she bade Douglas a hasty farewell, and telling the coachman to turn, drove home, all tremulous. When she reached the house she saw the other one—the man in the pea-jacket—obviously engaged in watching for her return. It was too, too horrible—too bad to believe; yet she could hardly doubt it any longer now. The men must have been set there on purpose to spy upon her.

She went up to her own room, unattended, and opened the door softly. There, Elizabeth Woodward was looking out of the window, with her eyes so intently fixed on that hateful man below that she never even heard her mistress enter. Linda walked on tip-toe across the floor, and stood just behind the girl, as she strained her sight to see the fellow disappear round the far corner. Elizabeth started, and gave a little scream. Her eyes were full of tears. Her face had a conscious look. Linda turned to her piteously.

'My child, my child,' she cried, 'who *are* these men? Tell me—do tell me! You know them! You know them!'

Elizabeth sank down on a chair, buried her face in her hands, and began at once to cry bitterly.

'I don't know them,' she answered through her sobs; 'but I know who they are. I've seen them before. I can't keep the truth from you any longer, dear Duchess. They're private detectives.'

'So I thought,' Linda said slowly, with a new and creeping sense of personal degradation. 'Oh, Elizabeth, Elizabeth, it's very, very cruel of him!'

The girl rose, and flung her arms wildly round the Duchess's neck.

'Oh, you're too, too good!' she cried, in a passionate outburst of sobs. 'You poor dear, you poor dear! What shall I ever do? You make me so ashamed of myself!'

Another hateful doubt rose up all unbidden in Linda's breast. Suspicion makes one so suspicious in return. What could the girl mean? 'Oh, Elizabeth,' she exclaimed, clapping her hand to her forehead in her agony of suspense, 'don't tell me that! Don't say you, too, are against me! Don't say he put you here to spy upon me and keep watch over me!'

The girl started back in another sudden burst of fierce emotion. 'Oh no; not that!' she cried, trembling like an aspen leaf. 'Never that, thank Heaven! Not treacherous, not treacherous! Dear Duchess, dear lady, don't ever believe that about me. I'm bad enough already, I know—oh, so bad, so wicked!—but I wouldn't do that; no, not for the universe. I wouldn't hurt you or spy upon you, not if it was to save my life. Why, I love you, Duchess! Nobody ever spoke kindly to me or treated me yet as you've always treated me. I've got a good side to my nature still, bad as I am, thank God! and you've played upon that good side as nobody ever played upon it in my life till now. I wouldn't do a thing to harm you, not for all the world. Oh, my lady, my lady, I love you, I love you!' And, to Linda's immense surprise, the poor sobbing creature flung herself wildly at her feet, and laid her head in her lap, laughing and crying long and violently.

Before Linda had time to think what this could all mean, however, a strange thrill ran visibly through her maid's body. Her head fell sideways, and her face grew deadly white and bloodless. Linda touched her hands. They were cold as a stone. In a moment the truth dawned upon her: Elizabeth had fainted. She was desperately ill. This was no hysterical bout, no passing ailment. In an emergency Linda always did the right thing instinctively. She lifted her maid up in those strong, round arms of hers, laid her gently on the bed as one might lay a sick child, put a little eau-de-Cologne on her cheeks and forehead, fanned her with a Japanese fan, snatched at random from the mantelpiece, and rang the bell loudly



for brandy and the doctor.

When the doctor came, he pronounced it at once far more than a mere fainting fit. The girl had gone on battling against disease too long. She was seriously, not to say dangerously, ill. In fact, if her grace wasn't afraid to hear it, this was typhoid fever.

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## CHAPTER XXXIV.

### MISS WOODWARD'S SECRET.

For three or four weeks Linda nursed her maid with unceasing care through that terrible attack as she would have nursed a sister. Night and day she watched tenderly by the girl's bedside, gave her medicine and food, bathed her with her own hands, and soothed and petted her as one pets a frightened child, in her paroxysms of delirium.

Not that Elizabeth Woodward herself permitted it. Time after time, looking up pale and tearful from her feverish pillow, she besought her mistress with earnest entreaty to leave her. She wasn't worthy of being so much cared for, she cried; if only the Duchess knew all—and there she always broke off short, with a stifled sigh and a look of profound meaning. Whatever it might be, Linda was certain the girl had something on her mind; but the very crisis of a dangerous fever was not, she wisely concluded, the best moment in the world to investigate its nature.

While her maid was ill, too, Linda went out but very little. The servants, to be sure, in their self-despising way, were scandalized that her grace should shut herself up for whole days at a time just to nurse a young woman of their own class through a severe illness—a paid girl from the hospital would have done it quite as well—but Linda didn't much mind their righteous indignation. To dowagers who called and expressed their disapproval of such levelling ways, she said quite frankly she was engaged in looking after her maid, to whom she had taken a great personal fancy; and she added that, not having herself been born a Duchess, she considered Elizabeth Woodward quite as human as anybody else in the whole circle of her acquaintance. The girl interested her, and she liked to take care of her. She had a professional nurse in from an institute as well, of course, to lighten the heavy night duty; but she herself tended the patient in person for the greater part of the day, and took turns, as well, in sitting up now and again with her when the fever was at its highest.

Among those who called once or twice during Bertie's absence, to Linda's great discomfiture, for more reasons than one, was Basil Maclaine. That eager young man couldn't resist the chance of thus making the most of his acquaintance with a Duchess. His attentions put Linda in a most awkward predicament. On the one hand she could no longer conceal from herself the humiliating fact that she was being closely watched by her husband's orders, and by two trained detectives; nor could she pretend to doubt, after what Douglas Harrison had told her, that Basil Maclaine himself was almost certainly the object of the Duke's insane jealousy. On the other hand, her own self-respect made it absolutely impossible for her to hint to Basil, however indirectly, that he should discontinue his visits. She owed it to herself, she felt, under these painful circumstances, to behave to him exactly as she would behave to any other casual acquaintance, neither making much nor little of him, but receiving him when he came as she received all other incidental callers. Yet she knew all the time that each such visit was, no doubt, being carefully recorded in writing against her, and that Bertie, on his return from Norway, would probably put the very worst possible interpretation upon them.

It's a terrible thing to be innocent, and yet to know yourself suspected. Nobody in such a case can ever act quite naturally. The very sense of innocence, coupled with the knowledge of the suspicions against one, gives rise to an awkward self-consciousness which looks like guilt in the eyes of others. Even the servants noticed that her grace was perturbed whenever Mr. Maclaine called; and, putting her obvious uneasiness side by side with the Duke's last words on quitting the house, they made such mischief out of the coincidence as only upper class servants, with time hanging heavily on their hands in the servants' hall, ever know how to make for innocent people.

Elizabeth Woodward's illness was long and severe. At one time it seemed as if she would never get better. During those doubtful days, while she hovered between life and death, so the butler reported, a well-dressed man, giving the name of Jones, had called frequently at the door to inquire after Miss Woodward's condition. He was a very respectable man, the butler said emphatically—in fact, quite the gentleman—and he seemed to take on a good deal about Miss Woodward's illness, and, being so thin, might never get over it; which last remark, though grammatically referable to the very respectable man, was rightly interpreted by Linda as intended on the butler's part for an expression of sympathy and respect towards the amiable patient. But when Linda told the sick girl of Mr. Jones's polite inquiries, Elizabeth only buried her face in her hands deeper than ever in her remorse, and cried out energetically that as long as she lived she didn't ever want to see anything more of that dreadful creature.

It was evident, then, that, whatever the mystery might be about Elizabeth Woodward, Mr. Jones must in some way be very closely connected with it. Linda, looking at the poor girl's refined and lady-like face, drew at once her own natural conclusion. There are so many such tragedies in the world around us, and the unknown Mr. Jones, she thought to herself

with a sigh, only differed from the heroes (or villains) of most of them in this, that at least he had the grace to come and inquire after the health of his victim.

And that, Linda supposed, was the simple meaning of Elizabeth Woodward's many broken remarks about her own supposed unutterable wickedness. Such wickedness as hers Linda could easily forgive. The Duchess was not one of those good women who make of their own virtue a pedestal of self-righteousness from which to look down with scorn and contempt upon the slips of all their less fortunate sisters.

At last, after a long struggle, the patient began to mend. What made her convalescence slower and more difficult than usual, the doctor thought, was the severe mental trouble she seemed to be enduring. As far as Linda could judge, indeed, her maid was passing through a long-drawn agony of remorse and shame. More than once the poor girl started up in her bed and began to speak, as if she meant to unburden her heart of its load of grief in one wild outburst of spontaneous confession; and then her courage would break down again, and she shrank once more within herself, unconfessed, and sobbed herself faint with her suppressed emotion. Linda encouraged her, as much as she could, to lay bare her breast and tell all her secret, whatever it might be; but Elizabeth was too afraid or too profoundly ashamed of herself to venture on such an unburdening. Nothing her mistress could say would induce her to speak out the fulness of her heart. She lay on her bed and moaned, and deplored her own wickedness, for hours at a time, so that the doctor declared she would never get well till she had relieved her mind of the grievous load that was oppressing it.

In spite of the doctor, however, Elizabeth Woodward slowly mended. Day after day her strength returned, and she began to sit up, and to feel like herself again. At length, one morning as she lay on the couch, with the window open and the sunlight streaming in, Linda suggested gently that, as soon as she was able to move, they might run down together for a change of air to Hastings or Bournemouth.

The bare suggestion seemed to throw back the poor worn and wasted girl into a perfect paroxysm of delirious fever. 'Oh no,' she cried energetically, raising herself up on her elbows, 'I could never do that, Duchess. I could never do that. I've been more than enough expense and anxiety already to you. I'm ashamed of how I've troubled you. I won't go away. I'll go back at once ... to my own people.'

'To your own people!' Linda echoed in mild surprise. 'I didn't know you had any! But why to your own people, dear? If you won't let me send you to Bournemouth, why go away at all? Why not stop here where you are, and where we are all so anxious to nurse you well and make you happy?'

But the patient only shook her head very sadly, with intense determination, and repeated once more, in a dreamy tone:

'I must go home at once ... to my own people.'

'Where do your people live, then?' Linda asked, with some curiosity. 'In the country, I hope. Somewhere that you'd get nice pure fresh air and abundant sunshine.'

Elizabeth shook her head again sadly, and sighed.

'Oh dear no!' she answered with a very resigned air. 'Here in London. Quite dark. Almost in the City.'

'Then the change'll do you no good, you know,' Linda persisted warmly. 'Much better go with me down to Bournemouth. All I want is to set you up afresh and see you well once more. A month at the seaside, Dr. Bellamy says, 'll do just wonders for you.'

'Nothing'll do wonders for *me*, except to lie quiet in the grave,' the girl answered excitedly, with another of her passionate half-hysterical outbursts. 'And, besides, they'll want me back. I can't stop much longer.'

'And how long do you think you'll be at home?' Linda asked, gently soothing her hand. 'Perhaps you are right, dear. Home nursing's the very best nursing of all. Have you a mother alive? or a sister? I suppose you have. Well, but how is it, if they live in London, they've never called round—not once—to inquire about you?'

Elizabeth let her head fall back upon the pillow with a weary air, and clasped her forehead in her hands, like one distracted.

'Oh no, dear Duchess!' she cried, in an agony of shame. 'Don't talk like that! I've no mother—no sister. I'm alone in the

world. All alone—all lonely. And when I leave this house once, I leave it, I hope to God, for good and always.'

She spoke with wild force, and her eyes looked ghastly.

'Why, my child, what do you mean?' Linda exclaimed, taken aback and chilled by such unexpected vehemence. It sounded so ungrateful. 'After all our nursing and tending you're not going to run away from me at once, the moment you're well—and just as I'm beginning to like you and appreciate you.'

'That's just it,' the girl cried, clinging hard to her mistress's hand, and growing hotter and more excited in her talk each moment. 'That's just where it is, don't you see. If you hadn't been so kind to me, so good, so sweet; if you hadn't used me as if I were made of flesh and blood like yourself; if you hadn't treated me a great deal more like your sister than your maid; if you hadn't sat up with me, and nursed me, and watched over me, and prayed for me, why, I'd have stopped on, of course, in this place, like all the rest of them, and let things come to their natural end, as usual. But you've been so good to me, so good to me—oh, you dear kind thing!—you've just made me hate myself. If they kill me for it, I must go; I can't stop here any longer. They shall do their own dirty work themselves in future. No matter what comes of it, I shall go my own way: I shall leave this house the very first minute I'm well enough to stir out of my own bedroom.'

Linda shook her head helplessly.

'I don't understand you one bit,' she cried, much bewildered, and confident the girl must be wandering in her mind from the fever. 'You mustn't talk any more now, my child—you're far too weak. I can see you're going off into pure nonsense.'

'No, I'm not,' the maid answered fervently, seizing her mistress by the neck, and drawing her down to her face to kiss her lips passionately. 'I know what I'm saying, and *you'll* know by-and-by. You'll know and you'll forgive me. You mustn't mind about a month's notice, or anything else like that. We can't wait for that. I'm not fit to be here, and the moment I'm well enough to move I'll leave you—I'll leave you! But oh! Duchess, if ever I loved anybody in my life, I love you, I love you, I love you, I love you!' And she clung to her neck as if she would grow there.

Linda smoothed her hair with her hand, and tried to compose her gently. She was almost sure now this was the merest after-effect of fever and delirium.

That evening, about eight o'clock, the butler reported to her grace, Mr. Jones called again, and asked anxiously after Woodward. He begged the butler to tell the young woman he had made kind inquiries. The butler did so, and Woodward received the message, as he afterwards remarked, 'just a little bit flustered like.' Mr. Jones was a very respectable-looking man indeed, the butler repeated—tall, thin, and gentlemanly. He had a slight mark on his right cheek, as if he'd been wounded or cut with something sharp; but otherwise, the butler observed once more, he was *quite* the gentleman.

Half an hour later, when Linda went up to see her maid after her sleep, she found, to her great surprise, the room was empty.

That was all. Nothing was gone from it, not even Elizabeth Woodward's box; but her clothes had disappeared, and she herself with them. A sprawling pencilled note, in a shaky but very lady-like hand, was fastened on the pincushion:

'DEAR DUCHESS,—Good-bye. You have behaved like an angel to me. I could never stop another day in your house to wrong you further. You have made me feel as I never felt in my life before. Forgive me, forgive me!

'Yours gratefully,  
'ELIZABETH.'

The only explanation Linda could possibly make to herself of this strange mystery was that, in spite of her disclaimer, the delicate maid had been put there, like the detectives, by Bertie, to spy upon her.

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## CHAPTER XXXV.

### THE DUKE DELIBERATES.

There's nothing like solitude for a man with a wrong to brood over. In the society of his fellows the edge of his indignation may get worn and blunted by much rubbing against other ideas; but leave him alone in the wilderness, with his own thoughts, and he will feed his resentment undisturbed till it usurps, like some monstrous fungoid growth, the whole vacant field of his emotional nature. The Montgomeries had all something of the insane temperament in them; and the insane temperament, above all others, delights in such opportunities for nursing unrestrained its grief or its anger. It dotes on self-concentration. So six weeks in Norway, among the fiords and fells, gave the last of the house ample scope for the education of his jealousy.

The Duke had nothing to do, indeed, but to fish and to think about Linda. Fly-fishing allows a man plenty of time to think; and the Duke thought mostly (between casts) of that woman whom he had taken from her natural sphere in a Bloomsbury lodging-house to share the burden of an honour unto which she was not born, and for which, as his jaundiced eyes now told him, she was never fitted. He forgot, of course, when he talked to himself internally of the Bloomsbury lodging-house, that, as a matter of fact, he had taken his wife from the most brilliant and tasteful of New York *salons*, infinitely better decorated than the gloomy old halls of Powysland House, or Llanfyllin Castle, and that her money had enabled him, temporarily, to retrieve a position which before he married her had become all but hopeless. We do forget these unpleasant little distinctions when once we allow an overpowering passion to gain full mastery over us; and the Duke had quite enough of the insane temperament innate in his blood to be wholly swayed just then by that one hereditary passion of jealousy.

At the close of his six weeks, therefore, more angry than ever, he returned to town, now almost empty, at the tag-end of the season; and proceeded, before even he went home to Linda, to inspect the progress of the recent improvements at Powysland House itself. Great works in decoration and refurnishing had long been going on there—at Linda's expense, of course—that woman was doing it. She had given Morris and Liberty *carte blanche*, with her new-fangled notions, to restore the forgotten glories of the old Georgian Montgomeries. Oriental brasses and Persian tiles now adorned the walls. Fresh backgrounds of stamped leather panelling threw up the family portraits by Romney and by Reynolds, everything in the latest æsthetic style. The Duke smiled grimly as he glanced at the peacock hangings and the pomegranate brocades, bran-new as her own gentility, which the landlady of Clandon Street was lavishing on the ancestral home of all the house of Powysland. Would she ever live there herself, he wondered, to enjoy to the full this bastard Yankee magnificence? Or would Phillipps and Wardell's private inquiry office set all doubts at rest at once as to the part she was playing with that arch-rascal Maclaine?—Maclaine, who strolled down so calmly to the office in Whitehall each morning, cigarette in mouth, all unconscious of the malign web an English Duke and two private detectives were weaving merrily round his unsuspecting soul in the recesses of Belgravia.

From the wall, ten generations of Montgomeries smiled blandly down upon their ill-starred descendant. The Duke looked at the stamped leather panels by their side, and felt he had disgraced them. Charles Stuart Montgomery, first of the race, a son of Charles II. by 'a saucy Welsh playhouse wench,' as Pepys racily called her, gazed reproachfully into his eyes from the middle of a huge bag-wig, by Kneller. His grace had paid for that portrait with part of the money he received from Sir Theophilus Wragge, sometime Lord Mayor of the City of London, and a man of might in the provision trade, for making interest with the Secretary of State to grant his firm that lucrative commissariat contract for the army in Flanders. By his side hung saucy Nan Montgomery herself, created by Charles first Baroness Llanfyllin, and afterwards Countess of Bala in her own right—with long taper fingers of the exquisite Lely type and pattern. A little beyond her, again, George Adolphus, third Duke, in flowing white curls, reflected, apparently, on the inadequate sum for which he had just sold his vote and his boroughs to the insatiable Walpole. Opposite him stood the full length of Ernest, sixth Duke, better known to the world as the mad Marquis of Llanfyllin, who rode and won in that famous steeplechase before the Prince Regent, when no less than five noble necks were broken simultaneously. And here was Lord George, who grew fat on his winnings from Fox at faro; and there was Lady Jane, who sold herself for £15,000 a year to the daft Earl of East Lothian. This round face was Augustus, who parted with the Berwyn estate to pay his gambling debts; and that innocent youth was Edward, Lord Trefaldwyn, who mortgaged the family property at Bala to squander the proceeds on his French mistresses. The Duke gazed with respect on all those aristocratic ancestors, and wondered in his heart how a man so well descended as himself could ever have come down to the level of the Clandon Street landlady.

One point at Powysland House, however, annoyed the Duke very much. The head servant in charge, as he was on the point of leaving, mustered up courage to hope his grace wouldn't be offended, but a good many people, who looked like lawyers' clerks or money-lenders' agents, had been calling around at the house lately, and they were particularly anxious to know exactly when his grace would be back from Norway. Well, some of 'em asked most precise and confidential questions as to whether it was the Duke himself, or the Duchess for him, who was putting in all the new furniture and decorations and such-like.

His master turned upon him with an angry face. 'How the devil do you know, sir,' he cried, 'they were lawyers' clerks or money-lenders' agents, eh? How the devil did you know them? Who the devil told *you* I had anything to do of any sort with either? And if I did, what the devil do you mean by daring to speak to me to my face about it?'

The man, doubled up into himself by the Duke's outburst of passion, mumbled something inarticulate under his breath about thinking his grace would like to know all that had happened in his absence, and retired precipitately towards his own quarters.

But the episode left an angry man none the less angry than before. The Duke strode down the steps and out into the street from his own house in a still haughtier temper than the one with which he had entered it. Was it come to this, then, that a Powysland must ask for a paltry advance of money from a woman who had dragged the pride of the Montgomeries in the dust of Clandon Street? That a Powysland must drive a sharp bargain for hard cash to condone this strange episode of secret correspondence and stolen interviews between his own wedded wife and a beggarly clerk in a Government office? Perish the thought! Honour forbid it! Sooner than that——Adalbert Montgomery paused as he walked, and stood still for a moment in the street, knocking his stick against the pavement. The evil genius of his house was whispering to his mind faint echoes of diabolical old ancestral suggestions.

From the iron grill of Powysland House the Duke turned into Whitehall. He cast an angry glance at the Board of Trade, and, hailing an empty hansom that happened to pass by—for as yet he was in London incognito, having travelled up alone from Hull by the night express without his valet or his luggage—drove off in a turmoil of stormy feeling to a dingy, gloomy office in a street off Covent Garden.

He was expected at the office, for he had telegraphed on to announce his coming, and a hang-dog looking fellow, in a gray felt hat, took him jauntily up into a first-floor room to converse alone with him. The conversation didn't serve to dispel the Duke's ill-humour. He listened with a very bad grace indeed, while the man in the gray felt hat recounted at length the history of his observations. To do the Duke justice, this whole affair revolted his finer feelings. Jealousy had urged him to set a watch upon his wife, but pride made him hate the loathsome idea that this greasy, slippery, oleaginous detective should dare to play the spy on the Duchess of Powysland. Let her be twenty times over by birth a Clandon Street lodging-house-keeper—nay, let him have picked her up casually out of the vilest den of St. Giles's or the New Cut—still, if he, Adalbert Montgomery, Duke of Powysland, chose to make that woman his wife, his wife she was, and a lady of the highest rank in England accordingly. So what did this low-bred, cunning, sneaking, fawning eavesdropper mean by venturing to take note of her goings-out and her comings-in for a wretched bribe of dirty, mercenary money? He loathed the instruments his passion compelled him to employ. He would have loved to kick the man, as he stood there smiling and cringing, and rubbing his hands in the conscious delight of having important revelations to make to his employer about the Duchess. But he was forced to listen with some outer show of politeness, at least, or even to ask the fellow questions, from time to time, about this vile and skulking apology for a trade of his.

'And when did you first see her grace conversing with either of them?' the Duke inquired in a very dry voice, after some opening preliminaries. Even if he found that woman ten thousand times unfaithful to him, he must teach this low brute to pay proper respect to an English Duchess.

'In the park, on the afternoon of the third,' the man answered glibly. 'She was driving——'

'Her grace driving!' the Duke corrected, with emphasis, in a mechanical way.

'Her grace was driving in her carriage, and Harrison, he was a-sitting on the chairs by the side——'

'*Mr.* Harrison,' the Duke corrected dryly once more. Persons who were on bowing terms with himself or the Duchess should not be alluded to by inferiors with such cheap familiarity.

'*Mr.* Harrison was a-sitting there,' the man went on, accepting the rebuff meekly, 'when her grace drew up her victoria

and smiled at him quite pleasant-like. Then Mr. Harrison rose,' and he continued to tell, in his own fashion, at very great length, and with many added suggestions of obvious premeditation, the story of that chance encounter of Linda's by the side of the stream of afternoon promenaders.

The Duke listened attentively, though with marked impatience.

'And how soon after that did Mr. Maclaine begin to call at Onslow Gardens?' he asked very coldly, hating himself for the question.

The man went off at once into a full and glib account, aided by his note-book, of the exact number of calls Basil had made at the house, and of her grace's singular avoidance of evening engagements from the moment 'the suspected party,' as he called him, had begun to pay at all frequent visits to the Duchess.

While he spoke, the Duke's brow grew darker and darker. He was profoundly wounded in his most susceptible passion. He had sold himself for money, he felt, and this woman had betrayed him. There was only one way out of it now, he knew; but that way, being a Montgomery, he wouldn't hesitate to take. Never would he humble himself to receive any longer one farthing of pay from this creature, who had borrowed his name and his title only to disgrace them forthwith among the low associates of her earlier days. He wouldn't touch her money—not a sou, not a cent, not a doit, not a stiver of it. It was hateful to think he should have to stoop to such base means of discovering her relations with these men; but she herself had forced it upon him against his will. However, she would never be able to make merry at his expense, and live on in society upon the strength of her brief glory as a Duchess of Powysland. He would expose and disgrace her, without disgracing himself. There was one way yet open. And that way he was determined, if all went well, to follow. He would punish the woman, indeed! He would humble her! He would crush her!

'Very well, Phillipps,' he said slowly, with a resolute air, drawing out his purse. 'How much do I owe you for all this up to date? I'll pay you now on account, and you can continue, straight on, your observations. Don't let that rascal Maclaine escape. I shall bring him to book yet. But, remember, all this must still be strictly confidential.'

For even so, he was too proud a man, for his own sake alone, to let the world think he suspected his Duchess.

And then, with his soul all seething within him, he turned out of the dingy, gloomy office once more, and strolled aimlessly down to a seat on the Embankment.

It was the first place that occurred to him, or, rather, the first place he happened to light upon. He was well out of the crowd there, and more alone than he could have been at the club or any other of his accustomed haunts. He wanted time to think—time to make up his mind for action. He hardly knew how to comport himself under these painful circumstances. Should he go home once more to Onslow Gardens and meet Linda again? or should he take rooms at once at some hotel in town, and thereby definitely proclaim open war against her?

Either course was difficult and beset with danger. One was very irksome, very wounding to his pride. But he must stop and think. That's the worst of being a Duke, you know. You get so few chances of solitude in life. A whole body of pestering people are always following you up, and dogging your steps, and bothering you. It was quite a relief to him to sit down, unrecognised, on this bench on the Embankment, and find time to think a moment how next to shape his course of action. But his brow was hot and his brain seething.

