CHICAGO POST-OFFICE AS SECOND-CLASS MATTER.

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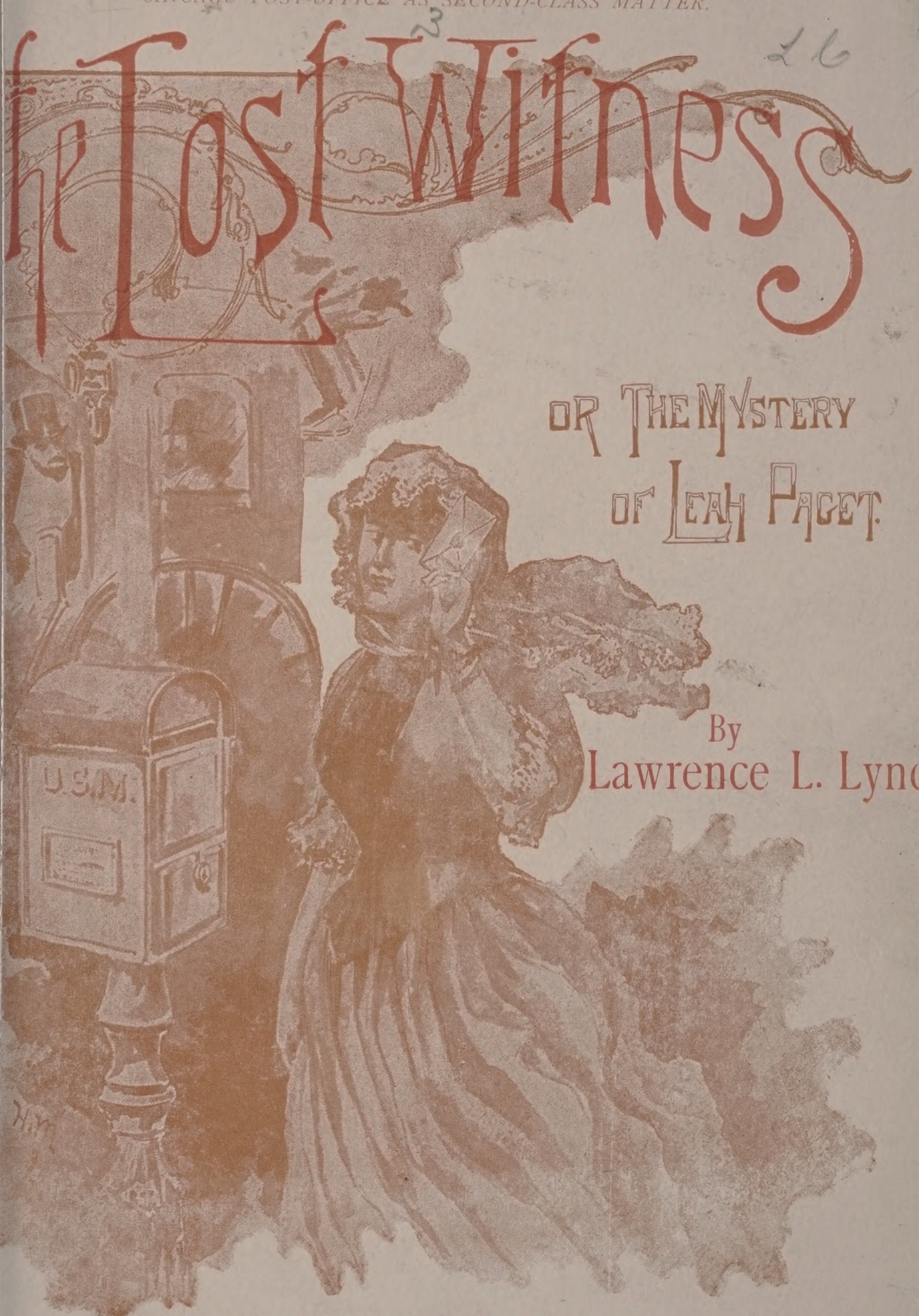
The Lost Witness

OR THE MYSTERY OF LEAH PAGET.



By Lawrence L. Lyn

CHICAGO
LAIRD & LEE, PUBLISHERS
1890

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"GOOD HEAVENS!" HE CRIED, RECOILING, "WHAT A SCENE!"
Page 243.

THE LIBRARY OF CHOICE FICTION

THE LOST WITNESS

OR

THE MYSTERY OF LEAH PAGET

BY

LAWRENCE L. LYNCH
(OF THE SECRET SERVICE)
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"MADAM, WOULD YOU COMMIT ANOTHER MURDER? *Hortense Novalis is not yet avenged!* Page 528.

A LOST WITNESS

CHAPTER I.

A REPORTER'S "GOOD WORK".

It was high noon, and past: the big, harrassed-faced Local Editor of that most reliable evening paper, which, for half a dozen reasons, each one better than the last, we will name the "Evening Call", sat in his sanctum, glancing at his watch, and evidently more at odds with the world than usual. And small wonder, for the "devil" stood at his elbow crying for "more copy"; and more copy, of the right sort, that would add spice to the evening's issue and send it forth with the *eclat* which was its due, was sadly wanting.

At this tragic moment, when one of the Editor's hands was clutched in his hair, and the boy at his elbow seemed in imminent danger from the other, a door opened, and a small, pale-faced, sandy-haired young man entered and walked up to the Editor's desk, upon which he deposited several slips of paper, by passing them over the boy's head.

"God bless you, Cousin!" ejaculated the Editor, fervently, and pounced at once upon the first slip of paper.

This is what he read:

A MYSTERY IN UPPER TENDOM !

DISAPPEARANCE OF AN HEIRESS !

It is with sincere regret that we record the strange disappearance of one of the first of our society belles, Miss Leah Paget, the heiress and only daughter of Abner Paget, our highly esteemed citizen and wealthy importer.

Miss Paget was last seen yesterday at early dusk, when she crossed the threshold of her splendid home, with two or three letters in her hand. It had been her habit to go often at this hour to the nearest letter-box, to post such letters as she wished to go by the early mails.