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## CHAPTER XXXVI.

### HEADS OR TAILS.

He sat there long, musing, and, indeed, he had cause. Everything on earth was going against him. He was deeply in debt once more—chiefly debts of honour, to be sure; but he owed also no small obligations to those obliging money-lenders. It was the Montgomery nature to spend whatever your hand could grasp, and then run in debt again as deep as your creditors and the bank would allow you. To owe no man anything would have been to any inheritor of the Montgomery blood a sheer physical impossibility. Why, it was hardly safe for the Duke even to be seen in town. Heaven knows what mad tricks some of his bill-discounting friends might not be tempted to play him. In these degenerate days even dukes get dunned in open court for payment. And then there would be no course open for him but to accept with a very bad grace Linda's hard cash. And, sooner than that——The Duke paused and reflected.

As he sat there, immersed in deep thought, and unobservant of all that passed around, a voluble female voice burst suddenly in upon his silent reverie. It was a familiar voice, clear, cold, and piercing.

'What, you here, my dear Duke!' it cried in tones like a musical bell, but very quick and articulate, accompanied by a well-gloved hand thrust out to greet him. 'Why, what an extraordinary place to find you, of all men, on a day like this! I thought you were away in Norway, beguiling the wary grouse or the wily salmon. The *Morning Post* says so. That's always the way with whatever one reads about one's friends in the papers. If ever by any chance you see a paragraph that refers to yourself or any one of your acquaintance, and you're in a position to check it, it invariably turns out upon examination to be either incorrect or else grossly exaggerated. I give you that, gratis, as my universal experience of the journals of my fatherland.'

The Duke looked up and saw—Mrs. Bouverie-Barton.

He groaned inwardly. This was indeed a most inopportune interruption. Can an unhappy Duke never be left alone, then, to his own devices for ten minutes together? And Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, too, of all people on earth! That well-known hostess and clever society talker would put it about over the whole of London before the world was six hours older, that he was in town once more, on view at the Embankment; and he must make up his mind at once accordingly whether to go back like an obedient slave to Linda, or openly to renounce her. He hated to have his hand forced in this way. But Mrs. Bouverie-Barton was just the sort of woman who always forced one's hand, confound her! The Duke had hardly patience enough to be commonly polite to the wretched woman.

'So I *was* in Norway till four days ago,' he answered somewhat testily, taking the well-gloved hand in his with very languid interest. 'I am there still, for that matter, so far as society—and the Duchess are concerned; for I've come back incognito. I've just returned to town by way of Hull; landed last night, ran up early this morning alone, and had business down here—of a confidential nature—with my agents. I haven't been home yet to see my wife; indeed, I—I was thinking of popping in to surprise the Duchess.'

'Oh, indeed!' Mrs. Bouverie-Barton replied, with a significant emphasis. 'So she doesn't know you're coming! Well now, that *is* interesting! And what a *very* funny place to find you ruminating whether or not you'll make up your mind to go home to her!'

The Duke looked up sharply.

'Mrs. Bouverie-Barton,' he said with a half-angry air, 'you're quite too much of a psychologist for me. Too clever by half, I call you. I object to being read at sight as if I were an open book. I never told you I was ruminating anything of the sort ... And if it comes to that, what brings *you* down so far into the City too? It's as least as much out of *your* beat as *mine*. I don't expect to meet a lady of your tastes hanging about loose like this on the Embankment.'

Mrs. Bouverie-Barton took off her glove deliberately—she had pretty white hands for a woman of her age, round and plump, but delicate—and displayed before his eyes a manuscript roll of foolscap she was carrying with most affectionate care in her music-bag.

'I've just been down to a publisher's to show him *this*,' she said, with a little air of triumph, 'for a clever young friend of mine—oh! immensely amusing—in fact, Rabelaisian. It's a book that's going to take the world by storm at once, I can tell



you—a piece of the most rollicking cynical humour by a mere lad of twenty-four, as witty as a Beaumarchais. They're simply delighted with it at Hall and Evershed's. And, coming back, I chanced by pure accident to turn this way. And turning this way, I had the great good luck to hit at once upon an idle acquaintance.'

And she beamed upon him so sweetly as she spoke, that even that angry jealous man felt himself almost disarmed by her smile for half a moment. Very fine teeth for her age, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton's.

'But what's been happening in town while I have been away?' he asked, with languid interest, or pretence at interest, for he cared just at present for nothing on earth but this one pressing problem of his own existence. 'I know I've come to the right source, anyhow, for the fullest information.'

Mrs. Bouverie-Barton laughed good-humouredly.

'Well, I *do* hear most things that go on in town,' she answered with conscious pride in his recognition of her talents as a collector and dispenser of gossip. 'Let me see. What's fresh? Sabine Venables is married at last to that leader-writing Harrison man. Oh, that was before you went away, of course. I remember now, I broke bread with you at the wedding. My poor head's getting dreadfully muddled. Well, they're pulling very well together, I believe, as far as they've gone. You see, that's a marriage for love. Love always answers. Hubert Harrison was after her years ago, of course, about the same time when one Lord Adalbert Montgomery—you recollect the incident—was debating with himself whether or not to tie himself for life to her.'

And Mrs. Bouverie-Barton shut her eyes for a moment prettily, and looked back into the past with a rapt expression to recall those pleasant days of pre-ducial reminiscences.

'I'm glad they get on well,' the Duke murmured by way of relieving himself from the embarrassment of such personal allusions.

'Oh yes, I always said that'd be a very good match,' Mrs. Bouverie-Barton ran on, with glib readiness, 'though I confess I never thought the girl would take him. Old Affability had trained up his child in the way she should go, as these heiresses are trained up nowadays, to sell herself in the open market to the highest bidder, for position, title, an old name, a coronet; and I thought at first she wouldn't depart from it. I thought she'd do as they all do—marry a marquis—and then run away from him. I remember saying one day at Hurst Croft to that young Maclaine——'

The Duke's eyes started into sudden interest.

'To whom?' he asked quickly, half doubting if he'd caught the name aright.

'To young Maclaine, of the Board of Trade,' his companion went on, without pretending to notice his start. 'Your Duchess's friend, you know. He says he used to see a great deal of her at one time—before she married. And, indeed, after too, for the matter of that; for he's been a constant caller at Onslow Gardens, I am told, all the while you've been beguiling the wily salmon, that we spoke about, in Norway. Well, I remember saying to him one day at Hurst Croft that that girl Sabine would marry as they all do—and at the end of six months run away with Hubert.'

'Six months is a precious short time to give a man for domestic felicity,' the Duke interposed bitterly.

'No doubt. But it is as much as the women give their husbands nowadays,' Mrs. Bouverie-Barton responded, with the smart joy of the scandalmonger. 'Look at Lady Geldart, of Nigg, for example, that pretty brunette that I strongly recommended to you before you went on the war-path to America—there's a fine contrast to the Harrisons for you! Sabine Venables marries the man she loves, wise girl; and they'll be happy for a lifetime. Gwendoline Mackay, of the Southwark beer-bottling place, marries Lord Geldart, of Nigg, a dissipated young rake who only wants her name at the back of his bills at three, six, nine months. And what's the consequence? Before the bills have matured the poor girl's had enough of it, and runs away from him.'

'You don't mean to say Lady Geldart's run away!' the Duke exclaimed, with a sinister interest.

'Yes, I do,' the lady replied. 'Bolted! Just bolted! Haven't you seen the papers? She's gone off with a cornet in the 8th Hussars—I forget his name this moment, but you remember the man: that fellow with the smooth dark hair and the small black moustache—Mr. Maclaine's cut to a T—that she used always to talk with so much before she was married.'

The Duke clapped his hand to his head mechanically.

'Run away from him?' he cried. 'And only six months married!'

'Oh dear yes; and that's a long way better, too, than if she'd stopped with him at Brook Street, and made a silent scandal by her relations with the cornet,' Mrs. Bouverie-Barton went on, all unconscious (to do her justice) of the way her every word was burning into the Duke's brain. 'She couldn't stand Lord Geldart's constant drain upon her purse. Who could, I'd like to know? The man has gambled away a quarter of her vast fortune already. Now, for very shame he'll have to get a divorce—his honour demands it; and then the poor girl'll come into her own again.'

'And keep the title he gave her!' the Duke said savagely. 'Be still Lady Geldart! That's the way with these women. They marry a man for what they can get out of him; and then, having secured his name and his rank, they go their own way and break the rest of their bargain.'

'Oh, she can't keep the title, of course,' Mrs. Bouverie-Barton ran on smoothly. 'She'll have to give up *that*, you know, if she gets divorced from Lord Geldart. But Gwendoline won't mind for a title, I'll venture to bet, if only she can have her own true love. A woman soon finds out that titles are hollow; and then she's sorry she didn't do at first what her own heart prompted her to do, like Sabine Venables. Why, do you remember, Duke, I offered to lay you two to one in dozens of gloves, at the Eton and Harrow match one year, that if you married Sabine yourself she wouldn't stop twelve months with you; and you refused to take me?'

The Duke smiled an ominous smile.

'I was wise in my generation,' he said grimly. 'Wiser then, perhaps, than now. But no matter. It's no use being cynical. What a perfect Court Guide you are to be sure, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton! You've always got the very latest society scandal at your fingers' ends. You're just the right woman for a man to meet after six weeks' solitude among the pine woods of Norway.'

For ten minutes longer Mrs. Bouverie-Barton kept her victim engaged with similar converse, all on her pet theme, the unhappy outcome of the modern mercenary marriage, till the Duke was fairly wincing under her graduated dose of slowly-dropping vitriol. At last he could stand it no longer. This was too much for any man. That fellow Maclaine again! He rose to go; and as he did so he felt himself stagger slightly. His head swam. He hardly knew what was the matter. Still, he held out his hand with his courteous society smile—for in externals he was always a polished gentleman—to say good-bye to his guileless tormentor. Mrs. Bouverie-Barton took it in her own plump and white ungloved palm. As their fingers met, she started back in surprise.

'Why, you're feverish, Duke!' she exclaimed, in a very frightened tone. 'You're in a high fever!'

'Am I?' the Duke answered, with the recklessness of despair. 'I dare say I am. Ever since I left home I've been sickening, sickening somehow. I seemed to keep it under in the open air among the pines in Norway; but since I got back to England last night it's come over me again in full force. I fancy I'm going to be ill. I can feel it in my bones. And a jolly good job too, as things go at present.'

He sank down, reeling, in the corner of the seat. Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, now thoroughly alarmed, hailed a passing hansom. With her aid, the cabman lifted the helpless Duke and placed him, a heavy burden, on the seat of his cab. The last of the Montgomeries had rightly diagnosed his own case. He was sickening for fever—a long-suppressed fever; in point of fact, an attack of typhoid, delayed beyond its time by the fresh air of the forests, but arising from the very same local causes in the house at Onslow Gardens as Elizabeth Woodward's.

'Where shall I drive, ma'am?' the cabman asked, touching his hat respectfully, for Mrs. Bouverie-Barton had confided to him in an undertone how exalted a personage it was the good fortune of his spavined mare to carry.

'To the Duke's own place,' Mrs. Bouverie-Barton answered, with prompt decision; 'Onslow Gardens.'

The Duke fell back on the padded seat, and nodded a drowsy assent. An awful idea held possession of his mind. Chance had decided his fate, then. The lady had chosen for him. Heads, a divorce; tails, the other thing. He would go home ill to Linda now, and let destiny work out the rest, as he himself foreshadowed it.

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## CHAPTER XXXVII.

### TAILS WIN.

Linda was musing, alone and disconsolate, in the big garish drawing-room at Onslow Gardens. They had taken the house furnished while their own was being prepared for them, and Linda hadn't attempted to rectify any room in it to her private taste, except her special little boudoir on the second floor. So she was sitting there, brooding, with her eyes on the ugly wall, nursing her grief and loneliness as best she might, when a footman of the usual gorgeous ducal pattern (to which she had long grown accustomed) flung open the door hurriedly, with the air of a man who has great news to announce, and blurted out in one breath the alarming tidings:

'His grace has come back by himself in a cab, without his luggage or anything, and he's waiting downstairs in the hall now, if your grace will please to step down and see him—very ill with the fever.'

In a second, at those terrible words, Linda had forgotten everything—save that Bertie was her husband and had come home ill to her. She rushed downstairs to him with beating heart and outstretched arms, as if the episode of his disappearance and the cruel watch he had set upon her movements had never existed.

He was sitting, or rather crouching, on one of the high-backed Chippendale chairs that flanked the hall table. Linda flung herself upon him with a dozen kisses, in a wild outbreak of emotion, very rare in her temperament.

'Oh, Bertie, Bertie!' she cried in an agony of suspense, 'then you've come back to me at last. What is it? What is it? Oh, how horribly hot your forehead feels! It was kind of you, when you found yourself so ill, to think of coming home to me!'

The Duke, for his part, didn't exactly repel her. That was not his cue now. He had left the arbitrament of fate to Mrs. Bouverie-Barton; and Mrs. Bouverie-Barton, as Goddess of Heads and Tails, had decided the toss-up in the sense that he was to come back to her. He accepted that decision in a blind, fatalistic way, as marking out his course for him. But he had a definite plan in his mind as well, to which that course was but the blank prelude; and he meant to carry out the plan, as it rose dim in his head a week ago on the Hamar Fjeld, and still more clearly that afternoon on the bench on the Embankment—ay, even to its uttermost jot and tittle. So he merely accepted Linda's kisses in a passive, mechanical, undemonstrative, high, aristocratic way, and whispered coldly in her ear:

'Not before the servants, please. No scenes, I beg of you. If there have been differences between us, let us keep them to ourselves. Don't let us go washing our dirty linen in public before the butler and the lady's-maid.'

For in all these matters, Adalbert Montgomery flattered himself, his manners still preserved that famous repose which stamps the caste of Vere de Vere.

Linda drew back as if she had been stung; but she never forgot her duty for all that. No, nor her tenderness either, harshly as he had greeted her. She could see in him, in spite of everything, only her husband, returned home to her ill—seriously ill; and her one thought now was for his comfort and safety. In less than half an hour they had moved the Duke upstairs and put him quietly in bed, and Sir Frederick Weston himself, the great specialist on typhoid, hastily summoned by special messenger from his house in Harley Street, was already in attendance.

It was a terrible time. Whatever the Duke's own plan might have been, this unexpected attack intervened to postpone or delay it. For a week or two he continued dangerously ill; and for a week or two Linda, already wearied out with her constant care for Elizabeth Woodward, nursed him assiduously, with very little intermission. His attitude puzzled her. She couldn't quite make out what Bertie meant. At times, indeed, it almost seemed as if he relented for awhile; he spoke to her so kindly, not to say affectionately, and Linda half began to hope the breach between them would be bridged over in part by this unexpected illness. But gradually it dawned upon her that these gentler moods were most frequently displayed before the doctor or the nurses. Whenever for a few minutes she was left quite alone with him, her husband relapsed at once into moody and gloomy silence. Not that he spoke harshly to her; she fancied he seemed almost of set purpose to avoid such conduct as that; but he hardened himself like adamant, as one who could neither hear nor see her. Often he lay, with closed mouth and feverish lips hard pressed, for whole hours at a time, revolving in his own mind she knew not what bitter thoughts about her.

To Linda, this silent mood of his was inexpressibly terrible. Womanly above everything, she felt his illness had suddenly

endeared him to her once more; and it froze the very marrow in her bones to see him thus chilly and irresponsive to all her wifely attentions. At times she half ventured to hope it might be nothing more than the lethargy of fever; when Bertie began to mend again, perhaps he would smile as of old upon her. But, strange to say, the Duke did *not* begin to mend. Even when the crisis was fairly over, as Sir Frederick himself declared, curious symptoms set in, which that experienced specialist, in spite of all his vast knowledge, failed entirely to comprehend.

'Never saw a case in all my practice quite like this one,' he said, mumbling. True, the long suppression of the fever under the influence of the Norwegian climate might have something to do with its abnormal development; quite possible—quite possible; but the Duke's strange drowsiness certainly surprised him. 'It forms a most unexpected symptom of some unusual and dangerous secondary evolution,' he remarked to Linda. 'It's a sequela of typhoid, like the one that followed the late epidemic of influenza, never before, to my knowledge, so clearly indicated. The patient's condition at times may be described as nothing short of absolutely comatose.'

All this never interfered for a moment with Linda's care in nursing him. She did everything possible to make him well, and even insisted on washing the parquered floor all round the edges with Condyl's fluid with her own hands, lest infection should linger in casual corners. That parquered floor she had had put down herself while Bertie was away, in case of illness; she was so grateful now to her own good genius for ever thinking of it.

One afternoon, as the Duke lay on his bed in a semi-conscious state, with Linda by his side, George the footman came up, bringing a card on a salver, one among dozens of similar cards of inquiry left each day at the door; but this one, George observed, with a malicious smile, the gentleman had particularly requested might be carried upstairs direct to the Duchess. In a moment the dozing patient was wide awake and restless.

'Whose card is that, Linda?' he asked, quite briskly, calling her by her Christian name outright for the very first time since his return from Norway.

Linda shrank back. The stars in their courses were fighting against her. With a terrible sinking at her heart she held it up before him. Her husband read it unmoved:

'Mr. Basil Maclaine;' and then below, in manuscript, 'With *very* kind inquiries for the Duchess of Powysland.'

'I see,' the Duke murmured, with a groan, turning his face towards the wall. 'His kind inquiries are all for you, Linda.'

The unhappy wife could answer nothing. She bent her head low, and burst into a silent flood of tears. Coincidence and occasion were dealing very hardly by her. She cried long and bitterly, but Bertie lay still, with his face turned away, and took no further notice of her. It was a terrible position; but, such as it was, she was bound to face it all through unaided.

For two long hours she sat there, with her head in her hands, and still her husband never spoke a word, nor moved a finger, except to turn from time to time on his side restlessly. Yet now and again Linda fancied he was fumbling with something unseen beneath the bed-clothes. But he was ill, oh, so ill!—how ill Linda hardly dared confess to herself, and that made things all the worse. For if Bertie were to die, feeling towards her like this, she didn't know how on earth she could ever look up again.

At five o'clock that evening Sir Frederick called again. He was a little dried-up old man, with parched yellow skin, and small ferret eyes that seemed to pierce one through and through every time he looked at one. The moment he saw the Duke, his round pursed lips and puckered forehead proclaimed at once to Linda's observant gaze that he found his patient much worse than he left him.

'What have you been giving him, Duchess?' he asked, in a very low tone. 'No quackery, I hope; no nostrums, no hypnotism. This comatose condition is simply inexplicable. Did you let him have his tonic, as I told you, at three?' He shook his head, much puzzled. 'I can't at all understand it,' he mumbled once more below his gray moustache. 'Most singular; mo-st sin-gular.'

'Yes,' Linda faltered out; 'I gave him the medicine myself, as you directed. Nobody else has fed him with anything to-day or yesterday. I was so afraid, from what you said, the nurse might have made some stupid mistake, that I've measured each dose out carefully in a minim glass, and held it to his lips with my own hands. I'm sure he's had everything exactly as you prescribed it.'

'And after every dose,' the professional nurse put in, coming forward from behind, and folding her hands demurely, 'the

Duke has seemed to get drowsier and drowsier.'

'Curious,' the doctor said, stroking his chin reflectively. 'Most curious. Most cu-rious. There's a dose due now. Temperature, one hundred and four and one-tenth. Let me look at the bottle.'

Linda moved hurriedly across to the table before the nurse could anticipate her. Sir Frederick followed her with keen little pursed-up eyes of silent inquiry. She handed him the medicine. He took out the cork, sniffed at it, turned it upside down with one finger on the mouth, and tasted a drop on the end of his finger.

'Very odd,' he said once more, smacking his lips critically. 'It's bitterer than it ought to be. I can't make it out. Unsatisfactory, very. I'll take this bottle away with me, if you'll allow me, Duchess, and get my own chemist to send you another.'

'But it's time for a dose now,' Linda faltered out timorously. 'Shall I give it him or not? He seems so terribly weak and faint just this minute.'

The doctor glanced at her once more with those keen small eyes of his.

'Certainly *not*,' he answered, in a very decisive voice. 'It can do him no good. There's some mistake of somebody's. I'll call round in my carriage and get another lot of this mixture made up under my own eyes. It won't take ten minutes, and I'll bring it round myself. The case is urgent. I must see to it at once.' He eyed her hard. 'There's something very odd,' he said, with slow deliberation, 'going on somewhere.'

As he spoke, the Duke lifted up his head drowsily from the pillow, and stared around him with a blank, open-mouthed stare of surprise and wonder. His look was idiotic. Presently, with a start, he seemed to recollect himself.

'Linda,' he murmured, in a very feeble voice, 'will you leave me for a minute, please? And you, too, nurse. I've something I want to speak to Sir Frederick ... alone ... about.'

With a ghastly misgiving in her breast, Linda staggered from the room, hardly knowing what she did, and tottered into her boudoir next door in an agony of horror. Two minutes later she heard Sir Frederick open the bedroom door and call in the nurse in a very low voice. His tone was most mysterious. Then came sounds of whispering, and a short consultation. When it ended, he knocked at her boudoir lightly.

'For the present, madam,' he said, in a very formal voice, 'I think your grace had better not enter the Duke's room. He's best left alone just now with the regular nurse. Understand, this is urgent. To disturb him may imperil your husband's life. I *forbid* you to go in to him. I'm seeing after his food and medicine myself. I'll call round again to watch the further effect of the tonic the very first thing to-morrow morning.'

Linda sank down on her sofa in a perfect paroxysm of horror, suspense, and misery. What on earth could it all mean? Why was Bertie so strange? And why did Sir Frederick forbid her so strictly to wait at such a crisis upon her own dying husband?

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## CHAPTER XXXVIII.

### A NIGHT OF TERRORS.

She sat there alone for an hour or two, each minute of which lengthened itself out to an eternity.

From time to time sounds came from the next room. First, as she judged, Sir Frederick arrived back with the medicine, and entrusted it to the nurse. That Linda rather resented, for so far she had given her husband everything with her own hands, and it seemed hard indeed she should be debarred from waiting upon him now at this final crisis. Then a fit of coughing came on, and Bertie seemed worse. Overwhelmed with grief and terror, she rushed to the door. There, a new horror awaited her. A fresh nurse, just brought in by Sir Frederick, met her on the threshold as she tried to enter with the stern words:

'Sir Frederick's orders are, we're not to let anyone but ourselves come near him for the present.'

So Linda, unnerved at the moment—a rare thing indeed with her—staggered back again, with a dumb sense of injury, to her own boudoir, and waited, her heart almost standing still with awe, for some other token of life in that mysterious sick-room.

Presently she heard Sir Frederick's foot on the stairs. Then he was still in the house!

'I'll leave him for the present,' he was saying to a servant. 'I'm going down to get an hour or two's sleep on the library sofa. If the nurse should ask for me, just step down and wake me.'

Then all was silence again—a long, long silence.

At last, about ten o'clock, new sounds broke in upon the stillness of that lonely boudoir. One nurse left her husband's bedroom for a moment, and then another. Could they have left Bertie alone, ill as he was, she wondered breathlessly to herself, even for a single second? Oh no; impossible! They would never be so careless! She listened again. Well, it couldn't be so, but she fancied she heard sounds through the wall; sounds as of somebody moving softly and stealthily over the floor. Footsteps of one going on tip-toe, she almost imagined. Could he be so very ill? Were they walking so not to wake him? Or didn't it sound more like the soft fall of bare feet on the velvety carpet? Either way, the noise frightened and puzzled her exceedingly.

As she stood there, irresolute, devoured by a fierce impulse to force her way into her husband's room, and wondering with a vague terror why Sir Frederick had insisted on keeping her so long away from him, another small incident occurred that still further perturbed and bewildered her agitated mind. The houses in Onslow Gardens, as every visitor to the square behind them must have noticed, have a sort of continuous ledge or terrace formed along their second floor back by the roofs of the great square bows built out into the garden from the drawing-rooms behind, so that a person can pass without much difficulty along the top of the ledge from one house to another. Indeed, the whole space is regularly laid out as a long promenade. On to this open terrace the windows both of Linda's boudoir and the Duke's bedroom gave, and Linda, looking out now—for she hadn't allowed the servants to come in to draw the blind—fancied she saw a dim figure glide, ghost-like, along outside, from the direction of Bertie's room towards the houses to the left of her. It was but a momentary fancy, for when, a minute later, she mustered up courage to fling open the sash and glance out along the terrace, she saw nobody there; but the very weirdness of the suspicion gave point to her lonely vigil in that empty room, and she felt in her heart she could stand it no longer.

With a wild burst of impulse she rushed out into the passage. A footman was standing there to bar the way.

'You mustn't go into his grace's room,' he said, with a strange undertone of severity alloying the wonted deference of the trained upper servant's manner. 'That's Sir Frederick's orders!'

Linda brushed past him with her grand commanding air.

'Stand aside, sir!' she said imperatively. 'How dare you interfere with me?' And she waved him away with her outstretched hand like a queen in her wifely dignity.

The man hesitated a moment—and then let her pass on. Even with Sir Frederick's authority to back him up, he was too

true a flunkey at heart to lay forcible hands on the sacred person of a Duchess.

Linda opened Bertie's door, and rushed into the room. There her worst fear was realized. Her husband was alone—alone and ghastly pale, lying back with his eyes shut, exhausted, upon his pillow. Then both the nurses must have left the room at once, as she feared, and heaven only could say what Bertie might have done meanwhile, being mad and dangerous in his delirium. He lay breathless now, like a man who has spent his little remaining strength in vain on some wild endeavour.

Linda darted across to the bedside, and felt his fevered brow. The Duke opened his eyes for a second and smiled at her contentedly. He seemed quite happy. His face was like that of one gloating over some accomplished success. Linda couldn't tell why, but that smile of his filled her with a deeper horror than the sternest repulse. In her agony she almost cried out with an exceeding loud voice. All at once a strange feeling of endless separation between him and her had come over her unawares. Bertie was dying; but do what she could, she couldn't find it in her heart to stoop down and kiss him.

That last smile he had given her seemed to freeze up the very fountains of love in her marrow. It was a smile of triumph, but ghastly in its malevolence.

As she stood there, leaning over him, her heart fluttering wildly, and her lips parched with horror, the door opened once more, and the first nurse entered. At sight of Linda, bending over her husband's bed and smoothing the sheet with her hand, she rushed up, apparently terrified.

'You here, Duchess!' she cried in a voice of astonishment, not unmixed with repugnance, almost pushing her aside in her haste with her trembling arms. 'I thought Sir Frederick had forbidden your grace the room! You have no place here. Go back to your boudoir at once, if you know what's best for you. My assistant and I have sole charge of the patient.'

The Duke opened his eyes dreamily once more, and looked up at the nurse with another ghastly smile and something very like malicious triumph.

'It's no matter now,' he said in a small faint voice. 'I think she may stop, nurse. Nothing will make much difference to me after this, I expect. Give me some drink. I'm so thirsty—thirsty.'

Linda snatched up a glass that lay on the table by the bedside, and poured him out at once a draught of barley-water from the jug that stood beside it. The nurse, darting forward with a little cry of alarm, almost wrenched it from her hands; but Linda was firm now. She was mistress in her own house, and nobody should thwart her.

'Sir Frederick or no Sir Frederick,' she cried passionately, 'I shall take care of my own husband in such straits as this. Let me alone, I tell you; I shall *not* leave the room. How do I know whether you two are treating him rightly or wrongly? When I came in here just now, you'd both of you left him entirely by himself—a sick man in his condition! How could you! How dare you! I shall stop here henceforth and watch over him till the end—till he gets well or doesn't get well. I shall never leave him. I shall sit here night and day. I *can't* go away from him.'

'As your grace pleases,' the nurse answered, in a very cold voice, watching her suspiciously with cat-like eyes as she held the glass to the Duke's lips; 'but my assistant and I will stop here to look after our patient. We've orders not to leave him alone with your grace one moment.'

Amazed and blinded, Linda took her seat by the bed, and answered nothing. What it could all mean she hardly dared to realize, but, come what might, she would stop there still and do her duty. Not even Bertie's awful smile should deter her from that. He had dozed off into a comatose sleep now. His breathing was heavy, long, and stertorous.

Presently the second nurse came back with some things in her hand she had taken down to wash. The moment her eye fell on Linda she started back in surprise, and looked inquiringly at her pale companion. Linda could almost see her lips form into the half-unspoken words, 'Not the Duchess, surely?' The first nurse nodded a sullen acquiescence, accompanied by a gesture of deprecation, as who should say, 'I couldn't help it; not my fault; but let her be now. Anything to avoid making a noise to disturb the patient.' Linda glanced up and gave the new-comer a nod of polite recognition. The new nurse answered only by a remote inclination of her head and a stolid stare. Never in her life had Linda been treated with such cold contumely before. She felt these women were shunning her like some deadly thing; she felt Bertie by her side was dying, without forgiving her.

The strain of the situation was too terrible for tears. She sat there, mute, like one dazed, her hands folded on her lap, and waited for what she felt was the inevitable end with parched eyes and mouth, and heart that stood still with the intensity of its horror.

By-and-by the first nurse rose suddenly, as if struck by an idea, poured out a drop or two of the barley-water into a glass, tasted it, rolled it on her palate, pursed up her lips judicially, and finally poured back the remainder, undrunk, into the jug, which she regarded for a few seconds with deep deliberation. Then she lifted it in her hands, put it carefully into a corner cupboard, where several other jugs and bottles were already standing, locked the cupboard, and stuck the key in her pocket, and, last of all, touched the knob of the electric bell by the Duke's bedside.

A housemaid answered the bell immediately.

'Is any of the men-servants out there?' the nurse asked under her breath.

'Yes, miss; there's a footman a-waiting in the passage by Sir Frederick's order,' the girl answered, in the same low tone, darting a compassionate glance at Linda in the corner by the bed-head.

'Send him in,' the nurse said laconically. And the man entered. It was the same who had tried to prevent the Duchess from entering.

'I want you to stop here with me while the other nurse goes downstairs to Sir Frederick,' the first speaker went on, addressing the footman in a scarcely audible whisper. 'I mustn't be left alone with the Duke and Duchess under these circumstances, for fear of consequences. Now, Emily, you go down and get some more barley-water yourself and bring it up straight. When Sir Frederick comes up he'll want to look at it.'

Linda glanced up hastily, and saw the second nurse depart with a nod of intelligence. The footman, eyeing her hard, stood there respectfully, still as a statue, after the wont of his kind. The chief nurse kept her gaze fixed steadily on Linda. By her side, Bertie was still breathing in the same laboured way, and the bed-clothes were heaving and falling slowly and regularly.

The hours passed away, and no change came. Once, there was a slight murmur at the door, and Linda looked up inquiringly. Somebody had come in? Yes, Sir Frederick stood by her side, and gazed down with his wrinkled small eyes at the patient. But he said nothing. He merely took a chair, and joined her in watching. It was a long, long watch, and all around was deathly silence.

One o'clock, two o'clock, three o'clock, four o'clock. At half-past four in the morning the doctor watched more anxiously.

'It generally comes about now in these cases, if it comes at all,' he whispered to the nurse at his side, utterly ignoring the sick man's wife, who sat there still at her post, all pale and trembling. 'The effect gets strongest when the bodily functions are at their lowest ebb. I think he looks worse now. Breath comes and goes feebly.... H'm, I thought so. Pulse scarcely distinguishable.'

Linda looked closer as he spoke, and saw that Bertie's breath hardly stirred the feather the nurse was holding to his lips. A minute later there came a very faint gasp, a rattle in the throat, a fierce clutch at the bed-clothes. Then the mouth fell open suddenly with an ominous relaxation. Linda leant forward and clasped her hands convulsively upon her strained bosom.

'Dead!' she cried with a terrible burst of horror to think he should have died without even having spoken one last kind word to her.

'Oh yes; he's dead, sure enough, madam,' Sir Frederick answered, gazing hard at her. 'You need be under no apprehensions at all on that score. He's quite, quite dead.... And now I think your grace had better go back to your own boudoir.'

At his words a second doctor, not seen till then, stepped out from behind the curtain.

'We'll take charge of the body,' he said, with marked gravity. 'This is my affair. Sir Frederick has called me in to assist him. And we can dispense with your grace's further attendance.'





## CHAPTER XXXIX.

### WHAT THE WORLD SAID.

Linda listened as in a dream. His words fell dead upon her. Now all was over, a strange reaction set in. Worn out with watching, she allowed herself to be led to her own room, and let her maid put her to bed like an overworn child, with passive unresistance. She was dazed with the horror and incomprehensibility of the situation. Her very senses seemed to fail her. She sank at once upon her pillow, in a sort of dreamy, unconscious listlessness: in a few minutes, strange to say, she was sleeping heavily. The barley-water she had sipped in Bertie's room to moisten her parched tongue must have made her drowsy.

When she woke up, it was broad daylight; there were noises in the house of much stir and commotion. She awoke with a start, hardly realizing just at first the full extent of her misfortune. What had happened? Let her think! She was conscious only of a dull aching sense of loss and misery. Something had gone from her life. Something vague and dim. Then she remembered, with a flash, it was Bertie—and more than Bertie.

She rose hurriedly, and, putting on her dressing-gown, moved over to the window and looked out through the blind. She hardly knew why; perhaps it was mere want of fresh air that prompted her; but something made her stand there a minute with her hand hard pressed on her throbbing forehead. As she stood gazing idly, two men, skulking as before, passed one another opposite, with just the same mute look of mutual recognition in their eyes as that she had noticed in the private detectives'. They were not the same two men, however; their faces and dress were totally different; but she remarked at once an extraordinary similarity of type, and build, and walk, and manner about them. Like all detectives, in fact, they were obtrusively unobtrusive in appearance and style. They seemed to proclaim aloud to all the world that they desired nobody to take the slightest notice of their presence.

Many other people were lounging around the street; in fact, a little crowd had gathered near the door, discussing the Duke's death and its attendant circumstances. But these two were quite different in bearing from all the other loungers; they wore the unmistakable impress of men who lounge for professional purposes. It was their trade to hang about loose and keep a careless eye on people and things without seeming to observe them. The sickening truth came home to Linda's mind at once. They were watching the house; they were spies—police agents—closely noting the movements of all the inmates.

Her heart sank within her: yet, even so, she hardly admitted to herself the full truth about the situation.

Moving dreamily back, she rang the bell for her maid, and dressed mechanically. The maid preserved a most unwonted silence; scarcely a word was spoken while she combed out her mistress's hair. A deadly stillness prevailed in the room, made more oppressive by the gloom of the blinds drawn down out of respect to the dead. Linda felt she could hardly bear up against this blow of fate. But for very womanhood's sake, she bore up and steadied herself.

As soon as she was dressed, some strange impulse led her afresh to the opposite window, that looked out upon the gardens at the back of the house—the window of her boudoir, where she fancied last night she saw a draped figure pass, crouching and ghost-like, just before she burst wildly into Bertie's bedroom. Gazing out of it, two men once more riveted her attention in the garden behind. They were dressed like gentlemen, and they walked up and down on the path as if the gardens belonged to them. But they were not inhabitants of the houses around; the same stamp was upon them in unmistakable ways as on the men in front. She knew they, too, were a couple of police detectives.

The house was being watched, then, both front and back. The police were taking note of every man, woman, or child who either entered or left it.

She flung herself on her couch in silent horror and agony.

The day wore away in the same weary, dreary, desolate way as days always do wear away when there's death in a house. There were the same tedious, distasteful details to look to; the same ill-timed questions of dress and mourning; the same hateful necessity for eating and drinking. Nobody came near her to lighten her sorrow. Linda bore up through it all alone, save for the servants; and even the very servants seemed to shun and mistrust her.

At last, after lunch, a newspaper boy, running hastily down the street, broke the awful silence of the room by bawling, in

a half-inaudible shout:

'*Evenin' Standard*, Speshul Edition! Suspicious death of the Dook of Powysland! The Doctor's Account! Curious Conduck of her grace the Duchess!... Supposed Murder of the Dook of Powysland. 'Ere y'are. *Evenin' Standard*, Speshul Edition!'

Linda clapped her hands to her ears, aghast with horror, and rang the bell instantly in the fierce fever of her excitement. She must know the worst. A footman answered it.

'Go out and get me that paper,' she cried, in a voice chilly with awe. 'The paper the boy's crying. The *Evening Standard*. He's calling out something dreadful about the Duke. I must see it immediately.'

The man hesitated. 'I beg your grace's pardon,' he said, with obvious reluctance either to obey or to refuse, 'but I don't think ... I fancy your grace would rather not see what's printed in the papers.'

'Have you seen them, George?' Linda cried, turning round upon him point-blank.

'Ye-es, your grace,' the man faltered out, uncertain how to reply under these embarrassing circumstances.

'And what do they say?' Linda exclaimed, growing pale, and clutching at the nearest chair to support herself.

'I think, perhaps,' the man responded cautiously, thus driven to bay, 'I'd better go out and get one for your grace. Then your grace can see for yourself what it is they're saying about it.'

Linda staggered back to the sofa in breathless dismay. This was too, too terrible. She wondered what these scandal-mongers could have made out of her conduct. Even yet she had no idea of the full strength of the case against her. She sat waiting for the paper with bloodless hands clasped in front of her in agony. It seemed an age before the man came back. But at last he arrived, bringing the paper with him.

Linda tore the sheet open, and turned to the middle page. There it was, sure enough, in sober earnest, displayed in the very biggest leaded type: 'A Belgravian Mystery. Death of the Duke of Powysland. Suspicious Circumstances. An Inquest to be Held. Attitude of the Duchess. Rumours of Poison.'

It made her blood run cold, but she never flinched externally. Her eye glanced rapidly down the column, taking it in at first but vaguely, and then slowly assimilating the full meaning piecemeal. And this is how the paper described the events that had lately been happening to the House of Montgomery:

'We regret to have to announce the death of the Duke of Powysland, which took place at an early hour this morning at his grace's temporary residence in Onslow Gardens. The Duke, as we have already informed our readers, returned from Norway a few days since with the virus of typhoid fever thoroughly imbedded in his system. He has been attended throughout his illness by Sir Frederick Weston, the eminent specialist on typhus and the allied zymotic complaints, and up to Tuesday last Sir Frederick had formed a most favourable opinion of his patient's condition. On that day, however, a change for the worse unexpectedly occurred; symptoms of a curious lethargic character set in by degrees, and the noble patient's state became gradually such as to arouse grave suspicions in Sir Frederick's mind of some serious form of narcotic poisoning. Nothing is yet known with certainty as to the facts of the case, but rumours of a very disquieting nature have been flying about town and the clubs this morning. It is even stated in some well-informed quarters that an inquest will be held, at which facts of a most startling and sensational character are expected to be made public. London is promised an unusual excitement.'

So much was in large type. Then came a paragraph of less absorbing interest, beginning: 'The deceased nobleman, Adalbert Owen Trefaldwyn Montgomery, ninth Duke of Powysland, who has thus just been removed by death in the prime of life, was the second son of Leopold Augustus, seventh Duke, by his wife Amelia, only daughter of Sir Leoline Watkins, the well-known head of the distinguished brewing firm of Watkins, Brown, Traies, and Walbury.' And so forth, and so forth. All that Linda skipped; she knew it well before. It was the common information vouchsafed to the public in the official works of Burke, Debrett, and Foster. But below it came a second paragraph in more important type, with a leaded heading: 'Latest Details. Suspected Murder!'

Linda turned to this part with a certain eager awe and horror. It read as follows, as far as she could gather:

'Inquiries made at the deceased nobleman's residence in Onslow Gardens disclose the fact that very suspicious circumstances surround the Belgravia Mystery, as the Duke of Powysland's sudden death is now already called throughout the entire neighbourhood. The servants and other employés of the late Duke observe the strictest reticence, and it is difficult to discover the exact truth in the midst of the contradictory rumours which are everywhere freely put about and publicly debated upon. Little of certainty has yet transpired, and the police decline to yield any information. However, a representative of the Central Press Agency vouches for the general accuracy of the following startling statement:

'About three days since Sir Frederick Weston, who has been in constant attendance upon the Duke, began to notice very distinct signs of opium-poisoning in his patient's condition. He inquired of the Duke whether he was in the habit of privately taking any form of morphia or other narcotic, an inquiry to which the Duke returned an emphatic negative. Sir Frederick then began watching his patient's food with close attention, and saw grounds for believing that large quantities of morphia were being surreptitiously introduced into it from some unknown quarter. As soon as the presence of morphia in any food or medicine was reasonably suspected, the object was at once impounded and laid aside, and the strictest watch was kept upon the nurses and other attendants. Still, no clue could be obtained to the perpetrator of the outrage. Meanwhile, the Duke grew feebler and feebler, though every precaution was taken to prevent any of the poisoned food being administered to him unawares. Sir Frederick Weston, however, became more and more convinced that the slow decline in the Duke's strength must be due to the improper administration of some form of opiate, and could not possibly be assigned to the normal course of the fever, whose progress throughout has been thoroughly understood, in all its complications, ever since the classical researches of Sir William Jenner. He determined, therefore, to keep a still closer guard upon the food and medicine, and to allow nobody to have access to the Duke's room except the Duchess herself and two trained nurses of his own choosing.

'Now comes the most sensational part of the common rumour, which we publish under all reserve, and without in any way guaranteeing the truth of any portion of the statement. It is currently reported that last night, about eight o'clock, the Duke desired to see his medical attendant alone, without the presence of any third party, and conjecture has it that his grace then confided to Sir Frederick's ear the gravest suspicions as to the Duchess's conduct. At any rate, it is certain that Sir Frederick immediately after this interview forbade the Duchess her husband's room, and left the Duke under the care of his own two nurses only. In the course of the evening, however, it is asserted that the Duchess, taking advantage of the temporary absence of both attendants, forced her way, against the doctor's orders, into his grace's room, and administered to him a dose of medicine from a bottle she carried in her own pocket. On the return of the nurses, a few minutes later, they found the Duke lapsing into a comatose and almost dying condition, while the Duchess, taking her stand upon her rights as mistress in her own house, positively refused to leave the sick-chamber. The unfortunate nobleman fell at once into a deep and lethargic stupor, from which he never rallied, and passed quietly away a little after half-past four this morning.

'Rumour adds that the contents of the Duke's barley-water and other foods and drinks supplied by the Duchess have already been subjected to a hasty analysis, and that extravagant quantities of morphia have been found in all of them. A bottle of the same drug, containing a sufficient amount to kill a whole household, but harmlessly labelled as "Best Violet Powder," has also been unearthed among the valuables in the Duchess's jewel-case, which lay accidentally in a drawer of the Duke's bedroom. If these rumours prove true, it is probable that London will soon be called upon to witness one of the most sensational trials of recent years. It is not often that a Duchess has figured in court as the accused in a case of this character. We understand, indeed, on inquiry, that her grace's nerves are temporarily shattered by the painful events of the last fortnight.'

There was much more to the same general effect, but Linda had no eyes left to read it. Her sight failed her. One of the most sensational trials of recent years! That was all the paper had to say about this atrocious attempt to make the world believe she had deliberately planned to poison Bertie!

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## CHAPTER XL.

### IN DEADLY PERIL.

For the next ten days London spoke, wrote, thought, and dreamt about nothing else on earth but what the newspapers called the Belgravia Mystery. Since Pigott's flight, indeed, no sensation had so universally enchaind attention. It was the common talk of clubs and tea-tables how the Duke of Powysland had been poisoned in his food—and it was the Duchess herself who had deliberately poisoned him.

At first, to be sure, the few compassionate souls who took Linda's part—either because she was a woman, or because she was a Duchess, or because she was young and beautiful, or because (though this was the rarest class of all) they hated to hear any case prejudged on insufficient evidence—objected with apparent truth that no adequate motive could be shown for so terrible a crime against the supposed criminal's own newly-wedded husband. But cynics replied, with an ugly smile, that nobody could ever gauge anybody else's motives—[not gauge, a vile dictionary blunder]—that each of us knew his own business, and his own alone; that one never could tell what might remain behind; that Powysland was a gambler and a *roué* who married his wife for her money, and spent the money like water as soon as he got it; that the Duchess herself was a pretty upstart, raised suddenly from the very dregs of the people to position and affluence; and that her rapid accession, first to wealth and then to the highest rank in the land, had probably turned her head till she fancied she could do whatever she chose with impunity. Wealth and title had intoxicated her brain. She found too late she had made a mistake in marrying the Duke, who neither loved nor respected her. Within the first year of their marriage he had squandered a large part of her immense fortune, and then treated her with studied and ostentatious neglect by going off alone on an inadequate pretext for six weeks to Norway. As soon as he returned, the Duchess, stung to the quick by this slight to her charms—('Notumque furens quid fœmina possit,' said a famous talker at the Reform)—had seized the opportunity of his illness to get rid of him outright, and had carried out her plans with all the reckless openness of an ignorant and hasty half-educated woman.

For, of course, as soon as Linda's action came to be publicly discussed, the facts about Clandon Street soon leaked out. And, as always happens in such cases, they were grossly exaggerated, till a totally new complexion was put upon the Duchess's character and position. She had begun life, it was currently reported, as a lodging-house slavey, and had been raised to sudden wealth by the good luck of her brother, a journeyman mechanic, who had learnt his trade as a blacksmith's boy or a layer-down of gas-pipes. Many people were positive on the point that the Duchess could neither read nor write; while others hinted that her change of name on going to America was necessitated by causes of a most unmentionable character. Altogether, it was looked upon as certain, both in West-End drawing-rooms and in the free-and-easy at every London public-house, that 'the Powysland' had poisoned her husband because she was tired of his gambling and his continual extravagance, and because he had let her see all too plainly and too soon it was her money, not herself, he had wooed and wedded.

In fact, the only question the world seemed to ask itself was, Why did she poison him? The prior question, Did she poison him at all? never for one moment occurred to anybody.

The newspapers had leaders about Lucrezia Borgia and Beatrice Cenci; they discussed Brinvilliers and the Duchess of Kingston; they raked up all instances, British and foreign, of high-placed poisoners or distinguished murderesses. They prejudged the case by suggestion, and prejudiced people's minds by parallel stories, introduced without comment, as bearing upon a question now very much talked about in all circles of society.

Then, by-and-by, other facts, one by one, leaked out. It began to be whispered about that there were reasons below the surface; well—the usual reasons, you know; h'm, yes, exactly so. This mystery was of a piece with all similar mysteries elsewhere. Somebody else was really at the bottom of it. 'A gentleman's name,' said the cautious newspaper reports two days after the occurrence, 'was freely mentioned in the clubs yesterday in connection with the Duke of Powysland's sudden death;' and that gentleman, people muttered in West-End drawing-rooms, was Mr. Basil Maclaine, of the Board of Trade, the handsome young man with the killing moustache, who used to lodge in the Duchess's house some years ago at Bloomsbury. Private detectives, it was noised abroad, had been set by the Duke to watch this gay Lothario's relations with his too lively Duchess; and the result of the watching had been—well—eh—so unfavourable to the suspected persons that the lady had taken an heroic way out of it.

In clubland, ever ready to believe the worst of anybody, this plausible explanation was accepted at once with a cynical

sneer of complete comprehension. The whole thing, my dear fellow, is as clear as mud. Nothing on earth could hang together more naturally. This is how we look at it in our set, don't you see? The Duke picks up a young woman in New York, of enormous wealth, of course, and handsome—very—but of the shadiest possible social antecedents. Girl started in life in a London lodging-house, and we all know what *that* means; the morals of lodging-houses, to put it mildly, can seldom endure a close censorial scrutiny. There she knocked up against this young man, Maclaine—you must recollect the fellow by sight—a good-looking chap, in a Government office, with a fashionable drawl and a black moustache, and, from Miss Figgins's point of view—oh yes, I assure you, the Duchess's original name, when history first turns its bright bull's-eye upon her, was positively Figgins—no more than that, a most plebeian Figgins—well, from Miss Figgins's point of view, Maclaine would naturally seem 'a perfect gentleman.' She would see him with the admiring eyes of the lodging-house slavey. To her he would have position, money, social prestige, fascination; he could bring her home a bunch of blue ribbons to tie up her bonny brown hair, or some cheap tawdry jewellery from a shop in the Palais Royal; and to Miss Figgins, no doubt, in her Bloomsbury garret, such things would appear in the light of most munificent presents. You can guess the rest. A mutual attachment springs up between the young people, left-handed so far as one of the parties involved is concerned; the ordinary consequences supervene; and one fine morning, hi presto! Miss Figgins disappears as if by magic to New York—Mr. Basil Maclaine, no doubt, for sufficient reasons best known to himself, having paid her passage-money. That closes chapter the first, don't you see? Chapter the second opens a little later under different auspices.

Here we have a complete fairy transformation scene. Miss Figgins has disappeared through a hidden trapdoor, and, enter in her place, with totally new dresses, scenery, and properties, a very much redecorated and whitewashed Miss Amberley. The brother with the gas-pipes has 'struck ile'; he turns out on examination to be one of your genuine unsuspected working-men geniuses. Having gone over to New York in disgrace with his pretty sister—bought off, no doubt, for a fifty-pound note by the prudent Maclaine—he finds himself suddenly an electrical engineer of the first water, on the strength of this small capital so ill-acquired, and rises offhand, with true American haste, to incredible wealth and social position. The pretty sister, who had thus indirectly been the founder of his fortunes, naturally claims her share in the proceeds. 'Give, give!' she says, like the daughters of the horse-leech; and Amberley-Figgins, being an austere man, admits the justice of her claim, and buys her off with her clear half-million.

Just at this juncture, poor Powysland goes over in search of tin to pay his debts for a year or so, and marries, as he imagines, an American heiress. In an evil hour he brings his bride to London. At a party at the Simpsons'—I was there myself and saw it—the girl meets her discarded lover unexpectedly. In a moment the old flame revives. The forgotten lover returns. Maclaine thinks better of her now he sees her a Duchess in a diamond necklet. *Cœtera quis nescit?* Intrigue, detectives, disgrace, exposure. The Duke makes a feint of going to Norway, just to give them rope enough to hang themselves. They blandly accept the rope with child-like innocence, and Powysland comes back to find the lodging-house maiden has flown to the arms of her former lodger. He threatens divorce. The Duchess gets frightened and takes to poison. She gives him morphia—by the bucketful, like a little fool that she is—and he dies of the dose under Sir Frederick's eyes, announcing to the doctor with his last breath that her grace has done for him. A very pretty tragedy indeed, as tragedies go; but what can you expect if a man of his rank mud-rakes the slums, and sells himself without inquiry to a young woman of no education and doubtful antecedents, picked up at random out of a New York gutter?