Mr. and Mrs. Paget were dining out and did not return until late ; hence, the absence of their daughter was not learned until this morning. The discovery brought with it instant alarm, for it was evident that her bed had not been occupied. Miss Paget had never been known to leave her father's house, even for a brief time, without informing some member of the household of her intentions. Mr. Paget, in the midst of his grief and consternation, displayed marked presence of mind by dispatching messengers at once to all of their friends and intimates, upon the possibility that the young lady had taken a sudden fancy to visit some one of them, and had been for some unknown reason detained over night. Not until he had thoroughly convinced himself that Miss Paget was not to be found among their friends, did he call for help.

Now, the authorities are straining every nerve, Chief of Police Connors himself having taken the matter in hand. There is no hint of her whereabouts—no clue to follow. Mrs. Paget is nearly crazed with grief ; she believes that some fearful calamity has befallen her daughter, and will not be comforted. It is to be hoped that a simple solution for this problem will be found, for the sake of the grief-stricken parents, who adored her, of the society of which she was a bright ornament, and for her own sake—young, rich, beautiful, and beloved.

The Editor laid down the slip and faced the reporter.

" Cousin," he said, gravely, " this is delicate ground. Are you sure—" He stopped, and looked at the small demon in waiting.

" O, it is all right," replied the young man. " I've been there

with Chief Connors. I might have made the thing more sensational, but it didn't seem best to me. We are the only paper that has, as yet, an inkling of it. And I shouldn't wonder if there were plenty more 'material' in the case before the end is reached."

"Highly esteemed citizen—wealthy importer," he commented, "sounds as if he is the only importer. I'll fix that."

He slapped the paper upon the desk, made an erasure, and hastily introduced a word or two, while the writer of the *on dit* looked serenely on. Then he gave it to the waiting boy.

"Take it, Napoleon; away with you." And then as the lad vanished—"What's next?" he said, and took up the second slip.

LA BELLE FABRICE.

We have it from excellent authority, that Fabrice, the charming and long-looked-for Comedienne from over the water, is actually among us; that she came quietly and *incognito*, accompanied only by her maid and Madame Congreve, who is a devoted friend and member of the Fabrice Company. The remaining members of the Company are hourly expected, but the date of the first appearance of La Belle Fabrice before an American audience is not yet fixed. The dashing little Comedienne is in positive retirement for the present, and absolutely unapproachable.

Apropos, rumor says, that the little lady left behind her a throng of admirers, and that one, a titled "scion of nobility", arrived in the steamer which brought the fair actress.

The Editor turned from the perusal of this second slip, with a smile upon his face.

"Well, Cousin, you *have* improved the shining hour. I suppose this is a 'reliable' morsel of gossip?"

"Perfectly so," said the imperturbable young man. "I met Manager Horton in Madison Square, before he had had his breakfast."

"Quite by accident, of course?"

"O, quite. Only I waited something like half-an-hour to bring the accident about. I had a hint that the lady was in New York, and made up my mind to have it out of him."

"Precisely—I see. And this 'scion of nobility'—is he a fact or fiction?"

"That was Horton's suggestion; but I think the 'scion' is genuine. Horton thought it was a good point to make, but he seemed a little doubtful of its effect upon the lady. He didn't seem much concerned about the young man. His name, Horton says, is Sir Felix Wynton. To be on the safe side, I omitted it.

"Quite right." The Editor took up the remaining slips. "What have we here? More nuggets?"

"Padding, all but one. Just run them over; I want your judgment on that."

The Editor began looking over the slips and reading aloud the heading of each.

"'Bellevue Hospital again'?"

"No, not that."

"'More about the 10th Street murder'?"

"No, no!"

"'A possible sensation in high life'?"

"Yes, that's it."

The Editor turned in his chair until he faced the reporter, and began to read, slowly and aloud:

A POSSIBLE SENSATION IN HIGH LIFE.

If the rumor just set afloat, and spoken of, when it is known at all, with bathed breath, and in secret places, should prove true, it will deal a blow to society that will be felt to its very center. It concerns a lady of high social standing, and would, if but half were proven true, con-

vince our social leaders, in more ways than one, "That things are seldom what they seem."

This is a case in which tongues should be bridled, the evil report nipped in the bud, or the broad, unvarnished truth be boldly declared. If the rumor has no foundation, society should rise to the defense of a maligned lady. If report speaks the truth, which Heaven forbid, society should be protected from future pollution. This is a case in which there should be no middle course. Let the tongues that have set this baneful ball rolling, speak out. "Say all, or be forever silent."

From this fragment of literature, the Editor turned with a puzzled countenance.

"Of all the ambiguous, mysterious productions—" he began, but the little reporter interrupted him.

"Of course it's ambiguous," he declared. "You needn't print it if you don't like. It *may* end in nothing, and people will call it a canard. In that case, we will have to invent an ingenuous explanation. But it may end otherwise—and the '*Call*' prides itself on being first in the field with marriages, murders, and mysteries—don't it?"

"Certainly. But this 'rumor'—what is it?"

Cousin perched himself upon a corner of the Editor's wide desk.

"It isn't a rumor yet," he said, quietly. "The truth is, I picked it up accidentally, as you might say, several days ago. I've been watching it, and turning it over in my mind, ever since, and it's my opinion that it will become a rumor very shortly—a genuine sensation, that will make 'sassiety' howl. I can't explain further—you can use it or not, as you like."

The Editor took up the paper and laid it down again.

"Is this sensation connected in any way with the disappearance of Miss Paget?" he asked.

"By no means."

"Did it occur to you that readers might construe it as meaning that young lady?"

"No, it didn't. And if they do—"

"It will give us a chance to set them right through the medium of another sensational paragraph, eh? Well, it's your affair, Cousin; I'll send in the copy."

As he put out his hand to touch the bell, a door leading to an outer office opened, and a boy came in with a card, which he placed upon the desk before the Editor, who glanced at the name, hesitated, and then proffered it to Cousin.

The reporter took it, looked at it hastily, slipped from his perch, and said, with a significant glance at the waiting boy:

"Do you know who he is?"

"Why, yes, as a society man, a club man. I think we even have a bowing acquaintance."

"Bah! I mean, do you know that he is the reputed *fiancée* of Miss Paget?"