To us, who know and understand Linda, it's hateful even to have to write or read such vile insinuations. But such is the way of Pall Mall. You have only to suggest to the denizens of those princely palaces that line the main thoroughfare of clubland some disgraceful motive or some ugly desire as the key of any problem then under discussion, and straightway, as men of the world!—by George! yes, my dear sir, they see at a glance you've hit by instinct upon the true solution. So all London explained in this way Linda's reasons for wishing to get rid of her superfluous husband, the moment it began to be generally known that the Duke had set private detectives to watch over her intercourse with Maclaine while he was away in Norway.

To Linda herself, of course, those anxious days of suspense and waiting were inexpressibly terrible. Yet they wore away somehow. The inquest was held, and Linda, habited in very deep mourning, sat on one side of the court, tearless and firm, but pale as death, while a hundred opera-glasses were turned upon her mercilessly. Many people, whose acquaintance she had made in the short whirl of her one London season, were there to look on; but few of them gave her more than a distant salutation. She felt terribly alone in the world. No real friend was near her. She rather wondered Douglas Harrison hadn't come to see her in her hour of need; but her good sense suggested to her at once the true explanation—Douglas was afraid of further prejudicing her case by seeming too attentive. Two things alone cheered her

up in her agony. One was that Sabine Harrison, like a true woman as she was, sat close to her all through, a true woman's instinct telling her plainly that Linda *must* be innocent. The other was the receipt of a telegram from Cecil in Montana:

'Am coming home as fast as steam will bring me. Bear up against this wicked and incomprehensible calumny. All will yet be cleared up. American friends have perfect confidence in your speedy acquittal.'

Yet the mere accusation itself was enough to strike any woman dumb with horror; and oh! when Linda heard it detailed before the coroner, how incredibly conclusive the evidence seemed against her! Day after day the inquest was adjourned; and day after day, as fresh facts poured in, the case looked blacker and blacker. Sir Frederick and the other doctors, the analysts, the nurses, the detectives, the servants—all had but one consistent story to tell, that she had poisoned her husband, and that she had poisoned him to marry the man who had deceived her. She sat through it all like one dazed, and listened breathless to the overwhelming mass of hints and details that told all one way, without the power of making even a suggestion to herself as to who could be the real murderer. Bertie had been poisoned; of that she could feel no reasonable doubt; but who on earth had poisoned him? Till she found out that, her character would never be cleared before the eyes of the world—if, indeed, she could escape the final penalty of the criminal.

Day after day the inquest dragged on; but at last those endless proceedings were over. The adjournments were finished; and the jury went out, *pro forma*, to consider their verdict. It was a foregone conclusion. Linda felt sure of that. With very languid interest she awaited their return. By-and-by they came back. Deep silence fell for a moment on the court.

'We find that Adalbert Owen Trefaldwyn, Duke of Powysland, has died from the administration of morphia in his food and medicine,' the foreman said impressively; 'and we bring in a verdict of wilful murder against Linda, Duchess of Powysland.'

Poor, weary soul! she thought she had sufficiently nerved herself up, in anticipation, for those terrible words, but when they actually came she almost fainted. She was standing to hear them, but as the foreman finished she sank back in her seat and closed her eyes swimmingly. All the room went round in a whirling maze. She hardly caught the terms in which, with grave decorum, the coroner handed over her grace the Duchess to the custody of the police on the jury's finding of wilful murder.

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## CHAPTER XLI.

### COUNSEL'S OPINION.

Till the trial came on, Linda had to pass through another terrible ordeal of suspense and waiting. The solitude of the gaol alone to which she was consigned would have made it almost unbearable, even without the cloud of that unspeakable accusation always overhanging her. The authorities, to be sure, did everything in their power to lighten the burden of her life while awaiting trial; but it was with a heavy heart indeed, in spite of every indulgence, that she wore through each day of that awful interval.

Outside, the question was only: When the Duchess is found guilty and sentenced to death, will they dare to hang her? Or dare, on the other hand, to commute her sentence? If she wasn't a peeress, everybody said, of course she'd be hanged; and if they didn't hang her, out of consideration for her rank, the democracy would be scandalized, and ask why a Duchess should have leave to commit murder more than her even Christians? Bets were freely offered and taken that, in the event of a hostile verdict, the Government wouldn't venture to commute the sentence into one of penal servitude for life. Men made the unhappy woman's fate a subject for gambling over, and watched with horrid interest the rumours of fresh evidence as it affected their own chance of losing or winning a few paltry sovereigns.

Happily, however, within her four stone walls, Linda knew nothing of all this. She was busy a good part of each day with her lawyers or their clerks—the eminent firm of Walberswick and Garrod had acted as her solicitors ever since her return to England, and they were now engaged in collecting or arranging the evidence for the defence. Yet it was with difficulty she could bring herself to believe any defence necessary. Strong as she saw the case against herself to be, she could still hardly realize that anyone could seriously accuse her of having poisoned Bertie. The idea was so monstrous, so wicked, so cruel. But what terrified her most was the slow discovery, not only that the world at large distrusted her, but that even her own lawyers, who had charge of her case, obviously disbelieved in their client's innocence. At first she refused to conceive this possible. Linda herself wished to repose especially upon some definite attempt to bring home the crime to its real perpetrators. Though she didn't know whom to suspect—though she suspected nobody—she yet knew in her heart that *someone* unknown—either the nurse, or the doctor, or the servants, or somebody—must necessarily have administered the morphia to Bertie. To her, the real question at issue was simply that—who had poisoned her husband? She cared little comparatively for mere negative evidence tending to exculpate herself. She wished to clear her own character in the one true way—by putting the guilt of the murder on the shoulders of the actual criminal.

But whenever she dwelt upon this aspect of the case to her urbane solicitor, it was only too painfully clear to her that that legal-minded gentleman, in spite of his courtly deference, totally disbelieved in the possibility of any such mode of conducting the defence.

'What we need, your grace must observe,' Mr. Walberswick would reply diplomatically, with a nod of that grave head, 'is rebutting evidence—rebutting evidence. Your grace's plan of action would be an admirable one, indeed, if we had witnesses to call for repelling the charge by laying it boldly on other shoulders. I say *if*, but we have no such witnesses. You don't even yourself venture to single out for attack any one particular individual. You don't know, you say, who administered the morphia. The Crown says *you* did. Very well, then; we have to confine our defence to rebutting the allegation thus brought forward by the Crown; rebutting it—rebutting it. We have to seek to find out what evidence in the case the Crown has got, and to shake the credit of their witnesses in cross-examination or otherwise. We must confine ourselves to detail, and fight their case piecemeal.'

'If you don't believe what I say,' Linda cried once impetuously, when the lawyer had smiled a more than usually cynical smile, 'I wish you'd tell me so, and then we should understand one another.'

Her solicitor looked grave.

'Our duty is,' he said, stroking his clean-shaven chin, 'to do the best we can for our clients, no matter what we think, and to believe them innocent till they are proved guilty. That's our duty as a profession. We must put the best interpretation upon everything, of course; but we must never for a moment under-estimate the strength of the evidence we're invited to repel. To do so would be to act unjustly by your grace in the end, for we can't conceal from ourselves the patent fact that the Crown has a very strong case indeed to go upon.'



The tears came up fast into Linda's eyes silently. This was hard—very hard. Even her own defenders didn't believe her innocent.

As the day for the trial approached, Mr. Walberswick advised her that it would be well for her to have a personal interview with the distinguished Q.C., Mr. Mitchell Hanbury, retained as senior for the defence in this memorable trial. Linda consented to see him, hoping she might impress the distinguished Q.C. with a deeper sense of her innocence than she had succeeded in conveying to the eminent solicitor. And Mr. Mitchell Hanbury paid her a visit in her room in gaol accordingly. He discussed with her the various witnesses called at the inquest, and the things they would most likely be asked to swear to at the actual trial. But through all he said Linda saw with alarm there ran the self-same vein of unacknowledged scepticism. It was clear to her that in his heart of hearts the distinguished Q.C. thought only of relying upon weakness of detail and legal quibbles as to circumstantial evidence. He was thinking of an acquittal, where she was thinking of a triumphant vindication.

At the end of the interview, Linda nerved herself up for a very bold effort.

'Mr. Hanbury,' she said plainly, looking straight into his eyes, 'you think I poisoned him?'

'My dear madam,' the barrister said, shuffling, and taken off his guard by the suddenness and frankness of her full-fronted attack, 'we lawyers think nothing on earth beyond our briefs. They limit our horizon. We are instructed by the solicitors in a case that such and such things happened thus or thus; that such and such witnesses will prove this or that; and we govern ourselves accordingly. We don't allow ourselves in any way to go behind the statement of facts submitted for our guidance. We've no time to indulge in otiose speculation'—he hugged his phrase—'no time to indulge in purely otiose speculation.'

Linda rose from the bare table by which they sat, and stood facing him like a woman.

'Sir,' she said, with infinite dignity, 'if that is how you feel about me, I'd rather not avail myself of your services. This is a case which can only be properly defended by a man who believes thoroughly in my innocence and purity. You don't believe in them—that much I can see—and your advocacy, however skilful it may be, would be worth little. I am a woman in distress, and I want to ask a favour of you.' Her eyes were full, and her voice trembled. 'If I decline to accept you as my counsel, my solicitors will throw up the case, I suppose, and I don't know how I can get anyone else in time to defend me. But this favour I ask you; I beg it, I implore it of you—arrange with Mr. Walberswick to withdraw by agreement, and leave the conduct of the case to another barrister whom I know, and in whom I repose implicit confidence.'

Mr. Hanbury started. There was so much womanly force in her as she spoke those words that the great counsel himself hesitated at the faith that dictated them. She looked for all the world as if she believed herself innocent. Strange how wonderfully women can act, or how incredibly they can deceive themselves! It was as plain as a pikestaff to anyone with a head on his shoulders that that woman had given her husband the morphia; and yet here she was, all tears and blandishments, assuming to his face the airs and graces of injured innocence. Still, she was a Duchess, and a beautiful one at that. All men are made of like passions with ourselves, even at the Old Bailey. The eminent Q.C. paused and deliberated.

'If I were to do so, madam,' he answered at last in a dubious tone, 'it would only prejudice your case in the end before the eyes of the jury. Everybody knows I've been retained for the defence; it's in all the papers; it's the fact of the moment. Should I withdraw now, without reason assigned, it'd raise a presumption that there's something very irregular the matter. People will say you've insisted upon having the case conducted on some impossible basis that my professional honour wouldn't allow me to accede to.'

'Never mind,' Linda answered firmly, gazing hard at him still. 'It matters but little to me what people say.' She shuddered slightly; then she added the very thought that was passing through her mind. 'I'd rather be found guilty and suffer for it,' she went on, 'than owe my escape to any mere legal argument. I don't want to be acquitted. I want it proved and shown that I'm entirely innocent.' She looked at him steadily once more. 'For a woman in distress,' she said, with a tremor in her voice, 'you will surely, surely grant this favour?'

The eminent Q.C. couldn't resist that look or that tremulous trill. She was the handsomest client he'd ever had to deal with.

'Very well,' he said slowly, turning over ways and means in his own mind. 'It's a difficult thing to arrange—unprofessional, very; but still, for your grace's sake, I don't mind arranging it ... though I'm afraid,' he added, after an awkward pause, 'you may see cause in the future to regret your precipitancy.'

'I think not,' Linda answered, with profound conviction. 'I have good grounds for what I do. I don't value life so much that I prefer it to honour. If I'm acquitted at all, I prefer to owe my acquittal to those who know me for what I am. And if I'm found guilty, I can die all the more easily for knowing myself innocent.'

'By George, sir!' the distinguished Q.C. said, an hour later, to his old friend Mr. Walberswick, the eminent solicitor, 'that woman's a wonder. I never saw her equal. She'd make her fortune on the stage if she could strike that attitude that she said it with over again. I'd marry her myself to-morrow—hang me, if I wouldn't!—if I were a single man, and risk the morphia, supposing she was at large to marry, which she'll never be again, poor soul! for all her beauty. But, for the life of me, Walberswick, when she stood up to me like that, and fixed me with her big black eyes, I couldn't refuse to let her have her own foolish way about the matter.'

And as soon as he had left her room, in fact, Linda sat down at the table by herself, and indited a letter from the very depths of her heart to the one best friend she had left in England:

'Holloway Gaol, Tuesday morning.

'DEAR MR. HARRISON,

'Do you remember, years ago, when you took me to hear that case where the burglar was involved, you said to me, as we were leaving the court: "How much harm a man can do by throwing dust in the eyes of a jury like that, and turning such wretches loose to prey upon humanity! When I think of it, I'm sorry I ever was called." And I answered you back: "Yes; but how much good a man may do, on the other hand, in helping to save some innocent person from condemnation when all the world's against him! Some day, perhaps, you'll get such a chance; and then you'll not be sorry you became a barrister." Well, the chance has come now. Will you accept it, and save me? I can see Mr. Mitchell Hanbury, who was to have conducted my case, doesn't believe in my innocence. I've asked him as a favour to give up his brief, and he's very kindly consented to do so. Will you take it up instead? If you will, communicate at once with Walberswick and Garrod, and come at your earliest convenience to see me here.

'Yours ever sincerely,  
'LINDA POWYSLAND.'

As she laid down her pen and shut her eyes for a second, a thought suddenly struck her. It was a reminiscence of that trial, so long, long ago. Dreamily, dreamily, the scene recurred to her in a mental picture. She saw it all—judge, jury, and prisoner. But one face stood out from all the faces in the court, wan, frail, and interesting. With a flash of intuition she remembered now where she had seen her maid, Elizabeth Woodward, before—that mysterious maid who evaporated so mysteriously. Her face was the face of the girl called Pomeroy, who gave evidence at the trial in the burglar's favour.

Could the girl have anything to do, she wondered vaguely, with this awful episode of the morphia in Bertie's barley-water?

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## CHAPTER XLII.

### MR. ROPER AT HOME.

On the self-same day when these things were happening in high aristocratic and legal circles, Mr. Arthur Roper, the head of another and opposed profession, sat in a familiar room, where he had often sat before, with Miss Elizabeth Pomeroy, and endeavoured to still that impressionable young lady's excited nerves by his usual prescription of a thimbleful of brandy.

'It won't do, Bess, my girl,' Mr. Roper was observing thoughtfully, as he poured out the thimbleful into a tall soda-glass; 'it won't do to go putting yourself into a tantrum like this, all about nothing, for I'm not going to let you go; that's flat. Here I've got you, and here you shall stop. Vous y êtes: vous y resterez. Not for twenty thousand Duchesses, however injured and innocent, am I going to risk my precious neck, and my equally precious liberty, by allowing you to go out on such a wild-goose errand.'

Miss Elizabeth Pomeroy looked up from the sofa, where she was lying at full length, with a fierce red spot in her pallid cheek, and cried out piteously:

'Oh, Arthur, Arthur! I've always served you well, and treated you like a lady. If you'll let me go this once, I'll manage to save her without ever exposing you.'

'No, my dear, I won't let you go,' Mr. Roper replied, pouring himself out a thimbleful in his turn (very imperial measure), and filling it up from the syphon by his side with a brimming dose of potash-water. 'You're safe where you are—extremely safe; and if once I let you well out of my sight, there's no knowing what mischief you mayn't be up to. You see, you're so volatile. It's all very well your saying you'll manage to save her without risk of exposing me,' and Mr. Roper took a long and steady pull at the diluted thimbleful; 'but when once you begin communicating with the police, or the injured innocents, who's to tell where on earth the thing may lead you to? That's what I look at. You mean well, of course. You always do mean well. I grant you that—and I've always given you credit for it. I've always said there isn't one of 'em, all round, I can trust like you. But that's no reason I should let you go and run both our heads against the stone wall of Scotland Yard. If once you start giving evidence in this case there'll be no stopping it. It may run to anything—it may run to Marwood. You're known to the police as an associate of common thieves and receivers. You're known as one of the most expert confederates in London. You're known as the companion of that distinguished criminal, the gentleman burglar.' He drew himself up. 'Very well, then; if once the police catch hold of you, they'll mark us both down: and after that what'll be the end of us?'

'Oh, Arthur,' the girl cried, trying to rise from the sofa, but evidently too weak to stir from her place, 'I *must* go! You must let me. I can't see that dear good woman hanged for a crime she's as innocent of as an unborn baby.'

'No, you don't,' Mr. Roper responded, with a hasty flank movement in the direction of the door, against which he planted himself solidly as an animated barrier. 'No thoroughfare this way! By order of the vestry! If you try to move, take care I don't serve you as your Duchess served her respected husband. You can't see her hanged, you say? Well, you ain't bound to go and see her hanged, unless you like; and even then you can't do it without an order from the sheriff. But she's all right, Lord bless you! Don't you trouble about her. They won't hang a Duchess, not if they know it. Why, a Duke's younger son, even, is always allowed an opportunity to hook it; and when it comes to a woman, even the beastly Radicals themselves wouldn't allow 'em to hang her.'

For Mr. Roper's political sentiments, as is usual with his order, were all on the side of Our Old Nobility.

The girl tried to raise herself once more, and fell back a second time.

'Arthur,' she cried, with the impotent rage of illness, 'you're a fiend; you're a devil; upon my word I'm ashamed of you. You've no pity in your heart. I can't think how I ever took up with such a wretch as you are. If only you'd seen how kind she was to me, and how she nursed me through that fever, I believe even you'd let me go and try to save her—and that when you know what wicked dreadful lies they're telling about her in all the newspapers!'

Mr. Roper eyed his glass, with the sunlight streaming through, in contemplative mood, and responded philosophically, in the character of a man who thoroughly understands the practical working of British justice:

'Oh, that's all gammon, you know, Bess. That don't amount to anything. What the papers say is neither here nor there. Mere rumour—mere rumour. The trial's the rub. When a thing comes into Court, it gets thoroughly sifted down to the very bottom. English jury system; grand old constitution; noble palladium of British liberty. And the truth comes out—mostly—a sight too often, in fact, for my taste, when a fellow's got an interest of his own in concealing it. But that's not how it will be this time. When your Duchess comes into Court, her counsel'll get her off as easy as winking, don't you be afraid of it! Look at the way that clever young chap, Erskine, got me off that time on the burglary charge—and that, too, when I was really the fellow they wanted.'

And Mr. Roper, shutting one eye the better to admire the beaded bubbles in his glass, pursed his lips into a circle and whistled unconcernedly.

'That's just it,' the girl cried passionately, raising herself once more, and staggering to her feet. 'That's just it. *You* were guilty, you see. But *she's* innocent.'

'Pretty bad opinion you seem to have,' Mr. Roper observed, musing, 'of the laws of your country! Pretty bad opinion! And yet they've treated you and me precious well, so far, Bess; the palladium's protected us, and will in future, I expect—if you don't go and make a blooming fool of yourself. But what do you mean, my girl, by calling me guilty, I should like to know?' Mr. Roper continued, bridling up with indignation. 'The expression's unparliamentary; totally unfit for the society of gentlemen. I'll admit I'm the man who was in the house at the time, with a sectional jemmy "concealed about my person," as the Act phrases it. But what of that, I say? Circumstantial evidence—mere circumstantial evidence—and liable to error. A gentleman may be lounging about a neighbour's house most innocently any day. The jury acquitted me. I won't stand these imputations against my moral character.'

As he spoke, Miss Pomeroy had glided quietly and unobtrusively toward the window, and was trying to open it now with trembling fingers. Mr. Roper's eye was so intent upon his bubbling brandy that he hardly noticed her at first; but when he looked up, with a start and a sudden oath he rushed over and caught her wrist hard in his hand at the critical moment.

'You sneaking little devil!' he cried angrily, dragging her back by main force to her place on the sofa, and laying her down there once more in no very gentle fashion. 'So you were going to shout out of the window and raise the street, were you? You miserable little white-livered, methodistical turncoat! I like your impertinence. I'll teach you to go trying to peach on me and call in the coppers. No unkindness meant, but I'll take it out of you, Bess, if ever you dare to open that window. I'll break every bone in your body before I let you get me into trouble. You shan't stir out of this room till that woman's tried and hanged, or acquitted. Duchess indeed! Much I care for your Duchesses! Much reason the nob's have given me to care for 'em; though I've always backed 'em! Well, no matter. Here you are, and here you'll stick till the woman swings for it.'

Elizabeth Pomeroy put her hands to her face, and burst into a flood of wild hysterical tears.

'Oh, I wish I was stronger,' she cried. 'I do wish I was stronger; I'd like to be well and myself again, that's all. If I was, though you're a man and I'm a woman, I wouldn't be afraid to wrestle with you for it, Arthur—I'd get out of this room, if you stood in my way with a loaded pistol. I'd be a match for you then, for I've got a devil in me when I'm roused; I'll tell you that. I'd kill you, but I'd get out and I'd save the Duchess.'

She spoke with fierce energy. Mr. Roper regarded her cynically meanwhile, with keen eyes of satisfaction.

'I dare say you would,' he said, smiling serenely. 'It wouldn't much surprise me if you turned against your best friend some day in one of your blessed tantrums. You're a bad un when your blood's up, and no mistake! But it soon blows over; that's one comfort. If I thought you meant all you say, I'd scrag you as you lie there, as soon as look at you, for I hate ingratitude. But I know you of old. You always were given to these fits of the liver. Remorse, the parsons call it. I call it liver. You'll be right again by-and-by, and you'll thank me for not letting your own hysterical passion get the better of you like this. Meanwhile, thank heaven! you're safe enough for the present. You're as weak as a cat, the Lord be praised! and all through your own silly imprudence, too, in exposing yourself too soon after typhoid fever.'

The girl flushed up crimson at this last ungenerous taunt.

'Why, it was for you, Arthur!' she cried; 'it was for your sake that I did it. I exposed myself on the leads to watch the house as you told me, and to give you your cue when there was a good chance of doing business. You ungrateful man!

You'd send me to my death, and that's all the thanks I'd ever get for it.'

Mr. Roper smiled once more.

'It's the privilege of our sex,' he retorted calmly, with a passing glance at the glass, where his own features were reflected, 'to benefit by the touching devotion of women. They *do* like me, I admit. There's a round dozen of 'em, one place or another, that 'ud willingly die for me.'

The girl rose once more and staggered towards the window. Mr. Roper rose in turn, and blocked her way with determined resolution. The girl seized his hands. The head of the profession was a slim-built man, but his limbs were of iron. Miss Pomeroy was frail, but she had the fierce momentary strength so often seen in hysterical women. The brandy had stimulated her into a brief outburst of vigour. It was nerve against muscle, energy against brute force, impulse against inertia, passion against passivity. She flung herself madly upon him.

'I *will* go,' she cried aloud, 'whether you let me or no. I'll choke you where you stand, you brute! I'll rouse the house with screaming.'

For a minute she fought wildly; she seethed with anger; then her strength broke down. Mr. Roper's strong arms were too much in the end for her. She burst into hot tears once more, and half fell to the ground. Mr. Roper lifted her up, more tenderly than before, and carried her like a baby across the room. He laid her down on the sofa, a sobbing, quivering, jelly-like mass, and proceeded to administer once more his favourite panacea of a thimbleful to the half-fainting creature.

'Now, mind you, Bess,' he added warningly, with one uplifted finger raised against her as against a naughty child who has tried to be disobedient, 'if ever you venture to go to door or window again till that woman's hanged, or not hanged, as the case may be, by the laws of your country, why, as sure as I'm standing here, I'll wring your neck for it! I'm a placable, easy-going, tender-hearted gentleman when I have my own way, and, as you very well know, I don't like violence. But I mean what I say now—this is a time for being firm. You mark my words: as sure as I'm standing here I'll wring your neck for it.'

Miss Pomeroy only doubled herself together on her sofa, and, with inarticulate sobs, gave herself up to a perfect feminine saturnalia of misery.

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## CHAPTER XLIII.

### MODUS OPERANDI.

To Douglas Harrison and Basil Maclaine those weeks of waiting for Linda's trial had been very painful. Even the honour of having his name mixed up with a Duchess's in an aristocratic scandal of the first water hardly made up to Basil for the horror and awe of that appalling outlook if Linda were to be found guilty. Indeed, a certain fascinating fear gave him a deeper sense of personal connection with the Belgravia Mystery than even the circumstances of the case themselves warranted. Except for the imprudence of his frequent calls at Onslow Gardens—an imprudence of which any honourable man might easily have been guilty—Basil had nothing with which to blame himself—in the more recent developments of this affair, at least. It was not his fault if the Duke was jealous. It was not his fault if his goings-out and comings-in had been watched by detectives, and his visits to Onslow Gardens all numbered and docketed. Personal vanity, however, suggested to Basil an explanation of the facts at which everybody else had jumped long since from pure love of scandal, but from which his own knowledge of Linda's character and motives might surely have saved him at least of all men. It was clear the Duke had been poisoned. It was clear somebody must have poisoned him. Basil half inclined to the startling conclusion that Linda, still desperately in love with him, had determined to get rid of her uncongenial husband in order to marry her old lover. That was everybody else's conclusion in all England, of course; but to Basil it naturally came with a good deal of difference.

For, however much flattered a man may feel by a Duchess preferring him to her own wedded Duke, he must yet be considerably perturbed in soul by the belief that she has committed a gratuitous murder in order to give full play to her abstract preference. The episode, to put it on no higher ground, makes him naturally nervous. Conscious as Basil was of the perfect innocence of his own relations with Linda, he couldn't help seeing that other people would almost necessarily put a different interpretation on the facts before them, and would therefore believe him, morally or actually, an accessory before the fact to the Duke's murder. He was too well acquainted with the psychology of clubland not to know how clubland would read his conduct. This feeling alone, therefore, would have served to make Basil's position an extremely uncomfortable one; and when there was added to it the probability of Linda's being found guilty, and the possibility of his being compelled to stand in the dock by her side, it is no wonder that Basil Maclaine lay low as much as practicable during those unhappy days, and that a medical certificate amply excused him, on the ground of 'nervous prostration,' from attendance at the Board of Trade in Whitehall.