"Eh! Are you sure?"

Cousin tossed the card down upon the desk, and said:

"He was entering the house as Connors and I left it. He has come to suppress us. You will see him?"

"Yes, of course."

"Well, I don't wish to. He knows me, and has followed me here."

"George," said the Editor, turning briskly toward the boy, "go out through the hall and wait there two minutes, then show the gentleman in. You understand?"

The office boy nodded, and went out as bidden.

"I think I'll go the same way," said the reporter.

"No, step in there," pointing to a door on the opposite side of the room, "and wait until he's gone."

The reporter vanished through the door indicated, and in another moment the visitor was ushered in.

The Editor, with the card between his fingers, turned in his revolving chair, and as the young man paused before him, he arose.

"Mr. Talfourd?" he said, with an inquiring accent.

"Max Talfourd—yes. I think we have met before."

"I think so too," said the Editor, genially. "Be seated, Mr. Talfourd."

But Mr. Talfourd, a tall, broad-shouldered type of the good-looking, cultured, and fortunate young American, preferred to name his errand standing.

There was a touch of pallor in his fine face, and a look of anxiety in his clear blue eyes.

"I will not sit," he responded, quietly. "I believe you have upon your staff a reporter named Cousin?"

"Yes," responded the Editor, "we have."

"I met him coming from Mr. Paget's house this morning, as I was entering. May I ask if he has been here since noon?"

"Yes, sir, he has. Cousin left me not long ago."

"Then I presume—I fear—that he has supplied you with a statement concerning—Miss Paget?"

"Concerning the disappearance of Miss Paget—yes."

The brow of the young man clouded.

"Do you intend to publish that statement, or any other statement of the case?"

"Why, yes, Mr. Talfourd, we shall print—*have* printed, I may say—a simple mention; no details—nothing that could offend."

Young Talfourd interrupted him with an impatient gesture.

"Can that, in any way—at any cost—be stopped?"

"Eh?"

"Can it be suppressed?—kept out of your paper by any arrangement you choose—"

"My dear sir," remonstrated the Editor, rising, and putting the finger tips of his right hand against those of his left, "be reasonable. Suppose it were not too late—that it could be kept out of the '*Call*', tomorrow it would be in every one of the other papers, and garbled maliciously. In Mr. Cousin's paragraph there is nothing but the simple statement— the bare truth. Merely, that Miss Paget is missing, not to be found among her friends, and that efforts are being made to explain the mystery, to find the young lady. Now, is there anything objectionable in that?"

The Editor's tone was one of mild remonstrance, but Max Talfourd only bit the end of his long mustache, and glared moodily at the opposite wall.

"Miss Paget *is* missing, is she not?" queried the Editor, his voice becoming that of a much-injured individual.

"Unfortunately, yes."

"Has anything happened since Cousin left the house that throws new light upon the subject?"

"Nothing."

"Then, my dear sir—"

Talfourd made an impatient movement.

"I have reason," he began, "—that is, I think it quite possible, that Miss Paget may return within the present twenty-four hours. And her explanation, while it will be perfectly satisfactory to her friends, will not interest nor concern the public. If you publish her absence, you must, of course, follow it up with her explanation—don't you think that it may be taking unwarrantable liberty with a lady's private affairs?"

The young man spoke slowly, but as he ceased, and rested his gaze upon the Editor, that personage saw clearly that his calm cost an effort.

"My dear sir," rejoined the Editor, in a tone that was at once caressing and full of regret, "evidently, you do know something about this business—something that justifies your wish to have this matter dropped; and if—"

His visitor's hand went up in an imperative gesture, while his cheek flamed and his eye flashed.

"Stop!" he said, and then paused; it was evident that he was agitated, and that he was weighing his next words. "Understand me," he said, after a moment's silence, "I know nothing concerning this mystery. But I know Miss Paget, and feel sure that she has done naught of which her friends would disapprove, and I am not willing to entertain the notion which unfortunately possesses her mother, that some harm has befallen her." He stopped suddenly, and there was another moment of silence—then: "Is it an utter impossibility to withdraw that item?" he asked.

"If it were possible to oblige you, Mr. Talfourd, it should be withdrawn. If you had called half an hour earlier it might have been done. I will furnish you, in a few moments, with a proof of the paragraph, and you can see how very little it really says."

Talfourd shook his head, and made a movement toward the door.

"Or," pursued the Editor, "if there be any additional word in the way of a correction, or suggestion—"

"Thank you," said Talfourd, with the air of one repeating a meaningless formula, "there is no more to be said. I will not trespass longer upon your time."

He walked to the door, and the Editor moved a pace after him, wearing a look of regretful sympathy.

At the door, Talfourd turned suddenly, and said, with a suspicion of sarcasm in his voice:

"It is not too late, perhaps, to ask that you make no mention of this call—this fool's errand—of mine?"

"Certainly not; by no means," said the Editor.

Talfourd released his hold of the door-knob and took a step back toward the Editor. There was a new ring of resolve in the tone in which he said:

"You had better understand me perfectly. Mr. Paget did not know that I intended to come here when I left his house. I saw that fellow, Cousin, coming away from there, and guessed that he would not miss his opportunity. I came to you solely upon my own responsibility, but with ample justification. Miss Paget was—is—my intended wife." He now looked keenly at the Editor, all signs of embarrassment having disappeared.

"I comprehend, sir," said the Editor, gravely. "I shall respect your confidence."

Talfourd bowed, and went out; in a moment Cousin appeared at the opposite door.

"Well?" said the Editor, seeing that the other was not inclined to speak. "I suppose you heard our conversation? What do you think now?"

Cousin consulted his watch.

"I have something to do at this hour," he said. And then, as if the question was of small importance—"I think this is going to prove an interesting case."

"Oh," said the Editor, with the nearest approach to sarcasm, "shall I make a note of your opinion?"

Cousin put away his watch, and said, ignoring both question and sarcasm,

"I'm glad you didn't let Talfourd talk you over."

The Editor began to toy with a paper weight.

"I shouldn't wonder if the whole thing turned out a canard," he said, looking furtively at Cousin.