Indeed, in the world at large, very free comments were expressed by high and low upon Basil's position. Some people said the fellow ought to be tried with his poor dupe, the Duchess. Some people said Maclaine was always such a calculating beggar that no doubt he'd managed most cleverly to keep out of all compromising matters. And some people said he'd behaved like a cur in encouraging the Duchess to poison her husband, and then leaving her alone—a woman as she was—to bear the brunt of that terrible accusation. A man of any spirit, a man of any honour, a man of any manliness, would have confessed at once, whether he did it or not—would have taken the guilt upon his own shoulders gladly, and saved the lady from the disgrace and odium of such a cruel charge at all hazards.

Everybody felt that to desert the woman with whom he had stood in such tender relations at such a moment was a stain upon his manhood never to be forgiven.

But nobody debated whether Basil had known anything about it at all. Nobody debated whether Linda was in love with Basil or not. The whole world took it for granted, with easy cynicism, that Linda had poisoned her husband for Basil's sake, and that Basil had either a guilty knowledge of her design, or else sheltered himself behind a still more guilty and disgraceful ignorance.

So Basil remained at home in a most unhappy state of mental perturbation, while the quidnuncs of clubland, taking up his own parable, railed against him to their heart's content as an unmanly wretch who deserted and betrayed in her hour of need the woman he had ruined.

As for Douglas Harrison, all these foolish cynicisms fell flat for him upon deaf ears. He had but one thought, and that was for Linda. How the world could so misjudge his spotless, stainless queen among women was to him incomprehensible. He had none of the base doubts that misled Basil Maclaine. With a certainty far deeper than any mere collocations of circumstantial fact could avail to shake, he *knew* she was herself, he *knew* she was innocent. All he could do was to wonder blindly how on earth such a mass of damning coincidences could by pure chance have arrayed

themselves in serried phalanx against her. But *was* it pure chance? Thinking it over perpetually in his own mind by the light of his psychological knowledge of human nature, a Theory of the murder began slowly to frame itself piecemeal in his brain by gradual stages. Bit by bit, the Theory grew and took definite shape—till, long before the day of the trial itself arrived, the solution stood out clearly before his mind's eye, a consistent whole and a palpable reality.

He had reasoned out to himself the actual truth as to who had poisoned the Duke of Powysland.

But how to make use of his idea in Linda's defence?—that was the difficulty. He couldn't induce Linda's lawyers to see the matter in the same light as himself, he was very much afraid—hard-headed, unimpressionable people, your great London solicitors, like Walberswick and Garrod, or your eminent Q.C.'s, like Mr. Mitchell Hanbury! If it rested with them alone, Linda's character would never be cleared—for that to Douglas Harrison, as to Linda herself, was the chief thing at stake in the approaching trial. Sensitive and shrinking as he was by nature, it wasn't the awful consequences of an adverse verdict he thought about most; it was the indelible stain of such a hideous accusation. He wanted to save Linda from death, of course; but he wanted far more acutely to save her from dishonour.

The lawyers, he knew, would never trouble their heads about trifles like that. If only they could secure an acquittal for their client by hook or by crook, on the merest legal quibble or technical uncertainty, their professional instinct would be amply satisfied. 'The benefit of the doubt' would suffice for their need. Enough for them if they could show an absence of reasonable proof that it must have been Linda, and nobody else on earth, who put the morphia 'by handfuls' into the Duke's barley-water. All they would aim at would be merely to damage the case for the Crown by suggesting this, that, or the other possible alternative, and asking the jury on such miserable grounds to acquit their client. But half-measures like those would never satisfy Douglas Harrison. He wanted to prove Linda wholly innocent of the vile crime laid to her charge—innocent on all counts—an unfortunate wife, as pure as snow, and sinned against, not sinning, in all her relations with her dead husband.

Anything less than that, Douglas would not have cared to undertake. And to such a line of argument he felt sure in his own mind Linda's legal advisers would never commit themselves.

It was while things were standing in this condition that Douglas received one evening by the last post, with profound delight, Linda's letter from gaol asking him to accept the task of defending her.

For a moment joy stunned him. He could hardly believe his eyes as he read and re-read half a dozen times over that most welcome letter. It was the very opportunity he had hoped and longed for. He could wish nothing better than to be permitted to defend Linda upon those very grounds—not her life, but her honour—and Linda, his Linda, the Linda he had always loved and worshipped with his whole heart and soul—why, Linda, as might be expected of her, took the very same view of the situation as he did. What she cared for was not that her neck should be spared, but that her innocence should be established before the observant eyes of all England.

And yet, the difficulties in the way were almost insuperable!

It wasn't so much that Douglas himself had quite indirectly been mixed up in the affair. The mere fact that the detectives had kept watch upon his movements didn't in itself perhaps count for much. That was merely as Basil Maclaine's fellow-lodger, he believed—and, what was more important, all the world thought the same about that as he did. Maclaine had been the one man whom everybody had talked about; handsome, pushing, a gossip, a loungeur, much spread about in the world, eager of notoriety, he was the natural person for scandal to fasten upon, to the complete exclusion of poor humble-minded, shy, retiring Douglas, even if the Duke's suspicions had not designated him at once as the other chief personage in that sombre tragedy. Douglas had no hesitation on that ground, any more than Linda herself. His very insignificance in the eyes of society had saved his name from being dragged into the forefront of the scandal.

But then he had to fight that terrible dragon of obstruction known to the inner circle as the Etiquette of the Profession. Every vocation in England keeps in stock among its joint properties one of these fearsome monsters of its own peculiar breed, and few outsiders can form any conception to themselves of the pains and penalties attached by the members to all attempts at disturbing or ignoring it.

Even if Mitchell Hanbury, Q.C., had voluntarily consented, as Linda said he had, to retire from the case, Douglas knew he had Walberswick and Garrod still to fight, not to mention the juniors, and the court itself, and the officious friends of the case, and the final bugbear of public opinion.

Yet, nothing daunted by all these chimeras breathing fire in his path, Douglas went next morning, at the earliest possible hour, to see Linda, as she desired, after a somewhat stormy interview with her much-scandalized solicitors.

In the end, however, Linda carried her point. Even in gaol, Linda generally did, in fact. In spite of everybody, it was finally arranged that Douglas Harrison, that briefless unknown, should conduct the defence in the most sensational murder case known in England for years; and that Mitchell Hanbury, Q.C., that obliging counsel, should look on in a friendly way, merely to advise and assist with his superior experience his raw and unheard, but enthusiastic colleague.

"Pon my soul, there's a chance for her still," Mitchell Hanbury said in confidence to the distinguished solicitor after all was settled. "The man's mad, to be sure, but he believes in her thoroughly. If Vernon or I were to make a speech for the defence, you see, we'd urge everything that human ingenuity or legal subtlety could devise in mitigation of proof; we'd be argumentative, demonstrative, suggestive, critical—but, hang it all, my dear Walberswick, dashed if we could ever be enthusiastically convinced of our client's innocence. Now, that's just what this young man will be—enthusiastically convinced—and there's no counting, therefore, upon the electric effect he may possibly exert upon the minds of the jury. Enthusiasm's contagious—extremely contagious—especially when the subject of it is a pretty woman. This fellow Harrison won't be content with proving the Duchess may conceivably *not* have administered the morphia; he'll go in for demonstrating, through thick and thin, that the woman's misunderstood, and that, instead of being a murderess, she's a much-wronged angel. Vernon or I couldn't walk into the lions' den like that—we'd be afraid of making ourselves simply ridiculous; but this young man has no fear, and no good sense either; so, of course, he may succeed in carrying away the good sense of twelve honest men before the flood of his eloquence by pure force of human infatuation."

So it seemed, too, to Basil Maclaine, in his utter dejection.

"If you should get her off, though, Harrison," he said, the night before the trial, as they sat together in the room at Clandon Street, discussing the chances, "there'll be only one course open both for her and me—she'll have to marry me."

And with that consolation he buoyed up his soul. They were playing for high stakes now, the Duchess and he; but it would be a wonderful thing if, after all, these strange events led to his allying himself at last with the British peerage.

Douglas, however, only gazed at him fixedly with a stony stare, and answered, almost in indignation:

"I don't want to "get her off" at all, as you call it. I want to prove her innocent before the eyes of all England."

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## CHAPTER XLIV.

### BEFORE TWELVE GOOD MEN AND TRUE.

At last the great day of the trial arrived, and Linda found herself confronted once for all with that unspeakable accusation.

She had looked forward with infinite dread to the ordeal of her public appearance, but when the crucial moment actually arrived her nerves availed her far more than she could have imagined. As her need was, so was her strength also. But her need was great. As she entered the crowded court by a side-door, in her deep mourning dress and her widow's bonnet, a buzz of voices, surging deep over the well, called attention to her entrance. Some scraps of comment that Linda caught as she passed sufficed to show her—what she already knew, indeed, far too well—how generally the sense of the public was against her.

'Hush! Look there!' 'That's her!' 'That's the prisoner!' 'Here she comes!' 'That's the Duchess!'

'Oh, doesn't she look handsome, too! Who'd 'a thought she could 'a done it?'

'You wouldn't say by the look of 'er she was a murderess, would you?'

'Poor thing! Poor thing! And so young and pretty, too! Hers doesn't look like a neck for a rope! What a shame if they were to hang her! Though, to be sure, she poisoned him.' This last from a woman.

Through an undercurrent of such anticipatory verdicts, overheard here and there above the buzz of voices, Linda moved on as in a dream, with stately dignity, to her place in the dock. Some good spirit befriended her. A chair had been placed for her by the courtesy of the court. She sat down on it without flinching, and gazed about her with the old frank and fearless manner, not bold or brazen, but upheld by an inner consciousness of innocence that disdained to simulate guilt by downcast eyes or pretended deference. She was there on trial for her life, she knew; but she had nothing to dread from the sternest justice; and if injustice must be wrought, she would take it smiling.

Her attitude evidently impressed the court. An approving hum ran through the dense mass of close-packed sightseers. Whatever else she looked, the prisoner was every inch a Duchess.

She gazed around at the bench, and took in the whole scene. An old, half-blind and mumbling judge occupied the chief seat of British Themis. Right and left sat a few of his friends who had come to hear the case on his introduction. Among the barristers, Linda's eye soon picked out the counsel for the Crown, the senior of whom she had met at Lady Albury's, and her own chosen advocate, sitting pale and anxious, but with vigilant resolution on his pallid and clear-cut countenance. The Dowager Duchess, her mother-in-law, in crape as deep as her own, gazed across at her from a seat near the bench with a stern look as of embodied justice. She had prejudged the case, of course, like everybody else, and saw in her daughter-in-law only her son's murderess. Other acquaintances, not a few, refused to meet her eye. When her glance lighted upon them they looked at their feet, or acknowledged her presence by a bow of chilly courtesy.

The jury was empanelled, and the case began.

'Linda, Duchess of Powysland, do you plead guilty or not guilty to the wilful murder of your husband, Adalbert Owen Trefaldwyn, Duke of Powysland?'

There was dead silence in court as Linda stood up and answered, in a very firm and unshaken voice, 'Not Guilty.'

After the usual business of getting the court to work, Mr. Attorney-General, for the Crown, rose briskly to his feet, and opened the case for the prosecution. Adjusting his wig, and clearing his throat, Sir George ran briefly through the chief facts he proposed to prove, and the previous history of the personages to this high domestic tragedy. He was respectful to Linda, of course—professionally respectful; never for a moment did he forget the fact that the prisoner at the bar was an English Duchess. But none the less he skimmed lightly over the circumstances of her early history, her acquaintance with Basil Maclaine, her removal to America, her sudden accession to a dazzling and blinding fortune, meeting with the Duke—'the murdered man,' as he often called him—and, last of all, her unexpected rise to the most exalted rank in the British peerage. Conspicuous fairness marked Sir George's allusions to her humble origin. Then he detailed in a few words the beginning of the Duke's suspicions as to her grace's relations with Mr. Maclaine, the hiring of the detectives,

the hurried trip to Norway, the return to London, the attack of fever, the strange symptoms that baffled the most experienced members of the faculty, the evidences of morphia-poisoning, the Duke's lethargic death, the analysis of the barley-water, the results of the post-mortem, the universal occurrence of the suspected drug in everything submitted to the noble and unfortunate patient. Further than that, Mr. Attorney said, he would not go at present. The circumstantial links connecting the Duchess with this terrible crime would come out more fully during the examination of the witnesses. It would suffice for him just now to point out that he proposed to prove—first, an adequate motive; second, an opportunity; third, a long chain of concurrent testimony to the mode of administration; and, fourth, the dying man's own deliberate suspicion, as well as his evidence as to the Duchess's action, given with almost his last breath to the physician in attendance. Their mode of proof would be strictly cumulative. He would call first—Sir Frederick Weston.

At the call, Sir Frederick stepped briskly and elastically into the box, a wizened old man, with small beady pig's-eyes, but otherwise wonderfully agile and youthful in manner for his years. He gave his evidence in a quiet, scientific, cocksure way. He had no doubts or misgivings. Linda listened breathless—so much of what he had to say was new to her now, even after the preliminary investigation at the coroner's inquest and the police-court.

Sir Frederick had attended the murdered man during his last illness?

Yes, certainly he had attended him.

Did he remember when he first noticed the peculiar circumstances suggestive of morphia-poisoning?

He had a note of it here in his casebook. It was—h'm—the Sunday before the fatal termination of the illness.

Did the deceased die of typhoid fever?

Certainly not. The crisis of the fever had passed some days before, and there was neither relapse nor complication of any sort.

'Of what, then, in your opinion, did deceased die?'

'Undoubtedly of morphia-poisoning.'

And then Sir Frederick went on to explain, in minute detail and with much technical accuracy, the nature of the symptoms by which he had detected the action of the opiate. At the end of a long medical disquisition of the usual sort, the examining barrister asked once more: 'And what led you first to suspect the drug was administered by the Duchess?'

Sir Frederick looked up with his small beady eyes and answered quickly, amid profound silence: 'The Duke himself suggested it first to me. He told me the Duchess kept meddling and muddling with everything he had to eat and drink, that she was always messing about his food and medicine in extraordinary ways, and that whatever he took from her hands seemed somehow to make him immediately drowsy.'

As those unexpected words burst upon Linda's ears she gave a little start of surprise, and grew still paler than before. This was, indeed, an awful revelation. Then Bertie himself had died believing she poisoned him.

She grasped the railings of the dock with her hand and steadied herself tremulously.

'When did this conversation take place?' the Crown counsel went on.

'Two evenings before the Duke's death. The night he died, however, he desired to speak to me further alone; and then he called my attention to the contents of a medicine bottle and a jug of barley-water, into both of which he said he had seen the Duchess drop something like powdered sugar. This put me on my guard. I immediately forbade the Duchess the room, and told her I'd see about the medicine in person.'

'You took away the medicine and the barley-water for analysis?'

'I did, and I analyzed them, with Dr. Moreton's aid. Both contained large quantities of morphia. The barley-water alone contained enough of the opiate to kill three or four adults. It was perfectly saturated.'

Many other details came out in further examination which equally astonished and horrified Linda. Bit by bit it dawned upon her, as the case went on, that Bertie himself had supplied the most killing evidence of all. She had to fight, not only

against a strange concatenation of misleading circumstances, but also against the word of a dead man—and that man her own husband—whom they could no longer submit to cross-examination.

When Sir Frederick had finished his evidence in chief, the judge looked at Douglas. Douglas rose, irresolute, and looked at the judge. 'I—I have no questions to ask,' he said at last, faltering.

The half-blind old judge glanced sharply up in astonishment. 'No questions to ask!' he repeated, incredulous. 'No questions to ask the witness? A principal witness like this! Surely you mistake! You don't wish to cross-examine?'

'No,' Douglas answered, flushing very red; 'none whatsoever.'

A slight titter ran rippling through the ranks of the bar. Evidently this young man had misunderstood his vocation. What singular conduct! To let the chief witness for the prosecution stand down from the box without a single word of cross-examination!

The Crown shrugged its shoulders, and proceeded to put the nurses into the box. Mr. Erskine, the smart young junior whom Linda knew of old, rose jauntily to question them. Mr. Erskine's manner had not improved with years. When Linda saw him begin, her heart sank within her. She remembered the smart young man's previous forensic exploit with no great satisfaction. She felt he was unscrupulous—all he cared for on earth was a professional victory. What to her was an issue of life and death was to him an opportunity for displaying his talents as an advocate.

The smart young barrister proceeded, by dexterous side-questions, to get out the gist of the nurses' story—their chief point being how the Duke had seemed better after the Duchess went away, till, by an unfortunate coincidence, they were both of them sent down from the room together on successive errands by the unfortunate patient. They oughtn't to have gone both at once, they allowed; but the Duke insisted. He was very imperious; when he asked for anything he must have it at once. And so they went down perforce when he told them. While they were away the Duchess slipped into the room unbidden; and as soon as they returned they found her there once more, standing 'messaging about the things' by her husband's bedside. She was close by the table with the medicines and the barley-water, and she looked as if she had just administered a dose from the bottle to the patient. Later on, when the Duke complained of thirst, she insisted upon giving him some barley-water with her own hands. From the moment of her arrival his grace seemed worse; after sipping the barley-water he became rapidly unconscious. They had kept the rest of that barley-water, as Sir Frederick ordered. It was in a jug labelled 'A,' and sent to the Government analyst for analysis.

Then Douglas Harrison, rising up, still pale, but resolute, proceeded to cross-examine. He had only one important point to ask about. It was at the Duke's request, then, that they both left the room together?

Yes, at the Duke's request, most urgently repeated.

He insisted upon their going?

Yes, he insisted firmly.

How long were they both away together?

Oh, several minutes—maybe six, maybe seven.

There would have been time for much to happen meanwhile?

Well, time for anybody to do a good deal in.

Further cross-examination dealt only with the point that the barley-water was there before the nurses went down; and that they had not actually seen the Duchess give the Duke a dose of medicine when she broke into the room during their somewhat lengthy absence. They only inferred it from the Duchess's attitude on their return, and from the fact that a dose was gone from the bottle.

Other witnesses for the Crown proved various other points essential to the prosecution: the circumstances of the Duchess's early life; her acquaintance with Maclaine; the detectives' story; the Duke's suspicions; the finding of the remaining morphia in the Duchess's jewel-case; its presence in the jars labelled 'A,' 'B,' and 'C'; the result of the post-mortem; the suspicious conduct of the Duchess during the whole illness. The day wore away slowly while all this was being proved; and Douglas Harrison's cross-examination, at times directed to very small details, seemed to bring out but

little that was of a clearly rebutting nature. His only main points were the annihilation of one part of the detectives' case by showing how brief and unimportant were Basil Maclaine's visits to the house during the Duke's absence; and his careful proof, by drawing out the servants at Onslow Gardens, that no interview of any sort could ever be shown to have taken place alone between Maclaine and the Duchess. It was noticeable, too, that Douglas carefully avoided the use of the question-begging expression 'the murdered man,' which counsel for the prosecution used so freely; and often, in repeating witness's words to them in a second question, he substituted for it 'the deceased' with marked emphasis. Altogether, however, at the end of the first day, when counsel for the Crown bowed to the court and remarked, triumphantly, that 'this concluded their case,' appearances all along had gone dead against Linda, while nothing of importance had been elicited in her favour. It was evident beyond a doubt that the Duke had died by the administration of morphia; and strong probabilities pointed to the fact that the morphia had been administered in food and medicine given him by the Duchess.

With a weary heart once more, Linda, standing again, heard the court adjourned till the next morning. As she drove off alone to her quarters in gaol, she wondered how Douglas Harrison could ever find any way of his own out of this labyrinth of conspiracy, doubt, and coincidence.

For it was beginning to dawn upon her that conspiracy as well as coincidence had entered the lists against her.

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## CHAPTER XLV.

### COUNSEL FOR THE DEFENCE.

When the court re-assembled next morning, Linda saw with a thrill of delight that Cecil had at last arrived from America. He was standing in his travel-stained tweed suit by the side of the dock to greet her on her entrance, for he had only just come in by night train from Queenstown, where he had landed the day before, and hurried on at all speed across Ireland to join his sister in her hour of need in London. News of Bertie's death had reached him by telegraph in a remote part of Montana, where he was engaged in applying a new electrical apparatus for the separation of silver from the ore to the mines of his syndicate; and he had returned to New York post haste, as fast as American stages and trains could carry him, in his eagerness to stand by his sister's side in her day of peril. It was a long journey, for Amberley Pike lies miles away from the ordinary means of communication, and the snow had drifted deep in the passes of the Sierra. A ten days' tossing across the Atlantic, with head winds to battle against, had still further delayed him, so that he had only that moment arrived in town, and leaving his luggage hastily in the cloak-room at Euston, had driven straight to court in the clothes he wore throughout the long sea-voyage.

The moment Douglas perceived him he moved up at once and grasped his old friend's hand warmly. But they had hardly exchanged greetings and explained these particulars before Douglas, scanning him critically from head to foot asked, in a confidential whisper:

'You've your luggage in town, I suppose? You've a better suit than that one, no doubt, in your portmanteau?'

Cecil nodded assent.

'The best clothes a good New York tailor could make me,' he answered, half suspecting at once his questioner's meaning.

'Then don't lose a minute. Drive straight to an hotel; wash, shave, and dress,' Douglas responded quickly, 'and come back here as neat and trim as you can look. I shall want you to-day for a special purpose, and your appearance at present doesn't do it justice.'

'I see,' Cecil answered, catching at his idea with quick apprehension. 'You're right, of course. It never struck me, in my anxiety to come direct to Linda. But I won't be gone an hour, and when I get back—well, you needn't be afraid your case will suffer by me.'

By this time the mumbling little old judge had taken his seat on the bench; silence was proclaimed in the court; and everybody fell into the attitude of attention for further proceedings. Linda, glancing around once more with that frank, fearless gaze of hers, though pale as death, could see that a deeper interest was taken in her personally than the day before. The brief recognition between brother and sister, and the conscious pride with which each had greeted the other in spite of their painful situation, told distinctly on the crowd of sightseers in Linda's favour.

'Well, anyhow her brother don't believe she did it,' they murmured to one another in the intervals between the formal business.

Presently Douglas Harrison rose to open the defence. He would open it, he said, turning full upon the jury, in a somewhat longer and ampler speech than usual. The peculiarity of the circumstances demanded this treatment. He rested his case, not so much upon rebutting evidence, as upon a theory totally different to that of the prosecution—a theory which, had he been retained at the time, and had he then had an occasion of forming it in full, he might have brought forward more opportunely at the inquest on the body of the late Duke. The defence he proposed to offer to the charge brought against his client hung, in fact, upon this theory—that no murder had been committed in the case at all; that the Duke had himself administered with his own hands, and for his own purposes, the fatal doses of morphia whose effects had been proved to them by Sir Frederick Weston.

As he said those words, after a long and clear preamble, he paused and took breath, looking hard at the jury. Linda, watching him narrowly, was surprised to see he showed no signs of nervousness. She had had fears of this. Douglas himself would have had fears of it in the conduct of any other trial. But here he had none. He had ceased to be self-conscious. One devouring feeling alone usurped his whole soul. He was possessed with a fiery determination that Linda should have justice. Seeing the whole case clearly now in his own mind, without one doubt or hesitation, he could think

of nothing save the most effective way of laying his conviction convincingly before the eyes of the jury.

He began, then, by treating the case, though always as an opening only, from the very beginning. He explained what his witnesses would be called to prove. They must learn what sort of person the late Duke was. They must learn from what family he sprang, in what ideas he was educated, with what hereditary feelings he was possessed and permeated. He would bring evidence to show them that the late Duke's father had been a confirmed gambler; yes, and that the late Duke's father had committed suicide as a direct result of his gambling transactions. He would also bring evidence to show them that the late Duke's father never left a line in writing behind to explain the circumstances of his sudden death, and that suspicion accordingly fell afterwards—most unjust suspicion, as they knew later—upon innocent persons. Next, he would bring evidence to show them that the late Duke's brother was likewise a gambler, that the late Duke's brother likewise committed suicide, and that a similar uncertainty hung at first over both his reasons for the deed and the very fact of his having performed it. It was matter of history that remote ancestors in their day had also been gamblers, and also suicides. The two tendencies ran together in the Montgomery blood. And so, admittedly, did the other half-insane tendency to a mad jealousy of their wives. Several of the Montgomeries had killed themselves within a very short period indeed after marriage; and they had died on bad terms with their Duchesses for no sufficient or well-defined reason.

After that, Douglas went on, he would call witnesses who would testify to the late Duke's own opinion of suicide, and his own foreshadowing in his own very words of the self-inflicted fate that finally overtook him.

Then, altering his voice unconsciously to a more sympathetic key, Douglas went on to give his own history of the Amberley family, and the means by which they had risen to wealth and eminence. In contradistinction to the 'upstart' view, put forth by the Crown, he dwelt lovingly upon Cecil's skill, knowledge, and scientific attainments; the position the family had taken up in New York; the temptations held out by so wealthy and accomplished an heiress to the cupidity of an impoverished English nobleman. He would bring forward witnesses to show the Duke's embarrassed condition before he sailed for America; the way, on his return, he had recklessly squandered his wife's money; the load of accumulating debt; the resulting crisis; the determination slowly formed in the Duke's mind to meet it in the hereditary Montgomery fashion.

In short, he would bring evidence to show that before ever the Duke left for Norway his financial straits alone had led him to contemplate the possibility of suicide.

Then came in the other and still more terrible heirloom of the Powysland blood—their insensate jealousy. He would call witnesses to prove the existence of that, too, and its presence in the Duke's case without any adequate reason. He would show them the improbability of the Duchess having bought or administered the morphia, and the probability that the Duke himself, dimly contemplating suicide, had purchased it in Norway for that very purpose, and had been driven to use it, partly by the influence of delirium during the paroxysms of fever; partly by the increase in his own mad jealousy, produced, it might be, by physical causes; but partly, also, owing to the detectives' adverse report on the Duchess's conduct, which he had grossly misjudged; and partly owing to a casual conversation with a lady whom he would produce—Mrs. Bouverie-Barton. There Douglas paused. He had made this opening speech, he said, much fuller than usual (in spite of the obvious uneasiness of the judge, a stickler for precedent), but that was in order that the jury might clearly understand beforehand, and follow intelligently, the course of the evidence he was about to lay before them. Put briefly, his theory amounted, in fact, to this—that the Duke had deliberately poisoned himself, out of mingled despair and personal jealousy; and that he had just as deliberately planned a vile and horrible attempt to satisfy his vengeance by making suspicion fall upon his wife, 'that innocent lady who stands before you in the dock this moment, on trial for her life and, what is dearer to her by far than life itself, her honour.'

As he spoke, an instant flood of conviction burst over Linda's soul. It came upon her with a flash. He had unravelled the tangle. Impossible, incredible, horrible as it was to conceive, she saw in a moment that Douglas was right. The key he had discovered was one that unlocked all the twisted wards of that intricate combination. Bertie himself had put the morphia in his own food and medicine; and he had done it with deliberate intent to ruin and murder her. She understood it all now; she saw it all distinctly. In a sudden revulsion of feeling, the man as he lived stood revealed before her in all his hideous, mad, selfish cruelty. She knew he had devised it of malice prepense; she knew he had done it all for a horrible revenge. Resolved to die in any case, and goaded to reprisals by his own baseless, unreasoning jealousy, he had died with this ghastly lie upon his lips in order to wreak upon his innocent wife that hateful, incredible, posthumous vengeance.

So Douglas pointed out briefly in the concluding words of his speech, and sat down exhausted. The court was evidently

deeply impressed by this unexpected line of defence. Mr. Mitchell Hanbury, leaning across to the young barrister with a satisfied smile, whispered in his ear in a half-audible voice:

'Well done indeed! It's very irregular to open at such length—you should have kept half that for your final review—but I congratulate you, all the same, upon your brilliant theory. It's the strongest and most original plan of defence you could possibly have set up; it so completely traverses and sets at nought the whole line of the prosecution. And it interests the jury sympathetically in your client.'

But Douglas, wiping his brow and moistening his parched lips, answered, in almost equally audible tones:

'I don't care twopence about all that. The point to me is, it's the only true one.'

And Linda, sitting rigid as stone on her chair in the appalling horror of that first awful disclosure—for as yet she had never suspected Bertie—saw that Douglas believed it as firmly as herself, and thanked Heaven with silent lips that she had followed her own instinct, and insisted upon choosing the advocate who trusted her.

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## CHAPTER XLVI.

### CUMULATIVE EVIDENCE.

Then Douglas began calling his witnesses in order. The first of them proved only what everybody knew already—the main facts as to the history of the Montgomery family. But a little sensation was caused in court when, after eliciting these facts in the most telling manner, the unknown barrister proceeded with some evident hesitation to call—his own brother, the member for South Hampstead.

Everybody asked in a low whisper among themselves what on earth Mr. Hubert Harrison could have to do with the Duke's murder.

'You knew the late Duke when he was Lord Adalbert Montgomery?' Douglas began quietly.

'I did.'

'You remember a conversation you had with him one day at Hurst Croft, near Leatherhead, after a pastoral play, in which he took part in Mr. Venables' grounds?'

'I remember it perfectly. It impressed itself upon my memory, because it so strongly illustrated the hereditary tendency of the Montgomery family. In fact, when I returned to town that night I made a note of it for future use as literary material—I being then engaged as a journalist and playwright.'

'Please tell the court the gist of that conversation.'

'We were discussing a suicide reported in that morning's papers—Mr. Soames, of Wellington's—and I remarked that the person who had just taken his own life had behaved most abominably to survivors. If he was going to kill himself, he might at least have left a note behind to say why he did it, so as to exculpate others. "For a fellow to commit suicide, leaving it in doubt whether he wasn't murdered, is a gross injustice," I said, "to many innocent people."

'And what did Lord Adalbert answer to that?'

'He said, "Oh, hang it all, Harrison, you're too down upon him altogether, poor old wretch! Why should he go and try to bring disgrace upon the members of his family? For my part, I think he acted quite right; and when *I* commit suicide, as I shall do some day, I suppose, like all the rest of us Montgomeries, if ever luck runs against me a bit too hard, why, I'm not going to leave anything behind me in any way to incriminate myself. I'll let 'em guess who did it; and if they can't find out, well, then they may whistle for it."

'What particularly impressed this remark on your memory?'

'The fact that on that very afternoon news arrived from Homburg that Lord Adalbert's brother, the previous Duke, had committed suicide.'

'Did you make any comment on the circumstance at the time?'

'Yes, I said to Mr. Charles Simmons, of the War Office, "It's a family habit. Gambling and suicide are hereditary with the Montgomeries. They run through their money, and then they cut their throats. That's the regular routine, and then the next in succession marries an heiress again, and begins *da capo*. As soon as her money's all gone, cut throat, and exit."

'That's hardly evidence, what you said to Mr. Simmons, of the War Office,' the mumbling old judge observed, with a preternaturally wise and cunning air, looking up from his notes suddenly. 'Besides, after such a lapse of time as this the witness's memory is likely to fail him as to detail, surely.'

'I have my note-book here, my lord,' Hubert responded, promptly producing it, 'with all the conversation written down in full exactly as it occurred. I put it in writing at the time for its dramatic value, intending to use it in some future play. I hand up the book now for your lordship's inspection and the jury's. Your lordship will not fail to observe that the conversation is intercalated between two other notes referring obviously to the same period—the rehearsal of the play—and that the dates when the note-book was begun and finished are entered at either end on the fly-leaves.'



The court received this evidence with profound interest. That interest was certainly not lessened when Douglas continued:

'You recollect the news of the eighth Duke's death being communicated on the lawn at Hurst Croft to Lord Adalbert?'

'I do. Lord Adalbert saw several of us looking at a paper which contained the news immediately after the performance of the pastoral play was over. He noticed we were disconcerted, and asked us at once, "Anything wrong at Homburg? Powysland been making a fool of himself again?" I told him, Yes; the Duke was seriously hurt. He took the paper from my hand and read it slowly through—I have a copy here which the jury can see for themselves—then he handed it back and said quite quietly, "I thought so; I thought so! At last he's done it." From which remark I naturally gathered that he had expected his brother sooner or later to put an end to his life in the usual family fashion.'

That smart young barrister, Erskine, who rose, after a few more questions put and answered, to cross-examine the witness, tried to undermine the value of Hubert's evidence by suggesting with gentle lateral hints that he was moved by fraternal feeling to quicken his memory unduly, but he failed in his attempt to discredit the entries in the note-book; and when Charlie Simmons, of the War Office, and Mr. Venables, the well-known financier, called in quick succession, corroborated the main facts as to that prophetic conversation, Linda had only to scan the faces of the jury to see that the impression left upon the court by Bertie's unconscious foreshadowing of his own guilt was deep and lasting.

Then Douglas, pausing again one rhetorical second, proceeded to call Mr. Cecil Amberley.

All the court looked up, deeply interested. The dramatic appearance in the box that morning of the great electrical engineer—the successor and rival of Edison—to give evidence at the last moment in his sister's favour, came home to everyone's imagination and everyone's heart. And, indeed, prosperity had done much for the ex-workman of the Bloomsbury tube-works. As he stood there, in his manly, straightforward way, every inch a gentleman of Nature's own mint, answering all Douglas's questions in sound and sensible English, and describing the rise in the family fortunes with modest succinctness, Cecil Amberley looked and spoke like just what he was—a man of honour and a man of genius. Even in the old days at Clandon Street Cecil had always been a first-rate specimen of the best class of educated, self-respecting, scientifically-trained English mechanic. Dress and the other advantages of wealth had added all the rest; while intercourse with the world and with cultivated minds had given him a quietly confident manner, which, coming on top of his natural self-reliance and modest ease, stood him in good stead in any society.

Cecil's examination-in-chief, and still more the way in which he passed through the ordeal of Mr. Erskine's cross-examination, intended to confuse him, scattered at once to the winds all the absurd rumours as to the origin and rise of the Amberley family. It was abundantly evident, as soon as he had told his plain unvarnished tale, that the supposed change of name was a simple myth, the gutter theory of the family antecedents a gross impertinence, the sneers of clubland utterly unwarranted, and even the view taken by the counsel for the prosecution an unfounded misstatement. Everybody saw, as the great engineer detailed his evidence with manly straightforwardness, that the Amberleys had always been self-helping and self-respecting people: that the removal to New York had been entirely due to Cecil's own plans for the development of his wonderful inventions; that Linda's interest in his undertakings had been fairly purchased by the embarkation of her own little capital, inherited and saved, in her brother's ventures; that her part in the syndicates had been earned by her own labour; and that, from first to last, she had been the active assistant, confidante, and adviser of her distinguished brother. When Cecil sat down again after the ordeal of cross-examination, everybody knew exactly the simple truth that the Duchess of Powysland had once taken in lodgers in her house in Clandon Street, but everyone knew also the correlative truth that her whole past life bore a totally different complexion now from that which rumour had so long and so unjustly put upon it.

There was another sensation in court when Douglas Harrison, looking a little fatigued after his re-examination of Cecil Amberley, proposed to call, amid a deep hush of silence, Mr. Basil Maclaine, of the Board of Trade.

Nobody was prepared for this *grand coup de théâtre*. Every neck in the building craned to see him as he came slowly up—the skulking wretch, according to popular opinion one day before, who had led the Duchess into this horrible mess, and then had deserted her to flounder out by herself as best she might, instead of taking all the blame upon himself and standing by her side in the dock that moment as the real instigator and designer of the murder.

It was with manifold misgivings, indeed, that Douglas put his friend into the box that morning. He hardly knew how Maclaine would comport himself, how his little affectations and society graces would tell against him with the court,

how he would behave under the crucial test of a searching cross-examination. But there are some great crises in our history when even the smallest of us seem to rise instinctively to the height of the occasion. For once in his life Basil Maclaine that day managed to forget himself and the figure he was cutting, and, as a consequence, cut a far better figure than was at all usual with him. He went into the box with just that mixture of modest reluctance and anxious desire to tell the whole truth, without reservation, which was best adapted to produce a favourable impression on the minds of the jury, already prejudiced against him. For the moment, he was fortunately possessed only by a profound and honest desire to free Linda from the unjust suspicion of any kind of intimate relations with himself during her husband's absence. His handsome face, his manly bearing, his obvious earnestness and sincerity, his freedom from prevarication where there was nothing to hide, all gave weight to his words as he went on; and the mere fact that the defence had ventured to put him boldly into the box, and that he could give with unflinching directness a plain, straightforward 'No!' to all the insinuations and innuendoes of the prosecution, almost sufficed to dispel the gossip of the clubs about the supposed position in which he had stood towards Linda. The court listened throughout in breathless silence, and when at last Basil stood down, relieved, but with a feverish brow, there was scarcely a soul present who didn't think better for the moment both of the poor Duchess herself and of the man for whose sake she was believed to have murdered her worthless husband.

The tide was undoubtedly turning in Linda's favour.

Step by step, through all his succeeding witnesses, Douglas built up his case with wonderful ingenuity. Mere forensic desire to make the best of a difficult defence could never have led him to get so much out of such unpromising materials. Nothing but his intense devotion to Linda, and his profound conviction that he had read the secret of the mystery aright, could have enabled any man so to bring together into one strong strand all the threads of a separately weak but cumulative proof. His next witnesses were servants and friends, who spoke to the natural jealousy and deep vindictiveness of the Duke's character, as well as to the growing signs of distrust towards Linda which had been more and more obvious in his conduct from the night of her first meeting with Basil Maclaine at the Simpsons' party. Then Mrs. Bouverie-Barton went into the box—for Douglas, as soon as the case was put into his hands, had diligently hunted up everybody who had seen anything of the Duke in the brief interval after his return to London—and detailed her conversation on the bench on the Embankment, with the Duke's short answers and moody outbursts of fitful temper. Witness particularly observed the angry flash of the Duke's eye when casual mention was made of Mr. Maclaine; his curt remark, 'Six months is a precious short time to give a man for domestic felicity;' and his bitter reflection, 'That's the way with these women. They marry a fellow for whatever they can get; and then, having secured his name and title, they break the rest of their implied bargain.' Above all, Mrs. Bouverie-Barton recalled vividly two special and very significant phrases. When she spoke to the Duke of his sceptical attitude about another lady to whom he had formerly paid marked attentions—poor Sabine felt a tell-tale blush mantling her face at that awkward incident—the Duke had answered grimly, 'I was wiser in my generation than than now;' and when he told her at last he thought he was going to be seriously ill, he had added, with bitterness, 'and a good job, too, as things go at present.'

It was clear from all the evidence brought forward from this point onward that the Duke expected and wished to die; hardly less clear that he desired most definitely to cast the blame of his death upon the head of the Duchess. One link alone still remained to be proved. Where did the poison come from? Had the Duke any reason to have morphia in his possession? For that final link in his chain of proof, Douglas proceeded somewhat complacently to call the dead man's valet.

The valet's evidence was direct and to the point. His grace had always suffered severely from sleeplessness—especially on nights when he had played high; and on such occasions he was accustomed to give himself, as the valet phrased it with vast affectation of medical accuracy, 'hypodermal injections of morphia.'

'Have you ever procured him morphia for the purpose?' Douglas asked, amid a pause of solemn silence.

'Yes, frequently. Often in America, while his grace was there, I bought him large amounts, and also to a less extent in England. He had a prescription for the purpose from a medical man, which he used to send me out with.'

'Did you get any in Norway?'

'No, never; but his grace went more than once, to my knowledge, into chemists' shops, both at Bergen and Lillehammer, and he may have bought some then. I believe he did. At any rate, I noticed a blue paper packet of something in his dressing-case when I was putting up his things at the hotel at Christiania, which I can't now find in any of his luggage. I

have searched for it in his portmanteaus without discovering it. It had something printed outside, in Norse, I suppose, that I didn't understand. I can't tell you what the packet contained, but it was a white powder, which might have been soda, of course, or might have been sugar. I didn't taste it.'

'But did you form any opinion at the time what the powder was?'

'I did. I believed it to be morphia, as usual.'

'That isn't evidence,' the judge said dryly; 'that's pure conjecture.'

Then Douglas produced from his pocket with sudden promptitude a tiny glass syringe.

'Do you recognise this?' he asked the man quickly.

The valet started.

'I do,' he said, 'perfectly. It's the syringe his grace was accustomed to use whenever he made the injections of morphia.'

'Explain to the jury how it came into your possession,' the judge interposed, looking up sharply, with the nimble senile alertness of his class, at Douglas.

'My lord,' the barrister answered, with a respectful inclination, 'my next witness, the housemaid in charge of the Duke's room, will prove to your lordship and the court that she found this instrument beside the Duke's bed, on the evening of his death, as if accidentally dropped on the ground, upon the opposite side from the one on which the Duchess was sitting.'



## CHAPTER XLVII.

### A MISSING WITNESS.

When the witnesses had all been compelled, willing or unwilling, to yield up each his small part towards the cumulative proof, Douglas rose once more, with a very pale face, and proceeded to review the evidence for his Theory.

His speech was long, exhaustive, and able. He pointed out to the jury the character and antecedents of the man himself with whom they had to deal; the obviously insane strain which ran through the very warp and woof of his being; the vindictiveness and jealousy known to characterize his nature; and the probability of his being capable of conceiving and carrying out such a horrible revenge as that now suggested, if circumstances should ever arouse the devil within him to that pitch of wickedness. Then he showed how all the circumstances had just so aroused him; how the three hereditary Montgomery tendencies, to gambling, jealousy, suicide, had coincided to madden and inflame his soul; and how all the very accidents of the case had combined to precipitate the final catastrophe. He didn't suppose himself—he didn't ask them to believe—that the dead man had decided to take his own life merely in order to spite his wife and throw upon her innocent head the suspicion of a deadly crime. That would be more than human wickedness could compass or human credulity swallow. But he did ask them to believe that the Duke, having made up his mind on other grounds to die, had conceived and carried out that further aggravation of diabolical vengeance. He dwelt lightly on the real guilelessness of Linda's life; any observations on that score, he said, with fine rhetorical sense of effect, he knew he need not waste upon them. He glanced at Linda as he spoke—Linda sitting there, calm, though pale and worn, in her deep mourning, and all the jury, following his eyes with theirs, felt that glance was more persuasive than the highest flights of human eloquence. In short, he built up a psychological theory of Adalbert Montgomery's life that was all the more conclusive because he had known the man himself, and had gauged with his own mind the full depths of profound selfishness and cruelty that lurked unseen in his nature.

Then Douglas went on to point out the utter absence of motive for the suggested crime in Linda's case, and the presence of what was an adequate motive, to a mind so diseased and swallowed up by mean jealousy as the Duke's, both for the suicide itself and the cruel attempt to make it seem a murder. He dwelt long upon the fact that the police, with all their vigilance, had failed to find any proof of the Duchess having ever bought a grain of morphia anywhere, or had it in her possession, side by side with the fact, unshaken in cross-examination, that the Duke had been in the constant habit both of buying and using it. He noted that opportunities would easily occur for the patient himself to put morphia unobserved into the food and drink; and that such opportunities would be far more difficult on the part of the Duchess. When the Duke was left alone in the room, counsel's theory was that he had himself poisoned his food and drink, and administered hypodermal injections from the powder surreptitiously bought in Norway. It was a theory that fitted all the facts, and that fell in exactly with the nature and character of the man who had perpetrated, as he believed, with his dying hand and breath this gross injustice upon a woman who had loved and trusted him.

Then, again, there was the question of the remaining morphia found in the Duchess's jewel-case. If the Duchess herself had perpetrated the crime, was it credible that she would leave this clue against herself among her own belongings? Nobody could believe her so foolish or so heedless. But if the Duke had poisoned himself, with the deliberate wish that the crime should be imputed to his wife, this clumsy device of the jewel-case was exactly the sort of thing that would first occur to the disordered mind of a half-delirious and half-insane patient. Rightly viewed, it really told in his client's favour.

Finally, after reviewing all the facts of the case in his own sense, Douglas ventured upon a bold and very unusual appeal to the jury. He did not ask them, he said, merely to acquit his client. He did not ask them, if they doubted, to give her the benefit of the doubt. That was neither his client's desire nor his own. The old judge frowned, but Douglas never noticed him. He asked them confidently to proclaim her perfect innocence from every charge that directly or indirectly had been brought against her, in that court or elsewhere. He asked them to vindicate her character as a wife, as a citizen, as a woman, and as a moral agent. He asked them unreservedly to put the crime upon the shoulders of the man who had actually committed it. He asked them to declare before the face of all the world that Adalbert Montgomery, Duke of Powysland, a ruined and disappointed gambler, stung in his last despair by the mad jealousy of his race, and determined to die, had conceived in his heart the unspeakable wickedness of avenging himself after death upon the wife who had never wronged him in thought, word or deed; and had concocted for that purpose a vile plot to blast her reputation and to destroy her life in the cruellest way ever devised by the mind of man; and he asked them also to declare by their verdict

that that plot had failed, and that crime had recoiled upon his own head; while Linda, Duchess of Powysland, his much-wronged wife, went forth from court that day vindicated by their finding as a spotless wife and an innocent woman. Nothing less than that they demanded as their right—nothing less than that, he felt sure, the jury would award them.

He sat down almost fainting, while something very like applause broke from every corner of the court for a minute—to be promptly suppressed, of course—at the bold conclusion of his well-constructed defence. As the buzz of whispers ran round the well, Mr. Mitchell Hanbury himself leaned over once more, and whispered aloud, in a stage aside:

'By George! sir, you've done it. You've done it. You've done it. You've convinced the jury; and hang me! if you haven't almost succeeded in convincing me myself into the bargain!'

From that moment forth the rest of the proceedings fell fearfully flat till the jury retired to consider their verdict. After Douglas's fiery and impassioned eloquence, nobody was much impressed by the eminent Q.C.'s frigid but ingenious reply for the Crown, nor by the mumbling old judge's evenly balanced and insipid summing-up of the respective cases, in which he pointed out, with the usual luminous judicial impartiality, that if the jury believed the Duchess had poisoned the Duke, they should most unhesitatingly find her guilty; but if, on the other hand, they believed the Duke had poisoned himself to get out of a hole, as the defence suggested, and afterwards tried out of pure spite to make it appear his wife had done it—why, then, in that case, it would be a gross miscarriage of justice for twelve honest and intelligent men to hang the Duchess. Everybody seemed so perfectly ready to admit the truth of these trite judicial platitudes that they hardly even listened to them, and the crowd in court manifested towards the end some little impatience of such mumbled remarks in its eagerness to hear how the jury decided.

At last the critical moment arrived, and the jury left the room for awhile to deliberate. They were gone some minutes, discussing the case among themselves; and the public in court waited anxiously with breathless attention for their verdict. Linda leaned back in her chair, still very white, but with a certain air of conscious and triumphant innocence. She cared infinitely less herself which way the verdict went now. To her own mind, Douglas Harrison's speech and the evidence of the witnesses had completely exculpated her and told the whole truth as to Bertie's conduct. She felt certain that that man she had once called her husband, in an insane access of jealousy, had hatched this mad scheme against her life and honour, exactly as Douglas had so aptly described it. She had ceased to love him entirely now; she had ceased to regret him. A terrible whirlwind had passed through her soul as she sat there in court, and left her wholly changed; her one wonder was, now she knew him for himself, how on earth she could ever have consented to marry him.

Half an hour is a terribly long time when an issue of life and death is hanging by a thread in it. Linda had full leisure for these and many other tempestuous reflections before the jury, with official calmness, returned to deliver their expected verdict.

And so had the people in court. They had discussed the question at issue freely meanwhile; and by the looks that were cast towards her—most of them now sympathetic and pitying—Linda could feel tolerably well assured that the sense of the public was wholly with her. Douglas Harrison's bold defence had completely turned the tables. In the eyes of the assembled audience she was almost undoubtedly now a much injured lady.

But did the jury themselves accept that view? or why did they take so long to deliberate? A tremor passed visibly through Linda's frame as the twelve good men and true at last re-entered. Every eye gazed hard, and every ear was strained to catch the words of that fateful verdict.

The clerk of arraigns put the formal question:

'Gentlemen of the jury, do you find the prisoner at the bar guilty or not guilty of wilful murder?'

The foreman glanced lightly at a tiny scrap of paper held in his hand, cleared his throat, and began to answer:

'We find——'

At that moment, before he could complete his sentence, a loud cry was heard from the further end of the court, a scuffle by the door, a disturbance with the police, a wild rush towards the ushers.

The foreman hesitated; he looked up and waited; the turmoil increased. Even the mumbling old judge rose solemnly from the bench, where he had been going over his notes through his spectacles, and, peering across the well, tried his best to make out the cause of the uproar. Amid the din and confusion a woman's voice, raised loud above all else, rang clear

through the building.

'I have evidence to give, my lord—important evidence. They won't let me in. I *must* and *shall* be heard. I've come to save her!'

'Who is it?' the blind old judge muttered vacantly through his false teeth, craning his neck and gazing with his bleared eyes away down into the distance. 'This is very irregular: very, very irregular. If the woman had evidence to give in the case, why, in the name of goodness, didn't she come here sooner?'

But Linda, venturing just for once to break silence at this crisis before the eyes of all that attentive crowd, cried out in her turn:

'My lord, let her come. It's my maid, who disappeared mysteriously from the house just before the Duke's return, and whom we've been unable, in spite of all our efforts, to trace till this moment. If she has evidence to give on my behalf I hope and trust the verdict will be delayed until the jury have had a chance of hearing her.'

For she felt, in some dim, instinctive way, that Elizabeth Woodward, as she called the girl to herself, had really come there, as she declared, to save her.

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## CHAPTER XLVIII.

### MISS POMEROY GIVES EVIDENCE.

The blind old judge mumbled and hesitated ineffectively. He whispered aside with the clerk of arraigns, while the foreman, still fumbling the scrap of paper in his hand, stood waiting respectfully for his lordship's decision. Evidently, his lordship was very much annoyed. It was disconcerting, most disconcerting, to the dignity of the court, that a woman, unknown, without even so much as a bonnet on her head, should insist, at the eleventh hour, on thus interrupting an important case in which the court itself had already summed up with such luminous inconclusiveness. Episodes like this were unseemly—very unseemly. And probably, after all, the court mumbled to itself, the woman would have nothing essential to add to what other witnesses had long since told them!

However, English judges, if they have no other virtue, are at least well trained in the professional etiquette of seeming impartiality; so the mumbling old gentleman on the bench (being no exception to this rule), after readjusting his wig and setting his spectacles straight, observed with some acerbity, that if the witness thought she had anything important to communicate on the case, she might step forward and be sworn, though he must say, for his part, her evidence would have been more welcome had it been tendered in the regular course of events at an earlier stage of the day's proceedings.

As he spoke and wagged his head, a little lane was made with difficulty by the ushers through the dense mass of humanity that packed the floor of the building, and a torn and draggled figure advanced along it, breathless with fiery zeal, towards the box for the witnesses.