"I shouldn't wonder if it turned out a tragedy," said Cousin, serenely. "Have you any instructions? if not, I'm off."

"No," said the Editor, taking up his pen. But when Cousin was at the door, he asked, over his shoulder: "Are you going out in the capacity of reporter, or as a detective?"

"Both," replied Cousin, and went his way

CHAPTER II.

AT THE CENTRAL OFFICE.

That we may clearly comprehend the meaning of much that is to come, let us turn backward, and begin with the day that is so eventful for Percy A. Cousin, so fraught with sorrow for others.

At ten o'clock A.M., Percy A. Cousin, familiarly known among his intimates as "Polly" Cousin, is lounging in Madison Square, which, at that hour, is comparatively deserted. It is spring, and the place is clothed in its greenest and most beautiful garments, and flooded with brilliant sunshine. But Percy

Cousin seems not at all impressed by the beauties about him. He stands listlessly in a well-selected place of observation, and seems intent upon nothing whatever.

Cousin is slender, and below the average height; his small stature is made to seem still less, because of his stooping shoulders and a fixed habit of carrying his head with a sidewise droop. He has a pale face, and a few freckles—the last of a bountiful boyhood crop—which give emphasis to his pallor. His hair, like his face, is pale and thin, and always cropped close to his head. His nose is long and sharply pointed. His mouth is large, and when closed, has the appearance of a straight thin line. As redeeming feature in a not over-prepossessing face, the upper lip is shadowed by a drooping mustache, also pale of color, but luxuriant in growth, and the whole is lighted by a pair of large gray eyes, that can invite and inspire confidence, look keen, clever, cunning, or frank, as suits the mood or pleasure of their owner.

Five years ago, on a spring morning much like this on which he is introduced to the reader, Percy A. Cousin arrived in New York, fresh from a country home, endowed with as much learning as could be gained at the village High School, a plentiful stock of faith and hope, and with one or two very definite plans for future usefulness. He was then twenty-one years old, and his worldly wealth amounted to exactly fourteen dollars and twenty-five cents.

As a first step toward future glory, he visited the Metropolitan Detective Agency, and recommended himself, with more eloquence than humility, as a promising amateur detective. But the Agency was not in want of reinforcement. After walking past "Headquarters" four times, our hero then presented himself to the Chief of Police. But that august personage, with

the blindness often noticeable in men of developed genius, failed to recognize genius in the embryo. And so, as a last resort, Cousin began the rounds of the Newspaper offices. He encountered failure everywhere, until he entered the office of the "*Call*". Here, too, failure had almost marked him for a victim, but at the critical moment, misfortune, which so often goads people to despair, piqued him into uttering—under the sting of some editorial flippancy—his first impertinence. It chanced to be a piquant and original impertinence, and it drew from his auditors a roar of laughter.

There had been an accident in an adjoining street, and a reporter had been dispatched to be an "eye-witness" and write it up. By the way of furnishing the office with another good laugh, Cousin was now sent to evolve his version of the calamity. Then the laugh turned; the version of our amateur, with a few amendments—was printed, instead of the cut-and-dried report of the experienced hack. And Cousin was retained, at scant wages, by the "*Call*".

That was the beginning of his career, and, today he stood the acknowledged best "specialist" on the "*Call*" staff—the man who, more than any other, did as he pleased, wrote what he would, and was seldom questioned or criticised.

Madison Square at ten o'clock in the morning is not wakened into vivacity and it looked like an unpromising place for a reporter. But Cousin continued to lounge and look listless, and seemed very well satisfied with the aspect of the locality.

At fifteen minutes past ten, by his own infallible watch, he altered his position, and turned his face toward the Fifth Avenue hotel. Almost instantly he started forward, muttering under his breath: "There he is!"

The person who had just emerged from the hotel was a big man, with a smooth-shaven, genial face, his ample expanse of shoulders and chest being covered with a striking pattern of Scotch tweed, and further emphasized by a huge diamond, just below his chin, and a massive watch-guard.

As this personage paced slowly forward, Cousin advanced briskly, and when they met, the latter put out his hand.

"How d'ye do, Colonel?"

The big man stopped, and looked down at the little one.

"Do?—why, gad! it's you, eh? Cousin, my boy!" He grasped the proffered hand and shook it warmly. "It don't take you long to smell us out!"

"Not when your arrival is announced in the evening papers, Colonel."

The Colonel laughed lightly.

"Well, well, it's useless to fence with you. Whose scalp is it now, eh?"

"Yours."

"Oh, mine? Well, shall we walk on? I was just beginning my constitutional."

They paced on slowly, side by side. Cousin did not seem eager to begin the conversation, and there was a sly smile hidden behind his yellow mustache. It was not his first interview with Colonel Horton, who styled himself, and liked to be styled, *Impressario*; and who was, in truth, a most successful manager of sundry operatic and dramatic "stars" and "constellations."

The two men understood each other, and had laid aside all the plausibilities which were employed upon occasion by the reporter, and all the glittering effects that were dear to the heart, and so much stock in trade, of the manager.

"I hear that La Belle Fabrice has arrived," began Cousin, when they had walked a few paces.

"Yes. You have found her out, then?" It was evident that Colonel Horton was not ill-pleased.

"Yes; and I want to see her."

"If you *do* see her you'll be a clever fellow."

"Why?"

"She vows she won't be interviewed. And she really means it. If you can see her, can get her to talk—"

"Where is she?" broke in Cousin.

The Colonel eyed him askance.

"Look here, Cousin," he said, "if you can manage any kind of an interview and then make something spicy out of it, it will be a good thing, and I'll see you through. But Fabrice is a Tartar, I'll admit that."

"I see."

"Confound you! no, you don't. I don't mean that she's vixenish, like—well, like a good many that we know. She isn't indisposed three days out of a week. She is the healthiest little sinner I ever saw, and prides herself on it. She don't affect the airs of a grand dame; she hates all that sort of thing. She isn't cranky. She is the best-natured girl in the world. But she likes her ease, and her liberty, and she will have them. She has vowed that she won't be bothered by reporters, and I must say that she's more likely to have her own way than any woman that I know."

"Let's talk over the prospects," said Cousin. And having secured for themselves comfortable lounging-places, they lighted cigars and discussed their plans.

To get for himself and his Star, a newspaper announcement as racy as reportorial pen could produce, was the wish of Manager Horton, and he knew that Cousin was his man.

To give the "*Call*" the first word concerning the latest theatrical sensation and leave little to be said by rival journals, was the wish of Cousin. So he questioned craftily, listened closely, made numerous brief notes, and finally arose from his interview, feeling sure he had squeezed his orange dry.

"And you are really going to try for an interview with Fabrice?" said the Colonel, when Cousin had written down the address, and turned toward him in an attitude of leave-taking.

"I'm going to *have* an interview with her," corrected Cousin, with one of his quiet smiles.

"Oh!" and the Colonel beamed upon him admiringly.

"By the way, have you a good picture of her?"

"Picture of Fabrice? Why, bless you, boy, the shops are full of them."

"Yes, I know; character pictures and that sort—bare arms, flowing wig, etc. I've half a dozen in my pocket now. What I mean is a simple vignette, or in walking costume."

"Oh, every-day business? Yes, I've got one."

The Colonel took out a huge pocket-album and drew from it, after a moment's search, a picture, which he put into the reporter's hand.

"There you are."

Cousin looked at it critically. It showed him a piquant, pretty face, with rings of soft hair falling low over the forehead. The face was in profile, and all that was visible below was a simple band or collar, and the hint of a graceful shoulder.

"I'll borrow this, if you've no objections," said Cousin, pocketing the picture as he spoke.

"Keep it," said the Colonel, airily, "keep it; I'm always supplied."

When they had separated, Cousin crossed over to Broadway,

passed in front of the palatial New York Club House, and considered his next move.

"The Doane," he was saying to himself; "that's an apartment house near the Parker, and Daly's."

Then he seemed to have caught at the right idea. He turned briskly, and hailed a passing cab.

"To the Central Office of the Police," he said, as he seated himself within.

Captain Connors and Cousin had been friends for four years, which is to say, they had been friends three years before Captain Connors became Chief of Police.

They had first become acquainted as antagonists, at least in opinion, when the then Captain Connors came hastily one morning to inspect the scene of a murder in low life—a common tenement-house killing affair.

Notwithstanding his haste, he found a small, and, as he thought, insignificant, young reporter already on the premises, and in possession of many of the facts.

After much questioning, Captain Connors expressed his theory in the hearing of all present. A moment later, a hand touched his arm, and he turned to see the "insignificant" at his side.

"Captain," this personage whispered, "if you will give me a word in private, I can save you from a blunder."

A blunder! There was something in the fellow's eyes, after a moment's scanning, that impressed the Captain, and he moved aside with the young man and heard him in non-committal silence. As a result, he *was* saved from committing a blunder,—one that would have covered him with confusion, perhaps disgrace. Since that day a warm friendship had grown up between the Captain and the young reporter. And Cousin, who

had a remarkable faculty of reasoning from effect to cause, was often called upon for his opinion in difficult and important cases. Many times his advice had been found of great value, and once or twice even served to secure criminals who would have certainly escaped but for his suggestions. In return, Captain Connors never failed to inform Cousin of any choice items that came to his knowledge.

If Connors had been promoted to his present position two years earlier, before Cousin had achieved such success in his present vocation, there would have been one reporter less on the pay-roll of the "*Call*", and a valuable addition to the staff of city detectives. But when the opportunity came, as it did, Cousin shook his head.

"No," he said, "to be a detective was once my ambition. Journalism was second choice. But I've got my hand in now—got my apprentice work done, and I like it well enough, too. It wouldn't be good sense to give up the work I'm succeeding in, to try a new line, when so much depends upon chance.—It's mighty good of you, Connors, to offer me this, but I think I'll stay where I am. Of course, I'll be at your disposal, as I am now, when you want me, or can't do better. May be, I won't do worse detective work, upon occasion, for remaining journalist."

It was a long speech for Cousin to make, and Connors knew that his decision was final. He had been six weeks in office when he made this proposal to Cousin, and more than once since he had taken him at his word and called upon him for his opinion or his help. Their friendship had not lessened, and the Chief was often heard to say, that there was only one detective in New York who could do a stroke of business better than Polly Cousin.

When Cousin arrived at the Central Office and was about to

enter, he met a man coming out—a tall, spare man, well dressed, and carrying himself very erect. His bearing was that of natural hauteur, with which the look of anxiety upon his pale, elderly, aristocratic face was not in keeping.

"A Knickerbocker," muttered Cousin, as he hastened within; "one of the last of them."

"Hello, Cousin," called Chief Connors, as the reporter appeared in the doorway, "you're just in time. Come in, and shut the door."

Cousin obeyed, noting, as he did so, that Connors was standing at his desk, hastily gathering up some scattered papers, as if preparing to go out. The Chief continued his occupation, while he said:

"If I were a 'medium', I should say that I had brought you here by—what is it?"

"*Rapport?*" suggested Cousin.

"Well, call it that. By the way," turning toward him with the collected papers in his hands, "what are you about? anything urgent?"

"Not very."

"Anything to prevent you giving me, say, an hour of your time?"

"That depends upon circumstances. I came here to get one of your business cards."

"Eh! My card? What for?"

"Well, I want to write my name on the back of it."

Connors understood. He turned, and tossed the papers on the desk.

"Your own name this time?" he asked.

"Yes. I want to call upon a young woman who has vowed that she will not let a reporter into her presence—won't be interviewed."

Chief Connors laughed again, and locked his desk.

"You're a clever one," he said, admiringly. "I never heard of you in ladies' society. I'd like to know how you got such an insight into their peculiarities. How did you know that you can send a card to almost any woman in New York, and if it is sufficiently mysterious, be sure that she will see you? But you can postpone your call?"

"If necessary."

"I consider it necessary. Didn't you meet some one going away from here just now—tall, elderly, high-toned?"

"Yes."

"Know him?"

"Very familiar face, but—"

"Old Paget; Abner, the millionaire."

"Oh! surely. I thought I knew him by sight. But he looked so different."

Chief Connors glanced at his watch and took up his hat.

"He's badly cut up," he said; "his daughter is missing."