The new-comer's appearance was, indeed, sufficient to surprise the judge and excite remark from all spectators. Her hair, to be sure, was not dishevelled, as in all dramatic propriety it ought to have been—nobody ever saw that model lady's-maid's hair in any other condition, either in private or in public, than neatly coiled and carefully braided; but her head was bare, her eyes were red, and her dress, already muddied and splashed with running headlong through the streets, had been torn into shreds and tatters at certain points in her sharp struggle with the ushers and door-keepers. She was panting and excited; and though her face as a whole looked pale with bloodlessness, a fiery red patch burned bright in either cheek with momentary exaltation.

'I've run all the way here, my lord,' she cried, in a tone of eager frankness, as she came up to the box. 'I've run for my life, like. I couldn't get away before. They'd locked me up in the house to prevent my coming out to give evidence and save her. I didn't know whether it wouldn't all be over. But I've got out in spite of them, and I'm in time—I'm in time! I don't care for anything—they may kill me if they like now—as long as I'm in time to save her—to save her!'

The blind old judge fidgeted angrily in his seat:

'This is very irregular,' he repeated once more, with a shiver of disapprobation, for his sense of form was severely tried; 'these incoherent statements, so little to the point, and not on oath either. Unseemly! Unseemly! If you mean to produce the witness at all, Mr.—eh, what is it? Harrison—ah, yes, thank you—if you mean to produce her, you should at least proceed to swear her in due form before she begins to make any personal statement.'

'May I give her a few minutes to collect herself, my lord?' Douglas asked suspiciously, eyeing his new ally with a somewhat doubtful glance, in spite of Linda's recommendation—and, indeed, he had full confidence in Linda's judgment. 'She seems to me just at present to be somewhat fatigued and hysterical.'

'Or the worse for drink,' that smart junior Mr. Erskine suggested humorously beneath his breath—a comment which raised a smile in his immediate neighbourhood.

But Elizabeth Pomeroy, alias Woodward, looking up with her flushed face and dark-ringed eyes, and pulling herself together suddenly, answered in a very much more coherent voice, now she saw her purpose was fairly gained:

'I'm quite ready to be sworn this moment, my lord, and I'm *not* the worse for drink, though I'm hot and tired. I've slipped out of a guarded house and from a bed of illness with very great difficulty, to serve the ends of justice, and I've run over a mile to get here in time, which has taken away my breath; but if you'll allow them to swear me at once, I'm prepared to give evidence—important evidence.'

'Let the woman be sworn,' the old judge said, in a very official voice, and sworn Miss Elizabeth Pomeroy was accordingly.

'I believe your name is Elizabeth Woodward?' Douglas Harrison began, setting out on his examination very much in the dark—for he hadn't the slightest idea what this new witness, thus dropped down upon him from the clouds, was prepared to prove; and he took even her name on trust from a little piece of paper handed up to him by the solicitors.

To his immense surprise, the witness took his breath away by answering, in a very matter-of-fact voice:

'No; not Woodward. That's what I was called while I was in her grace's service. But my real name is Elizabeth Pomeroy.'

'Oh, your *real* name!' the little judge said sharply, with a sarcastic emphasis. 'Then the other's an *alias*! You're one of those people, I suppose, who go about the world with a choice selection of names, as occasion demands them.'

'Yes, my lord,' the new witness responded, with quiet incisiveness. 'The other's an *alias*, and not my only one. I'm quite accustomed to courts; the police know me well—Mr. Inspector there can answer for that—and I have a story to tell that the Duchess's counsel knows nothing about, so it isn't much use his questioning me and extorting it. Perhaps, if he'd allow me to tell my tale my own way, I'd save the time of the court and get sooner through with it.'

'By all means,' Douglas answered, nothing loath, obedient to a significant glance from Linda—'with his lordship's permission.'

'Go on,' the little judge remarked, with a resigned air, leaning back on the bench. This witness was evidently not a person for a judge who respected his ermine to bandy words with.

'Very well, then,' Miss Pomeroy went on, gathering the loose shreds of her gown together in front, and gradually resuming her more ordinary demeanour in her alternative character of model lady's-maid in a highly respectable family. 'I'd better begin by explaining at once that I was her grace's maid for a few weeks this spring; but that I'm also, and have always been'—she paused and hesitated—'the associate and confederate of thieves and burglars.'

And as she spoke she cast a defiant glance around her in her sudden access of virtuous resolve to make a clean breast of it and save the Duchess.

'God bless my soul, you don't mean to say so!' the half-blind old judge burst forth spontaneously, forgetful in his surprise of the dignity of the Queen's justiciary. He regarded Miss Pomeroy's coiled hair with close attention. 'The associate and confederate of thieves and burglars!' he repeated slowly.

'Yes,' Miss Pomeroy went on, with passionate warmth. 'I keep nothing back. I want to tell the whole truth and explain the whole circumstances. I've been put into good places in many West-End houses for several years back by means of forged characters. The man Arthur Roper—Mr. Inspector knows him—he always forged them. I was maid to that lady there for a month or two at Hurst Croft, Mrs. Hubert Harrison—she was Miss Venables then—and while I was there the house was broken into and Miss Venables' jewels and money were stolen. She'll go into the box after me and swear to it, I don't doubt, if your lordship wants corroborative evidence. Mrs. Harrison must remember me. I was called Elizabeth Williams then. I varied my surname from place to place as far as necessary, but for convenience' sake I was always Elizabeth; it saved time and trouble. Arthur Roper, an expert thief, well known to the police—they call him the "gentleman burglar"—Mr. Inspector nodded—'he stole the jewels, and Mrs. Harrison can corroborate me that I was there at the time, and wouldn't go into the room where they lay, because I knew he was in there stealing them.'

Sabine nodded unobtrusively a confirmatory nod, much wondering in her heart what all this could mean; but the little old judge, in spite of his blindness, caught the movement at once, and mumbled out angrily:

'Don't make signs to the witness, madam. Let her tell her own tale unaided. Besides, I don't see that this rigmarole is evidence at all. What's all this got to do with the Duchess of Powysland?'

'I want to tell your lordship and the jury,' Miss Pomeroy answered, turning round and growing calmer each moment now she felt she was really safe from pursuit, 'how it was I came to see the Duke poison himself, and why it was that Arthur Roper, my companion in crime, locked me up ill in my room all this time, to prevent my coming here to give evidence about it.'



'Oh!' his lordship echoed, somewhat mollified. 'You saw the Duke poison himself? That'd be evidence indeed, if you really saw anything that could be fairly so described. Proceed with your story, witness.'

And he eyed her narrowly.

'Then I was three months with that lady there, the Baroness Von Förstemann,' Miss Pomeroy went on, 'at the Austrian Embassy; and before I left the embassy was burgled, and her daughter, Baroness Sophia, had her jewels and important documents stolen. That was the way we worked. Arthur Roper used to send me with forged characters to a good house as maid; and as soon as I'd learnt the ins and outs of the place, so that I could draw a ground-plan and show him his way well about the rooms, why, he made up his mind and came in and robbed them.'

'How was it you didn't rob them yourself?' the blind old judge asked peevishly. 'That would have been so much simpler. This seems a very clumsy, roundabout proceeding—like the rest of your evidence.'

'Oh dear no, your lordship; in that case I might have got caught,' Miss Pomeroy answered in a very matter-of-fact tone, for this was to her a business detail; 'and, anyway, there'd be a clue, a very easy clue, to me. It would never have done to let one of the servants in the house be suspected, or all would have come out. But Mr. Roper broke in with jemmies and all that, like a regular professional out-door burglar, and nobody questioned the servants almost ... least of all *me*. I was always so respectable.... I'm telling the whole story now to save that lady's life, because she saved mine, and because I'm disgusted and thoroughly ashamed of myself. I give myself in charge for all these robberies by coming here to-day to save her life—Mr. Inspector, I'm your prisoner—and perhaps another time your lordship may try me for them, and send me to prison, where I know I deserve to be.'

And she paused, all trembling.

'Perhaps,' his lordship muttered below his breath. 'Well, go on, witness.'

'After that,' Miss Pomeroy continued, glancing around the court once more in a cold chill of remorse and self-accusation, 'I don't deny I was concerned in several other burglaries till the spring of this year, when I took service at last with the Duchess of Powysland.'

'Ah, now we're getting to it, then!' the little judge put in, waking up suddenly, and beginning to be attentive.

'There I stayed for six weeks or so,' Miss Pomeroy continued, looking down at the rail, 'and there I fell ill with typhoid fever.' And then, in quick and eager language, she went on to explain how Linda had nursed her through her illness with sisterly care; how she had treated her more like an equal than an upper servant; how she had done everything for her that the most delicate kindness or thoughtfulness could suggest; and how at the end she herself, the poor penitent associate of thieves and burglars, stricken down with remorse and grateful for benefits received, had felt she could never more follow her hateful trade, but must strive to make amends for the wrong she had already contemplated towards her generous nurse and mistress.

'I'd always had penitent fits like that from time to time,' the girl went on passionately. 'I suppose it's my nature, and the double life I always had to lead; but every now and again I just hated myself for helping them in all their robberies. But I was afraid to leave them; I was afraid even to say I wouldn't rob the Duchess. If I'd said so, I believe that brute, Arthur Roper, would have murdered me outright. He'll murder me now, unless I'm put in prison, if he catches me after this, for turning Queen's evidence.'

'We'll take good care about that,' the little judge interposed, smiling serenely. 'Go on with your story, woman.'

'So I left the Duchess, as I said, quite unexpectedly, just putting a letter on her dressing-table to say I'd gone, a day or two before the Duke came home from Norway. I told Arthur Roper I had reasons for leaving—I never said what—and for taking a place just five doors off in Onslow Gardens. I can prove all this, if you like, by the evidence of the people in the house I went to—Mr. Nicholas Mortimer's. I wanted to be near, so as to look after the Duchess; and I meant to prevent that man, Arthur Roper, from committing this burglary, and to give notice to the police as soon as he'd arranged a night for doing it, so that he might be caught in the act, red-handed. I was sick and tired of my way of life, and I wanted to do what I could to save the Duchess. I knew the Duke was jealous of her, and had quarrelled with her and hated her; and I knew she was an angel, and I couldn't bear to go away from the place altogether and see no more of her.'

'But how could you see her five doors off?' the judge asked sceptically.

'Why, that's just what I'm coming to,' Elizabeth Pomeroy went on. 'That's how I caught the Duke himself in the very act of giving himself the morphia.'

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## CHAPTER XLIX.

### THE MYSTERY SOLVED.

'Outside all the houses in Onslow Gardens there's a continuous ledge—a sort of platform or terrace. The Duchess knows it well. It's formed by the projection of the first floor rooms, so that you can step right out on to it from the bedroom windows. Well, I used to walk out on this ledge by night; and as I went from Mr. Mortimer's, where I was living, to the Duke's house, I passed first the Duchess's boudoir window, and then the windows of the Duke's bedroom. I used to look in sideways into both these rooms, through two little holes I'd made in the blinds on purpose before I left—little holes you had to hold your eye close to see—and there I could easily make out everything that was passing in either of them.

'Through all the Duke's illness I went along the ledge a great many times; and at last, on the night the Duke died, I went there, I think, about half-past nine; but anyhow it was after my lady had come up from dinner—the Mortimers dined at eight sharp—and was sitting in the drawing-room. I stole along the ledge quietly, close under the window, so as not to be observed. When I got to 20, I noticed, to my surprise, as I passed, that the Duchess's boudoir window had the blinds still up; and the Duchess herself was sitting there alone, and I was afraid she'd see me—of course the blinds ought to have been drawn—but she had her head in her hands, and she didn't see. So I crept on past her, and looked in through the tiny hole in the blind I'd made next door in the Duke's window.

'All this time Arthur Roper was waiting below in the garden for me to give him the sign when the coast was clear; but I didn't mean to give him the sign that night, because I hadn't communicated yet with the police; so I only just crouched there and watched, and made signals to him that it wouldn't be safe to try, as the Duchess was in her boudoir. And, indeed, it wouldn't have been. Then I kept on looking in at the Duke's windows for a good long time. I could see everything. There were two nurses there. Why, those are the two—those women sitting in the well of the court, by the box, only then they were dressed in nurses' uniform. I saw them distinctly. By-and-by I saw the Duke send them out of the room—first this one with the blue dress, and then that one in black. As soon as they were gone, I was very much astonished to see what happened. The Duke rose out of bed. He was very weak and ill, and he staggered horribly; but he had a fixed sort of look on his face as he turned his eyes first this way, then that—just so—to see if he was observed. As soon as he'd made sure he was quite alone, he smiled a dreadful, mad-looking, inhuman sort of a smile—oh, the awfulest smile I ever saw in my life, though I've seen some awful ones!—and got down on all fours on the floor like a child, and crept very cautiously across towards the window.'

By this time the interest in court was profound in its intensity. Linda leant forward in breathless suspense to hear to what conclusion this strange confession of her strange maid's was leading them.

'The Duke crept on, crept on, crept on, till he reached the edge of the carpet, corner-wise, at the end next the drawing-room,' the girl continued, after a short pause, wiping her eyes and forehead. 'It was a Turkey carpet, lying loose on the floor, with the edge untacked; and the sides of the room were polished. His grace lifted up the corner, holding his head on one side, for all the world like a monkey for cunning; and then, with something sharp he held in his hands—a pair of nail-scissors, I fancy—he egged up a loose square in the parqueted floor, and took out—a parcel. The square was one of the little black ones that lie between the light brown bits—about as long as that, and wide as that, and diamond-shaped. It seemed to me as if it came up quite easily. The thing he took out was a blue paper packet.'

'A what?' the judge asked sharply.

'A blue paper packet, my lord,' Miss Pomeroy answered, amid breathless silence. 'I saw the Duke open it. It had inside it a white powder.'

A shudder passed visibly through the court as she spoke. Miss Pomeroy took no notice of it, but went on excitedly:

'The Duke laughed when he looked at the powder—laughed low to himself like a madman, and stared around him once more. His look was ghastly. Then he rose on his feet, staggered across the floor, and dropped a lot of the powder—more than he meant, I think—into a jug by the bedside. After that he paused, glanced behind him suspiciously, and dropped a second lot into the glass, and some into the medicine bottle; then he laughed once more, and looked towards the door, as if he was frightened that somebody was coming. I think he heard a noise outside, for he half jumped towards the bed—stronger than you'd have thought a man like him could have done it, for he seemed possessed, somehow. But there was

nobody there, so he stood a minute again, steadying himself with his folded hand on the table, and looked as if he was filling a little glass thing he held in his hand—I should say a syringe, or something of the sort—out of the tumbler by the bedside he'd dropped the powder into.'

The court sat enthralled, and listened awe-struck to her story.

'After that,' Miss Pomeroy continued, pale, with her tale, 'he paused again, and looked around him nervously. I could see big drops were standing upon his brow. He seemed horribly ill. He tried to walk, but couldn't, so he got down on all fours again, and crept slowly across the floor, grinning once more to himself—oh, so horribly! so horribly! It was dreadful to look at him. I almost screamed with fright. But I didn't think then he was doing any harm. I just thought he was mad, behaving like a lunatic in his delirium, and that the nurses would soon be back to look after him.

'Well, he crawled over to the cabinet—the inlaid cabinet by the fireplace: your grace must remember it—I beg your lordship's pardon—and opened a drawer. The Duchess's jewel-case was there, as I knew, unlocked. It was the great Amberley jewel-case—not the one where she kept her every-day things—and I'd put it there myself just before I was taken ill, to have it handy in an easy place for Arthur Roper. Lifting the lid, the Duke took out a bottle with a glass stopper that I'd laid in there on purpose among the jewellery: it was a bottle marked "Best French Violet Powder;" but it had a lot of loose little things stuck in among the chalk—earrings with single diamonds in them and such-like small valuables—that I'd put there beforehand so that Arthur might carry them off without much difficulty. The Duke emptied out the violet-powder into the blue paper, diamonds and all, and emptied the stuff in the blue paper into the bottle of violet-powder. He saw the diamonds as he did it, and laughed low again. That made me feel sure he was really mad, and I was alarmed for the Duchess; but I held my peace still, for I knew the two nurses wouldn't be away from him very much longer.

'The next thing the Duke did was to shut the drawer firm, and crawl back furtively to the corner where the loose square was up. He'd left it lifted out: now he put back the blue paper, with the diamonds and things inside, and jammed down the square with all his might and main on top of them. As he did so, I think he heard a noise outside. He started, stared around, clapped his hands to his ears, pulled back the corner of the carpet in a very great hurry, and ran for the bed almost as if nothing at all was the matter with him. But he was shivering all over, I could see, and frightfully exhausted. The exertion had killed him. He jumped into bed like mad, pulled the clothes all up over him, lay stiff and stark, and let his head fall back upon the pillow with his eyes shut so that I thought he was dying. I couldn't stand it any longer. I jumped away from the window and crawled back all on the shudder, meaning to go to the boudoir next door and call the Duchess.

'When I got to the boudoir, the Duchess was walking up and down, listening, and wringing her hands; and my heart failed me: I was afraid to call to her. She turned, and for a moment I thought she saw me. But she didn't, I believe; for she started and looked away. I crouched back towards the Duke's window, and was going to peep in to see more, when suddenly I heard Arthur Roper below whistle twice to me. That meant danger. I was frightened at the whistling, and looked round at once. He was beckoning me to come down. I crawled back to my own house—the Mortimers', I mean—ran downstairs quickly, and met him at the door, not knowing what was the matter. He had a hansom there waiting. "Jump in, Bess!" he said. "Jump in, right away. If you don't, we're lagged! There's detectives in the Gardens." I jumped in at once, feeling very ill and weak with exposure to the cold, being convalescent still, and drove off with him at once without any more questions. He took me home where we usually stay; and I found I had a relapse. The fever was upon me in full force again, and I went to bed that minute, wandering in my mind, and pulled down with the typhoid. I was too ill for a week to do anything but lie still and forget myself and everybody else. It wasn't till the end of a week I could sit up in my bed and read a paper; and then I found out what had been happening meanwhile to the poor dear Duchess.

'The moment I read what the papers had to say, I saw it all at once: that the powder in the blue paper was morphia; and that the Duke had poisoned himself, and out of mad spite wanted to put it all off upon the innocent Duchess.

"Arthur," I said, "I must get up this minute and go into court, and tell the whole truth of what I've seen to the jury."

"Are you mad, Bess," says he, "that you want to expose us and get us both into prison? Leave it alone, I say, and it'll all come straight. They're sure to discover it."

And then the poor woman went on to describe in vivid terms her fierce long struggle to get free, and the close watch kept upon her; she told how at last, in despair, she had feigned to be far more ill than she really was, and so had got the watch

upon her relaxed a little; how, in an unguarded moment, she had seized the opportunity, slipped on a few clothes, rushed out into the street, and run towards the court, not knowing whether the Duchess had been tried yet or not; how the man Roper, returning, had missed her from her bed, and pursued her almost to the very doors of the court; and how she had arrived there, at last, breathless, ill, and feeble, but resolved to tell the whole truth, as far as in her lay, and save the life of an innocent woman who had helped and friended her.

'So here I am,' she cried, 'and I've saved her! I've saved her!'

At the close of her strange story, all told with that simple earnestness and directness of wording which is the best guarantee of good faith, not a soul in the court doubted for one moment her startling evidence. Even the blind old judge himself gazed at her somewhat compassionately, as the counsel for the Crown remarked with slow precision, 'There is one obvious means of testing the truth of this witness's story, my lord. She says the Duke replaced the blue paper under the loose square of the floor, from which he took the supposed morphia-powder.'

'He did, my lord!' the girl cried, turning full upon him from counsel. 'If your lordship likes, I can go with a policeman and point out the very place on the floor, where it is, to him.'

'Has a watch been kept upon the room?' the judge asked, somewhat coldly, turning to the inspector in charge of the case.

'Yes, my lord, day and night ever since the moment of his grace's death. Nothing could have been secreted or altered there without our knowledge.'

The judge looked at his watch, and conferred with counsel for the Crown.

'It's rather late,' he mumbled testily; 'but I suppose all parties concerned would prefer that this case should be completed to-night, without further adjournment. Are you willing, Mr. Harrison, I should send round two policemen by cab, at once, to search the spot indicated?'

'By all means, if your lordship thinks fit,' Douglas answered with pleasure.

'Shall I go with them, my lord?' Miss Pomeroy asked in an eager tone.

'Certainly not,' the judge responded dryly. 'We will detain you here, witness, for the present, till we've ascertained the truth of your story.'

There was a bustle once more. The Crown would defer Elizabeth Pomeroy's cross-examination till the police reported on the state of the room.

Linda leaned back in her chair wearily. The suspense of the trial was almost over now, and already she felt her character vindicated. But Bertie—the Bertie she knew and almost loved—was gone for ever. In his place, an unspeakable something had burst in upon her life. An awful presence haunted her. She understood at last why that smile of recognition with which he greeted her, as she entered the room after his final dose of morphia, had inexpressibly chilled and frozen the very marrow in her bones. He had smiled to think he was successful in his devilish plot to murder her!

But as the policemen left the court, on their errand of search, Mr. Mitchell Hanbury leaned across from his seat, and whispered once more in Douglas's ear, 'Very well planned—very well planned indeed! You couldn't have brought in your best witness for the defence more effectively or with more dramatic surroundings!'

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# CHAPTER L.

## GUILTY OR NOT GUILTY?

As the court waited, somewhat listlessly, for the policemen's return, one of the nurses came up and spoke a few words under her breath to Douglas, who presently turned to the judge, and asked in a respectful tone, 'May I put a few more questions to this witness, my lord, bearing upon the facts just detailed to us by Elizabeth Pomeroy?'

'You may,' the judge answered grumpily. 'She's been sworn already, so no need to re-swear her. Get into the box, witness.'

The nurse stood up in the box once more, and Douglas proceeded to question her on the communication she had just made to him. The woman had three things to say: first, that the window giving on the terrace was fastened from inside, both before and after her short absence from the room, so that Elizabeth Pomeroy could not then have got in from outside to secrete the paper; second, that a man was on guard on the landing, so that she could not have come in by the street-door; and third, that the police took possession of the room before she and her companion left it that evening. So that if anything of importance should be found in the Duke's room, it must certainly have been placed there at or before the time suggested by Elizabeth Pomeroy's story.

The Crown having refused to cross-examine Miss Pomeroy till the police returned, the court waited on, after this, in rather subdued silence. In an incredibly short time, however, the two men came back, bringing with them into court, amid profound sensation—a concealed something. The senior policeman, with practised familiarity, went into the box at once and was soon sworn. He exhibited the object he had found to the court. The judge examined it curiously, and then passed it on without one word to the attentive jury. It was a large piece of coarse blue paper, doubly and trebly folded, and with a label outside. Within was a quantity of fine white powder, and a number of small objects in pearls and diamonds.

'What is written on the packet, my lord?' Douglas inquired anxiously.

The judge examined the words closely. 'They're in some foreign language,' he answered, with judicial vagueness—'possibly Norse; but I'm no Scandinavian scholar. The lower words are presumably a proper name, followed by a legend, which may mean "Chemist, Christiania." However, the interpreter's in court; he will examine the paper, after the jury have seen it, and translate the words for us.'

The interpreter stepped up, with brisk readiness, and looked at the paper curiously.

'The words mean,' he said, "'The Powder as before. Poison. Ole Svendssen, Chemist and Druggist to the King, Upper Palace Street, Christiania.'"

'Will my learned brother cross-examine the witness Elizabeth Pomeroy now?' the judge said, turning serenely to the senior counsel for the Crown.

Senior counsel for the Crown smiled a smile of conscious self-denial. 'No, thank you, my lord,' he said. 'We will leave the case as it stands, to the jury. Elizabeth Pomeroy's statement may be taken for what it is worth—backed by this confirmation, such as it is. We don't desire to comment upon it further than to point out the very singular nature of the witness's pursuits, and the consequent improbability that her testimony can possess any great or really conclusive value.'

'You don't wish to address the jury again, Mr. ... ah ... Harrison?' the little judge said, more cordially.

'No, thank you, my lord,' Douglas answered with a confident smile; 'like the learned Attorney-General, I hope to leave myself in the hands of the jury.'

The little judge leaned forward, and looked very wise. 'The evidence just tendered in so irregular a way,' he observed oracularly, 'has left me little or nothing to add to the summing-up I have already addressed to you, gentlemen. If you now believe the witness Elizabeth Pomeroy, whose story has certainly been confirmed in one remarkable particular by the police, you will add the weight of her evidence, be it more or less, to the general weight of that which I have previously detailed to you. If, on the contrary, you think, with the learned Attorney-General, her testimony is tainted by her own frank admission of a life of deceit and hardened vice, then you will weigh it well, and allow it such importance as in your opinion may properly attach to it. But I may tell you, gentlemen!—and the blind old judge braced himself up for a

singularly free expression of judicial opinion—I may tell you that the peculiar circumstances under which this woman's evidence has been given, and her apparently straightforward desire to save what she seems to regard as an innocent life, entitle her testimony in this case, in my judgment, to far more consideration than might under other conditions be reasonably claimed for it. In short, I venture to direct you that the woman's evidence may fairly be accepted as, in a certain degree, not wholly unworthy of some little credence.'

The jury looked wise, in their turn, and conferred together, in an undertone, for half a second.

'Perhaps you wish to retire again?' the little judge asked, peering at them ferret-like.

'No, no, my lord,' the foreman answered, with some decision. 'We are agreed upon our verdict. The evidence just brought forward has contained nothing of any sort that could induce us to alter our opinion.'