"Miss Leah Paget?"

"Yes. You may be sure there's something in it, when that proud old aristocrat calls for the help of the police. Jocelyn is away, and Browne, too. There is no one else I want to put on the case. I was just about to send you a message, asking you to meet me at Paget's house, to save time. This won't be one of the ordinary girl's capers,—elopement, etc. I want you to go over the ground with me."

One of his subordinates opened the door that led to the general office.

"Cab's here," he said, as he nodded to Cousin.

"You'll go?" asked the Chief.

"Yes," said Cousin, and the two went out together.

CHAPTER III.

THE LOST HEIRESS.

The splendid home of Abner Paget, far up Fifth Avenue, and in view of Central Park, was under a cloud that fair spring morning when Chief Connors and Polly Cousin rattled up the pavement, and hastened across the trim lawn. In the morning-room sat Mr. Paget and his wife. But each face was turned aside, and both pairs of eyes looked out upon the street —those of the father gloomy and stern; those of the mother wistful, eager, and dimmed with tears.

From the window they saw the arrival of the cab, and Mrs. Paget hastily brushed her handkerchief across her face.

"I think you had better not remain here, Miranda," he said, gently. "You shall be sent for if it seems best."

"Is it the Chief of Police?" she asked, anxiously.

"Yes."

"And the other?"

"I do not know; I did not expect any one else."

Mrs. Paget arose. She was a tall, fair woman, with a gentle manner and a low voice. She was agitated as she addressed her husband, but one could guess, even then, that she could be firm as well as gentle.

"I will go," she said, "while you are telling your story. It will be as well. But if the Chief of Police begins to interrogate, I wish to be present. If there are to be questions about my daughter, I must be here when they are answered."

"And to answer them," added Mr. Paget, as he arose and walked beside her to the door. "You shall come in at the right time. I only want to save you pain."

He opened the door and she went out silently. At the same moment Connors, standing at the main entrance, with his hand upon the bell, was saying to his companion:

"Now, remember, when I give the sign, you are to take up the business, and do the cross-questioning."

"All right," said Cousin—and they were in the presence of Mr. Paget.

Chief of Police Connors was a shrewd, practical man, one needing neither advice nor instruction when the routine of official work, the management of men, the detail of police methods and police duty was concerned—here he was thoroughly at home. He could talk, and talk straight to the point. But one of the things the Chief of Police knew—and so wise and shrewd was he that it was known to few others—was, that he was not a "born detective".

In stepping out of his office into this Fifth Avenue abode of luxury, to investigate the mysterious disappearance of a beautiful young society belle, he felt that he was going into an atmosphere where he was not at home. But no uneasiness, if he felt such, was manifest in his manner, and he began with his usual promptness.

"So little was said at my office, Mr. Paget, that I did not learn your full intentions. Do you mean to make a thorough search for your daughter?"

"Certainly," said Mr. Paget, with a touch of haughtiness.

"I acted upon that supposition, and brought a friend with me, thinking that I might need his professional aid." He

turned to Cousin, who stood modestly in the background. "Let me introduce Mr. Cousin, sir."

Mr. Cousin, his modesty being of no further use, cast it behind him, and came confidently forward, bowing gravely.

Mr. Paget returned the bow, but continued to address the Chief of Police.

"Is Mr. Cousin a detective, then?" He spoke the word "detective" as if he did not like the sound of it.

The Chief drew a step nearer and smiled reassuringly.

"I was not sure," he said, "that you would care to have one of the city detectives, for—for various reasons. Mr. Cousin has frequently given me his help in difficult cases; he is not a professional detective, but he is the very man you want, or that I want, here."

"If my services are unwelcome to Mr. Paget—" began Cousin, with unruffled composure; but Mr. Paget checked him with a quick gesture.

"You will both excuse me," he said, "considering my position. It shocks me to think of setting the police to hunt for my daughter."

"Quite naturally," said the Chief, briskly.

"And you have acted properly," went on Mr. Paget. "Be seated, gentlemen." He set the example by seating himself. "Now, tell me how we are to begin."

The Chief of Police sat down with very much the air of a physician about to begin an exhaustive examination of an interesting case.

"At what time did you discover that your daughter was missing?"

Mr. Paget shivered slightly, and his brow darkened. What ugly words were these being uttered in the sanctity of his splen-

did morning-room !—" detectives", " missing", "the police", —and all in connection with bright, dainty, lovely Leah Paget.

There was a moment of silence before he answered the question.

" It was as early as eight o'clock this morning."

" And when did you last see her?"

" I saw her last at luncheon. My wife looked in upon her just before we left the house, at about six o'clock."

" When you saw her—Miss Paget, I mean—was she as well as usual, and in her usual spirits?"

" I saw nothing to make me think otherwise."

At this point, the Chief and Cousin exchanged glances. Mr. Paget was answering the Chief's questions in the briefest manner, as if they were impertinences, which he disdained to honor with his resentment.

" Who was the last person with whom your daughter spoke before she left the house?"

" As nearly as I can ascertain, it was Mrs. Paget."

The Chief leaned back in his chair as if his interview with Mr. Paget was at an end. He was a man of simple speech, and unassuming manners. The haughtiness of his host piqued him ; and he could be high-handed, too, when he chose.

" I would like to see Mrs. Paget," he said, shortly.

Mr. Paget arose, looked at the Chief for a moment, seemed about to speak, then moved toward the door.

" I will ask her to see you."

When Mrs. Paget appeared, and the two men had been named to her, the Chief said :

" Mrs. Paget, Mr. Cousin is here to help me ; in fact, I shall depend upon him if we find difficulties. Will you talk with him, please?"

The lady bowed assent, and seated herself near Cousin, who, having risen upon her entrance, now resumed his chair.

Then the Chief, not glancing again at the host, sat down also; and Mr. Paget, after a momentary survey of the others, seated himself in the background.

"Mrs. Paget," said Cousin, in his quietest manner, "will you please tell us, in your own way, all that you can of this affair?"

As he spoke, he put his hand into the pocket of his coat and drew out a small note-book.

Mrs. Paget began her recital promptly. Her face showed evident traces of agitation, but her voice was quiet and her manner composed.

"This morning," she said, "I went to my daughter's door at eight o'clock. It is my habit to rise at half-past seven, and my daughter, also, is an early riser when she has not been out late. No one answered my knock, and I tried the door. It was not locked, and I went in. The room which I entered was used as dressing-room and boudoir; I crossed it and went into the sleeping-room. In one glance I saw that her bed had not been occupied. Everything remained as I had seen it the day before. Going back to her dressing-room, puzzled, but not yet roused to alarm, I saw that her writing-desk stood open, with letters scattered about, and her chair before it, just as I had seen them last evening, when I went in at six o'clock to speak to her before we set out. She then had been writing and had just risen from her desk as I entered."

Here Mrs. Paget paused, and cast an appealing look at her questioner.

"Can you recall what was said by your daughter and yourself?" asked Cousin, in a subdued tone.

"It was very little. A few common-places about our dinner-party on my side, a little light badinage on hers. We were going to dine with a very estimable family, whom we value for old acquaintance' sake. But my daughter seldom accepts their invitations, for—for reasons of delicacy."

"Allow me," broke in the voice of Mr. Paget. "Since you have gone so far, it would be but justice to Leah to add that she had declined the addresses of their son."

He spoke to his wife without a glance at the others.

"Ah!" said the Chief, "it is well to mention all these small details. It saves finding them out at considerable expense, sometimes, of time and labor."

While he was saying this, Cousin was quietly jotting a few words in his modest note-book. When the Chief had ceased speaking, he said :

"Please go on, Madam."

"I stood at her desk, as we talked," resumed Mrs. Paget, "and I glanced down at the letters. There were three, sealed, and ready for the post. I read the address upon the first ; it was to a young girl friend at Old Point Comfort. I said, 'What have you been telling Amy?' And my daughter replied, 'I have told her that I must decline her invitation for this month at least, because I wish to attend the Essex Hunt, and, I am promised for the Fête of Nations next week. I have also written to Gertie Carter, to assure her that I cannot assist the Amateurs with their new play.' After a word or two more, I left her, as she was putting on her hat before the mirror. She was going to take a short walk, she said, and post her letters."

"And you did not see her again?"

"No." The mother's lip trembled, and she turned away her face.

"Who saw her after that?" Cousin asked this after an interval in which he seemed to have been meditating.

"Only Harkins, the footman. She passed him in the hall; he opened the door and closed it after her. He says that she was smiling as she came down the stairs. She only said, 'Thank you, Harkins', as she went out."

"And you are convinced that she is not with any of her friends?"

"Oh, yes."

"Have you anything in the shape of a clue or suspicion?"

"Nothing. My daughter was in excellent health and bright spirits. Her nature is a frank one. I do not think she had a secret from me, or that she ever had a serious trouble of any sort. The cause of her disappearance is a complete mystery. But I am sure that Leah Paget never left her home last night with the deliberate intention of forsaking us. She is not absent now of her own will. Something—some horrible thing—has happened to her."

Her voice broke, she pressed her handkerchief to her face, arose quickly, and walked to the window.

Cousin opened his note-book and turned toward Mr. Paget.

"I must trouble you to answer a few questions," he said, brusquely.

Mr. Paget nodded stiffly, but kept his eyes on his wife.

"Please give me the name of the people with whom you dined last night."

"We dined with Mr. E. G. Quinlan and his family."

"Their address, please?" said Cousin, without looking up.

"Their residence is on Madison Avenue, near the Church of the Transfiguration."

"Little Church Around the Corner," interrupted the Chief.

"Yes," from Cousin. "Now, if you please—names and addresses of the persons to whom those letters—the three seen by Mrs. Paget—were sent."

It was Mrs. Paget who answered this question, as she turned and came back from the window.

"One was to Miss Amy Lathrop, Old Point Comfort. Another was to Miss Gertrude Carter, Grammercy Park."

"And the third?" asked Cousin, when the others were written.

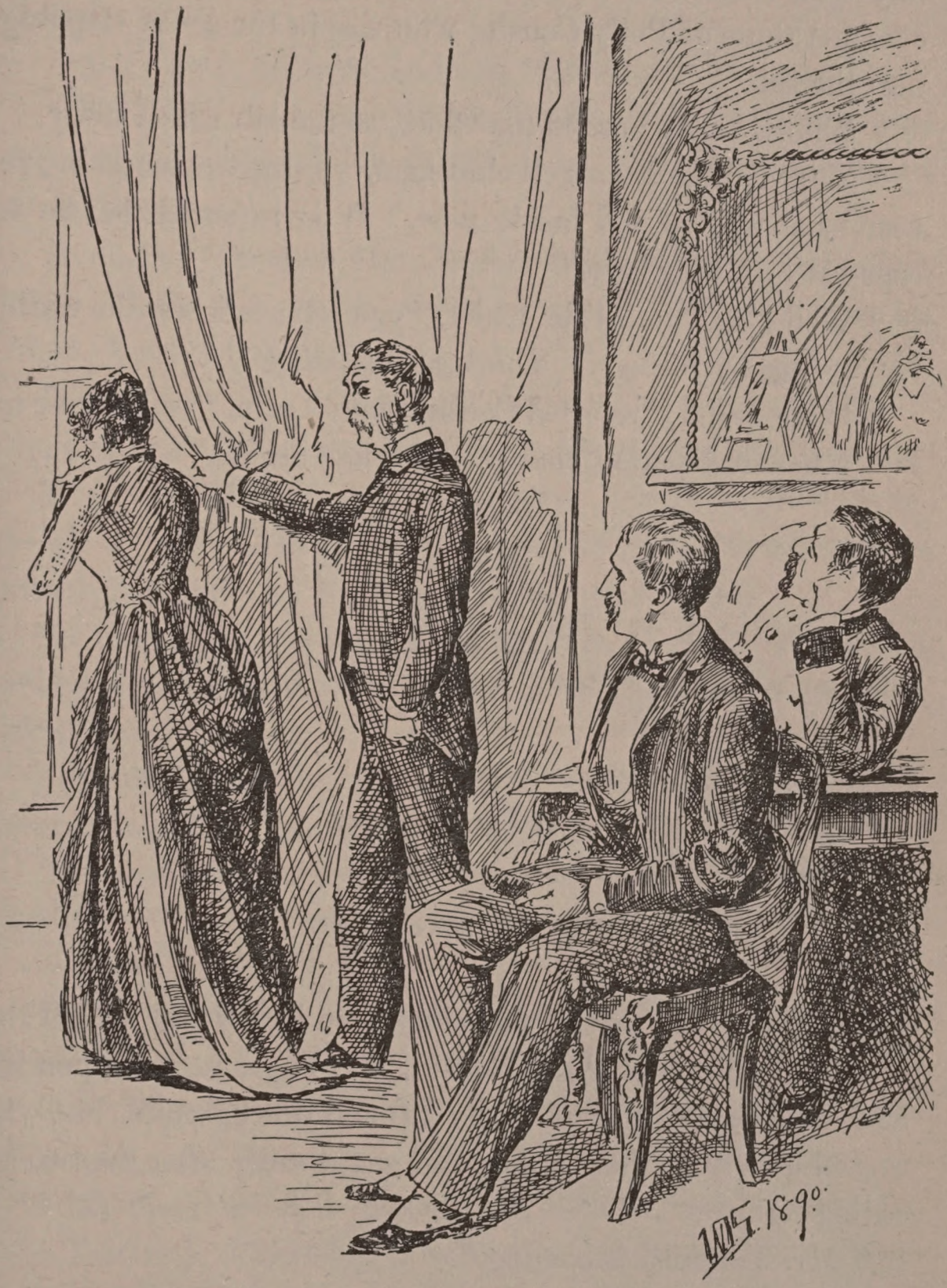
"I did not see the name upon the third envelope, nor did my daughter allude to it."