'Very well,' the little judge responded, leaning back on the bench with a self-satisfied air. 'We will resume at the point where this very irregularly-tendered evidence for a time interrupted us.'

There was dead silence, as before. Once more the clerk of arraigns spoke out the solemn words: 'Gentlemen of the jury, do you find the prisoner at the bar, Linda, Duchess of Powysland, guilty or not guilty of wilful murder?'

The foreman of the jury, clearing his throat a second time, read out again from the scrap of paper he held in his hands: 'We find her not guilty; and we desire, further, to express our unanimous belief that Adalbert Owen Trefaldwyn, Duke of Powysland, contrary to the opinion of the coroner's jury, died by his own hand, having wilfully and deliberately administered to himself an over-dose of morphia.'

The foreman paused for a second. Then he added, somewhat less formally: 'That, my lord, was the verdict we had agreed upon, without one dissentient voice, before we heard Elizabeth Pomeroy's evidence; and Elizabeth Pomeroy's evidence, I need hardly say, has only confirmed us in it.'

'This is very irregular,' the little judge mumbled, half to himself; 'very irregular indeed—extremely irregular. The jury impanelled to try the accused on the capital charge is taking upon itself the functions of a coroner's inquest. But under the circumstances I suppose it can't be helped. And all I have to say myself on the matter is—that I entirely coincide in all your findings.'

In the dock Linda still stood half fainting, and worn out with fatigue. The little judge looked at her hard through those inscrutable spectacles. Then he woke up suddenly to an almost human mood. 'Your grace is discharged,' he said, beaming upon her with his small ferret-eyes, 'and all that now remains for me, madam, is to congratulate you most heartily upon the complete vindication of your character from every charge, direct or indirect, brought against you by the Crown in this unhappy matter. I thoroughly concur in the finding of the jury.' He paused for a second, and looked hard at her again. 'Linda, Duchess of Powysland,' he said once more, 'you leave this court, as you entered it, a stainless lady. Your counsel and his witnesses have made it abundantly clear to every thinking mind that every count in the indictment preferred against you is utterly unfounded.'

Linda had just strength enough to say, 'Thank you, my lord, thank you!' and then she fell back upon a chair half senseless. She was dimly aware of a great crowd of friends pressing anxiously round her, and grasping her hand, and of Cecil's strong arm supporting her from behind with brotherly affection. Then her eyes closed for a minute or two, and she knew no more. When they opened again, there were two people alone she looked for eagerly in that stilled but attentive crowd. The first was Douglas Harrison; the second was Elizabeth Pomeroy.

Douglas came forward with modest pride, and grasped her hand frankly. She took both his in hers, and held them there long with friendly warmth. 'I owe you more than my life,' she said, with tears in her eyes. 'How can I ever thank you?'

Then she looked round, not less eagerly, for Elizabeth Pomeroy. The poor girl was seated hard by, broken down with shame, now the excitement and interest of the trial were over, with a policeman by her side, who was obviously guarding her.

'You—you're not going to use her admissions of guilt against herself, surely!' Linda cried out, horrified; for, in spite of all, she still liked and befriended the maid who had so silently sympathized with her in her great trouble.

'Oh, don't you fear, your grace,' the man answered respectfully, saluting as he spoke; 'she'll come to no harm. We'll take

care of that. We won't waste her in prison. She'll be much too useful to us.'

And so, in a dim, vague way, hardly knowing what took place, Linda felt herself hurried by Cecil to the door, and almost carried to a landau that was in waiting outside; while the crowd in the street, surging violently forward, set up a great cry of 'Hooray! hooray!' that was echoed far and near, in a deafening roar; and then Linda knew the mob was cheering her.

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## CHAPTER LI.

### LINDA IN EXILE.

On the rare occasions when the English people change their minds, and make stepping-stones of their own dead selves, they do certainly dance upon them to some tune. So Linda found, to her vast satisfaction, as soon as the great trial was fairly over. The revulsion of public feeling was intense, and, not to put too fine a point upon it, perhaps just a trifle irrational as well. No sooner was it found out that the Duchess hadn't murdered her husband after all, than she was elevated forthwith into a popular heroine of the first order. Nobody would hear a word of any sort against her character generally. Not only were people convinced that she hadn't given the Duke morphia, but they were also convinced that her relations with Basil Maclaine were, and must always have been, perfectly innocent. In this, of course, they happened to be right; but the proof they had of it was perhaps a trifle insufficient for the purpose. To believe in a woman's spotless integrity merely because she hasn't murdered her husband may be regarded by a severely logical critic as not quite reasonable.

However, the British public, when it leaves one extreme, usually rushes headlong down a steep place into another. The clubs, which three weeks before had so freely indulged in covert sneers at Linda's expense, now veered round entirely, and were convinced 'down to the ground' that that fellow Powysland was 'a very bad egg,' and that his conduct to that poor girl he married for her money was 'simply and solely nothing short of abominable.' Everybody now accepted Douglas Harrison's view, that the Duke, driven to desperation by his gambling losses, had deliberately poisoned himself; and that, having once made up his mind so to conduct his exit from life in the fine old ancestral Montgomery fashion, he had further been impelled by a mad impulse of jealousy to throw suspicion on his wife as a means of revenge for her supposed relations with Basil Maclaine. So, an hour after the trial was over, the news-boys in the Strand were shouting merrily, 'Speshul edishun! The Duchess acquitted! 'Ere y'are! *Evenin' Standard!* The defence of the Duchess!' And the public, which a week before had been all the other way, stood in the streets, with tears of joy running down its collective cheeks, as it read the news of the lady's safety.

Logically speaking, of course, disproof of the allegation that Linda had administered the poison by no means implied disproof of the allegation of an intrigue between herself and Maclaine as the motive for the Duke's extraordinary attitude. But the English people, having once made up its mind to acquit Linda upon the capital charge, was so much revolted by the Duke's hideous attempt to bring home to his wife a false accusation of murder, that it jumped at once to the happy conclusion—'He *must* have been mad even to think she could be guilty.' Basil Maclaine's own bearing in the box contributed not a little to this fortunate result; while Linda herself, by calmly taking it for granted, in her own quiet way, that her acquittal must still every whisper of gossip that wagged its tongue against her, disarmed even the old maids of five o'clock tea through her resolute demeanour of perfect innocence.

Naturally, however, the events of the last few weeks had shaken her nerves a good deal. You can't go through the ordeal of a trial for murder without feeling at the end a great deal the older for it. As soon as all was over, therefore, Linda went away with Cecil to the Continent, where they rested for awhile, under an assumed name, to avoid curiosity, in a remote and unvisited little Swiss village. Before leaving England, however, she had assured herself that Elizabeth Pomeroy would not suffer for her brave and timely disclosures. Further search had indeed confirmed Miss Pomeroy's account in every particular; and the poor girl had formed so deep a hatred of Arthur Roper for his attempt to confine her to her room during the course of the trial, that she had no hesitation now in giving evidence against him on various charges of burglary, which resulted in that enterprising gentleman being ultimately removed for fourteen years from the exercise of the profession he adorned as head, to what he himself euphemistically described as 'a position under Government'; while two or three of his less distinguished associates were similarly sequestered from their habitual pursuits by the strong hand of the law for just half that period.

Linda had wished Miss Pomeroy to leave England for good, after the police had done with her, and to begin a new life under fresh auspices in Canada; but Miss Pomeroy herself, her better nature now getting the upper hand altogether, wrote such a piteous letter praying for leave to remain always in Linda's service, 'because she loved her,' that Linda couldn't find it in her heart to refuse the poor penitent creature.

'Now that I'm safe from that wretched man's clutches,' Miss Pomeroy wrote with all her usual frankness, 'I think, if I had you always at my side, dear Duchess, I could manage to keep quite straight in future. It was all for him I lived that

horrible, unnatural, wicked double life of mine. He caught me when I was an innocent girl of seventeen, moulded me as he would, and trained me to his hand to work evil as he ordered me. Now that I've freed myself from him at last, I hate myself for having ever yielded to him; but I need support and help, and you can give it me. If you will take me back as your maid, on what terms you will, you will never have cause to reproach me with ingratitude.'

And Linda, convinced the girl was right, wrote back to her at once to join them forthwith by the very first train in their little Swiss village. From that day forth, Elizabeth Pomeroy was the Duchess's devoted slave, and Linda could only feel sorry at times that so clever and sensitive a woman as that should be wasting her years in dressing back hair, and arranging folds in an evening robe for one of her even Christians.

On London flags, meanwhile, Basil Maclaine, on the strength of the prominent part he had played for a week or two in the great Society scandal, found himself at once a nine days' wonder. People would have preferred, of course, to catch the Duchess herself, if they could, for their 'at homes,' and their garden-parties and their 'little musics;' but failing the Duchess, retired to the Continent to recruit incog., the next best thing Society could do for itself was to catch the man who had been unjustly suspected of conspiring to murder her husband the Duke with her. Basil had suffered a good deal of mental torture during those weeks of suspense; but it was almost worth the suffering, he felt, to be thus popularly coupled in thought and speech by all the world with their graces of Powysland. Moreover, it had gradually oozed out—not, indeed, at the trial, but privately afterward—that that poor Mr. Maclaine, 'who was so shamefully suspected by the dreadful Duke, don't you know, had really once been very much in love indeed with the Duchess, before the Duke met her, or, at least, the Duchess with him—it's all the same thing, you know—but they wouldn't marry, my dear, for family reasons;' and it was even whispered about in the highest circles that, as soon as the customary year of mourning was over, the poor dear Duchess would please herself at last, and bestow her hand and her American thousands upon the man she had first chosen in the heyday of her yet ungilded beauty.

This rumour was so rife indeed, at a certain club, usually well informed, that Basil almost began to give himself airs on the strength of his prospects, and discounted his future social grandeur by accepting the *entrée* to a great many of the best houses as the future husband of a dowager Duchess.

Things were going better, too, far better than of old, with Douglas Harrison. When that most briefless of barristers threw himself heart and soul into Linda's case, it was certainly with no idea of personal or professional advancement that he worked for his client's acquittal; he undertook her defence wholly and solely as a labour of love, and as a duty he owed to an innocent woman, of whose innocence he had a most profound and unalterable conviction. But none the less, the case incidentally made his fortune.

All the world knew that Mr. Douglas Harrison, of the Inner Temple, had constructed and carried through a most ingenious defence of a seemingly hopeless and hapless prisoner, as well as that he had anticipated in a most wonderful way the result of the evidence unexpectedly tendered at the last moment by Elizabeth Pomeroy. All the world knew, too, that he had succeeded in fully convincing the jury, against all previous conceptions, before Elizabeth Pomeroy came upon the scene at all, as to his client's innocence. On the one hand, his own address and the testimony he had so ingeniously gathered together in support of his theory, must have produced their due effect, even had Elizabeth Pomeroy's dramatic appearance never taken place; and on the other hand, that witness's evidence, when she actually arrived, showed with what surprising acuteness and forensic skill he had built up, unaided, his psychological reconstruction of the dead Duke's sentiments, motives, and actions. The whole Bar admitted it to be a remarkable success; and Douglas Harrison's name filled a large place in everybody's mouth for weeks to come as the rising barrister.

Briefs poured in upon him without delay, of course. All the circumstances of the great trial had naturally given his advocacy unusual prominence. Merely to have defended a Duchess on a capital charge was in itself alone already much—enough, perhaps, to secure any man a high legal reputation; to have successfully defended her in a difficult case which had been practically given up for lost by the ablest men in the legal profession was, of course, a triumph of the very first order. Douglas took his triumph modestly, however, as he took whatever else fell to his lot; and having a decided talent for his profession, now that the door was at last opened to him, he found money flow in upon him with that astonishing rapidity only known in the case of a new barrister who has suddenly made a great reputation by his conduct of a single important trial.

Time passed, and Linda remained abroad for six months, at first in Switzerland, but afterwards, with a gradual return to society, in Venice, Florence, and along the Riviera. She didn't feel bound to express or to feign a regret; she didn't now really in any way feel for the loss of her husband. The man had shown her too clearly the whole selfish wickedness of

his inner nature in that last vile act of his ill-spent life to leave even the shadow of such a feeling possible to her. And Linda, happily, was not the sort of person to be crushed to the ground, even by so terrible and unexpected a shock as that which the final disclosure cost her. On the contrary, she determined bravely to return to her usual mode of life as early as was seemly; and she had no hesitation, therefore, at the end of six months, in presenting herself once more in a very quiet way before the busy, eventful world of London.

The day before she was to return to town, Basil Maclaine sat in his easy-chair by the fire at Clandon Street, cigarette in hand, and pince-nez in place, discussing the fortunes of the future with Douglas Harrison; for through all changes of chance, they two still remained fellow-lodgers as of yore, in their familiar chambers.

'I shan't put it off, you know, Harrison,' the frequenter of the Best Society was complacently observing. 'I shan't put it off one day longer. I don't see why one should, indeed, under these peculiar circumstances. I haven't written to Linda all the time she's been away'—Basil always spoke of her grace as plain Linda now, even to casual acquaintances: it was part of the discount system—'except, of course, in the most purely formal and friendly manner, to congratulate her upon her triumphant emergence from all the charges preferred against her, and to tell her how pleased and gratified I've felt from time to time to hear her health was gradually getting restored to the normal. But there's a limit in all things—a limit in all things. I don't think delicacy demands I should wait any longer. If affairs had turned out differently, to be sure—if Powysland had died in the ordinary course of events, for example, and Linda had been left a sorrowing widow: deep weeds, the dear departed, and all that sort of thing—the classical business—why, I wouldn't have thought of approaching her on the subject, of course, before the usual period of a decent twelvemonth. But in this case, you see, things are so entirely exceptional. Powysland put himself altogether out of court, so to speak, by his outrageous behaviour. Linda isn't bound to go on mourning indefinitely in crimped crape for a man whose very last act on earth was a vile and villainous attempt to take away her life and blast her character. As her earliest friend, and now her natural protector'—Basil roped his moustache complacently—'I feel the sooner this matter is definitely arranged, the better for both of us. Besides, you see, our names have so often been coupled already; Society has discussed the thing so long and so intimately; there've been hints in *Truth*; there've been paragraphs in the papers—that I think we can't do better than settle it off-hand, as it must be settled in the end, to prevent more talking.'

And Basil drew himself up very straight as he spoke, and looked as though he felt himself already almost a left-handed morganatic husband-in-law of the British aristocracy.

As a matter of fact, indeed, he had more than once written down on a piece of paper, just to see how it looked: '*Fashionable Intelligence*.—The Duchess of Powysland and Mr. Basil Maclaine have arrived for the season at No. 510, Upper Grosvenor Street.' He even sometimes calculated the chances whether, by putting the screw upon the Government, through Hubert Harrison, M.P., he mightn't make it at last 'Sir Basil Maclaine, K.C.M.G., and the Duchess of Powysland.' Linda's money and title ought surely to secure a man of official experience and prepossessing exterior a paltry colonial governorship, with its usual reward of ultimate knighthood!

But Douglas, looking up from a pile of papers in 'The Queen *versus* Longwood, Jones intervening,' answered with a smile:

'Don't you think you ought to make sure of the Duchess's feelings first by gradual stages—approach the matter obliquely, as it were, and see whether her affections remain unchanged towards you still? Time and circumstances may have wrought some alteration in her heart, possibly.'

But Basil only puffed out a white stream of smoke from his pursed-up lips, and replied with confidence:

'Oh dear no! I can answer for Linda in that, as I can answer for myself. 'Pon my soul, my dear fellow, I wonder you don't know Linda better! *She's* not the sort of woman who goes chopping and changing her mind, bless you! I could see how much moved she was when she met me at the Simpsons'; and ever since—though, of course, not a word of the sort has passed between us—I've noticed always how her eyes sparkled and her colour warmed up whenever I came near her. The hesitation was always upon my side. I know better now; I acknowledge my error; and I mean to accept the affection she offered me. Why, if it were only for the sake of avoiding scandal, my dear boy, you must surely see yourself she'd be bound to take me.'

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## CHAPTER LII.

### THE DUCHESS ACCEPTS.

So, two days later, Basil Maclaine, in his best frock-coat and shiny silk hat, with bland smile on his face and moss-rose bud in his button-hole, sallied forth alone, on matrimonial thoughts intent, along the crowded Strand, to the door of the Métropole. Young love's first dream was now to enact its due fulfilment. Basil Maclaine strode exalted through the streets, with the double exaltation of a man who means to call upon the long-lost sweetheart of his callow youth, and a man who means to ally himself in marriage with the Very Best People in this realm of England.

The Métropole is well-known as a convenient and central hotel for families and gentlemen; and Linda had engaged rooms there before choosing a new home for herself in town, because she couldn't bear now to take up her abode at that hateful and gloomy old Powysland House, which she had refurnished and redecorated throughout for her unworthy husband, but had been prevented by circumstances from ever inhabiting. It was hers by Bertie's will, unaltered in his eager haste to die—but she could accept nothing now that was ever the Montgomeries'. So she made it over, without one qualm, to his mother, to get the hateful thing off her hands once for all, and took rooms for herself meanwhile in a comfortable hotel, while she looked about her in London for her future resting-place.

She was alone in her sitting-room, and disconsolate enough, on this the first morning of her return to England, when on a sudden the door opened brusquely and a servant announced:

'Mr. Basil Maclaine—to see her grace the Duchess!'

Linda rose with a faint blush and advanced with outstretched hand to greet him frankly. Basil stepped forward with an easy, jaunty confidence.

'What, Linda!' he cried, in his most familiar voice, seizing her hand in his like an old friend of the family, 'this is just like old times—to see you back again once more in dear old England!'

Linda was quite taken aback at the sudden warmth of this friendly greeting from the man who once thought her so far beneath his notice; but she was always forgiving by nature, so she answered only in a dignified tone:

'Thank you very much, Mr. Maclaine. I'm glad to be home again. Italy's lovely, of course, and it has taught me so much; but, still, I feel every day my heart's in England.'

'No, really! you don't mean to say so!' Basil cried, delighted, interpreting her innocent patriotic remark as intended to convey to him a personal assurance. 'That's very kind of you, Linda,' he went on, dropping into a seat on the sofa and leaning across towards her: 'it was Linda in the old days, you remember, wasn't it?' he added with warmth, for he saw the Duchess looked down at him with a faint air of surprise; 'so why shouldn't it be Linda now—and always?'

'Because,' the Duchess faltered, settling down in an arm chair a little way off, at a safe distance, 'so much has happened since, to make so great a difference.'

She spoke seriously—coldly; she meant him to understand such easy familiarity by no means pleased her. But Basil, too blind to see, and too self-confident to hesitate, went on with his brisk courtship, unabashed by her chilly response. He had only to come, see, and conquer, he knew: so why delay matters?

'Not to you and me, Linda,' he answered in his tenderest voice, looking across at her with a killing glance from those really fine eyes of his. 'Not, I'm quite sure, to you and me ... Linda. I know you're not one of those to whom mere wealth and title can make any difference in inner feeling. Where once you love—I feel confident, I feel certain—you love for ever.'

'Mr. Maclaine——' Linda began, trying to explain to him at once, and deeply embarrassed. But Basil would not hear her. He rose from the sofa, in a very melting mood, and drew a chair nearer to her side, as if by unconscious attraction. Linda tried to draw away, but he followed her up pertinaciously. This was mere coyness, he felt sure—her middle-class idea of what was rightly due to her womanly dignity. She thought she must be won—not give way too easily.

'Linda,' he murmured, coming closer, and speaking very low, 'I must explain at once. I must be clear with you

immediately. Not one day must you stay in London, under these peculiar circumstances, before our position is settled and announced to the world on our joint authority. I owe it as a duty to you; I owe it as a duty to myself as well. Questions will be asked, and gossip will get about. We've had more than enough of that already. We've suffered more than our due share from the curiosity of society. We must anticipate it now by a frank and immediate public statement.'

Then he went on to explain to her, in a very rapid flow of language that quite took Linda's breath away, how he had always loved her, and would always love her, though he had sometimes pretended for both their sakes to keep his love in abeyance. 'And you loved me too, devotedly, in those days, Linda.'

'Yes, Mr. Maclaine,' Linda said, looking up, and trying to get in a word edgewise, 'in those days I certainly loved you devotedly. But then——'

He cut her short at once, with a man's gesture of impatience. 'You loved me devotedly,' he repeated. 'I know it. I know it. I loved you, too. But Linda, foolish ideas, which I'm ashamed at my present age ever to have entertained, made me fight against my own heart, though I loved you even then, and tried to hide it from myself—as I fear, unsuccessfully. *You* found out my love, however, in spite of all my pains. Then doubts and difficulties arose.' He went on with glib words to gloss over his behaviour to Cecil when he called on him in the drawing-rooms before leaving England, for of the scene in the back bedroom he was still, of course, entirely ignorant. In his facile fashion he explained away everything. He made all clear as mud; he showed her how, in fact, he had never been false to her. For her own sake, as well as his, he hadn't wished to tie her down to a starvation income. How could a man at the Board of Trade have married on the screw he then possessed?—though, to be sure, he was much better off now, since his poor dear governor's death and his last rise in the office; but as things then stood it would have been simply suicidal. He couldn't bear to think he was spoiling Linda's future and wasting Linda's life for her, so he tried to break it off—perhaps too clumsily. It had cost him some pangs, he didn't deny; but as soon as he saw she was really losing her heart to him hopelessly, duty impelled him to break it off at once, at whatever cost of personal unhappiness. He had worded things to Cecil, perhaps, rather more strongly and brusquely than he really wished, but why was that? Only because he was so impressed by the necessity for letting Cecil feel how inevitable he considered it that they should both be free for a time—and both outlive it. He had never for a moment imagined in his wildest mood she would so take him at his word, and fly off to America.

Linda listened to this strange statement at first in blank bewilderment. She hardly remembered the episode of Cecil's visit to the drawing-rooms at Clandon Street at all: to her, of course, the real shock had come some hours earlier. But when Basil, finished at last, paused for breath and an answer, she rose and looked at him with proud disdain.

'I hardly know what you mean by all that, Mr. Maclaine,' she said haughtily, in spite of trembling. 'You refer to some interview I had almost forgotten. But if you think it was the result of that interview that drove me to New York, I can only say you're very much mistaken.... You have told glib falsehoods.... Now hear the plain truth.... *I* was in the back bedroom that morning, and the folding doors stood ajar, half open. *You* didn't know it, and *I* didn't wish to listen. But none the less I heard you say these words to Douglas Harrison—I'm Duchess of Powysland now, but the shame and unworthiness of them so burned into my very blood and love that I can never forget them: "She's a very nice young woman to flutter about and flirt with," you said, "when one has nothing better on hand to do. But, marry her! nonsense! She can't be quite such a fool as all that comes to. She can never have imagined for half a moment a man in *my* position meant anything serious when he amused himself a bit by playing and toying with her!" Those were the words I heard you say that day, Mr. Basil Maclaine, behind the folding doors of your room in Clandon Street; and those were the words, the shameful, hateful words, that drove me away at once across the sea from England.'

Basil Maclaine drew back, nonplussed at this sudden turn of affairs. To think she should have overheard that unlucky conversation, which he himself had altogether forgotten till that precise moment, but which, nevertheless, came back to him now with such unexpected and crushing force to checkmate him! Yet, even so, he could hardly believe himself checkmated. Delusions die hard. Basil Maclaine had counted so long and so confidently upon the shadow of the Duchess's title and the substance of the Duchess's dollars, not to speak of that handsome and eminently desirable person the Duchess herself (thrown in gratis), that he couldn't believe now, at one angry flash of those proud, dark eyes, his dream had vanished.

'You don't mean to tell me, Linda,' he cried passionately, almost flinging himself upon her, 'that for a single hasty and ill-considered sentence, spoken in pure chaff, as between man and man, to another fellow when you weren't supposed to be by, you'll throw me over for ever, who have loved you so long and thought of you so constantly! Have you no tender recollection of those dear old days? Don't you ever wish yourself back in Clandon Street? Do you really mean it? Do

you really mean to fling away your life for one man's fault and another man's folly? Will you never forget? Will you never marry?'

Linda turned to him calmly, and seized his last question with a certain proud unreserve.

'Yes, Mr. Maclaine,' she said; 'I *will* marry. I remember those old days at Clandon Street with unalloyed delight. I remember, too, the man who loved me there so truly and devotedly. And, what is more, I mean to marry him. In spite of everything, I mean still to marry him.' Basil drew a step nearer, enraptured, but she waved him off imperiously with her warning left hand held open upward. 'I care nothing for the title I took from a husband who never loved me at all,' she continued. 'I've learnt to value a true man at his true worth, unblinded by a false love or a brilliant position. And so I've come back to England at last—to marry Douglas Harrison.'

'Douglas Harrison!' the frequenter of Good Society cried, drawing back in surprise, and gazing at her all unnerved. 'Douglas Harrison! How mean, how unworthy, how unkind of him! Why, he knew I was coming here to ask you to-day—to offer you my love—and he never told me!'

'Because he never knew,' Linda answered quietly. 'But, if you care to be my messenger, you can go back and tell him now that Linda Amberley, whom he has loved so long and served so faithfully, loves him as truly as he deserves, and has come home at last on purpose to marry him.'

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'I never felt so astonished in all my life, Linda,' that eminent counsel often says to his wife, 'as when poor Maclaine, like a whipped spaniel, with his tail between his legs, came honestly back and gave me your message. It was most manly and generous of him. But really and truly, you dear good girl! I do seriously think you were too awfully cruel to make Maclaine the bearer of his own defeat to me.'

## THE END.

Transcriber's Note: Hyphen variations within and between volumes left as printed.

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