"Thank you." Cousin put away his note-book and glanced at the Chief. "That is all as far as I am concerned."

The Chief arose, and Cousin followed his example.

"You will close Miss Paget's rooms, sir." The Chief said this to Mr. Paget, with the air of a man who knows that the time *has* come when he can fully take command. "Be especially careful that no one disturbs the desk. We will set the wheels in motion without loss of time, and we will not ask to see these rooms until the case assumes a graver form. I must ask you, how ever, to send to my office any or all of your servants, as I may call for them. It will be much better for our chances of success if we are not seen coming here for interviews. Also, I would like to be assured that yourself and Mrs. Paget will hold yourselves in readiness to come at a call, together or singly, as you may be instructed. We will keep you informed of all we do, and I hope to have some news for you soon."

As the Chief and his assistant were entering their cab, another vehicle dashed up to the door. It was a handsome coupé, and a young man sprang out almost before the wheels



"SOMETHING—SOME HORRIBLE THING—HAS HAPPENED TO HER."
Page 33.

had ceased to revolve. As his feet touched the ground, his eyes met those of Polly Cousin, who was in the act of stepping into the cab.

"Who is that?" asked the Chief, as the cab rolled away.

"Max Talfourd, a swell club man. I'd give something to hear what will be said inside now. It is rumored that he is engaged to Miss Paget."

"Well!" exclaimed the Chief, "you reporters beat the world for finding out things. You beat the police!"

"If we didn't," retorted Cousin, with a grin, "we'd have to find a new occupation, that required less brains."

CHAPTER IV.

A KNICKERBOCKER FAMILY.

When the door of the morning-room had closed behind the Chief of Police and Polly Cousin, Mr. Paget turned upon his heel and began to pace stiffly up and down, while his wife turned slowly to the window and gazed sadly after the two receding figures.

"Mr. Talfourd is coming."

A sound, something between a grunt and a sniff, came from the direction of Mr. Paget, and he began to walk again.

"I don't want to see him."

"I *do*." As she spoke, the servant entered, and presented a card.

"Ask him to come to me here, Harkins."

"Harkins," said Mr. Paget, "bring the letters and the morning papers to me in the library," and Mr. Paget passed from the room.

In another moment Max Talfourd stood bowing before her, with a look of surprise, which he could not conceal, in his frank, handsome eyes.

Mrs. Paget rose, and put out her hand to him. "Max—" she began, and then stopped, with her eyes fixed upon his face.

Her greeting increased his surprise, and roused his apprehension. He felt her hand trembling in his. He was embarrassed, and said the first words that came to him.

"I have just received your note, Mrs. Paget." And then, after another glance at her face, "What is it? Has anything happened?"

She sank back into her seat, and motioned him to another near her.

"Leah—" she began, and once more she was unable to proceed.

"Leah? Is Leah ill?"

He sat down in the place indicated, and waited eagerly for her answer.

Mrs. Paget looked at him mournfully for a moment, and then said, as if she must explain her own position first:

"My daughter and myself have always been *confidantes*, Mr. Talfourd. I have been aware of your mutual affection since —since the first."

"She has told me as much," the young man answered, in a hushed tone, as if the theme were a sacred one.

"But for that knowledge I should not have ventured to send for you in my present trouble. Tell me, do you know where Leah is?"

"Where Leah is?"

"We have lost her. She has gone from the house—no one knows where."

"Leah gone? Mrs. Paget, for God's sake, explain! What can you mean?"

He was on his feet, pallid and startled.

"Poor boy," she said, with motherly pity. "Sit down, and I will tell you all that we know."

It was little enough, and unsatisfactory enough, when all was told. And when she ceased speaking, he sat silent for a few minutes—then:

"And was it the Chief of Police and his assistant that I met at your door as I came?" he asked.

"Yes."

He started to his feet again.

"I must see Captain Connors," he said. "Mr. Paget was very wise in appealing at once to the police. Mrs. Paget, I must help in this search for Leah. You won't forbid it?"

"Not if your heart is with us."

"My heart is with Leah Paget, and my hand will be against whomsoever has done her a wrong or an injury. Mr. Paget has not been well disposed toward me, but now he must know the truth, from one of us."

"It shall be from me," she gently interposed; and then added, as he was about to thank her, "and let me say now, so that we need not speak of it again, that I have not shared in his opposition to your suit. It is only the prejudice of one man for another. I looked upon you as Leah's equal, and told my hus-

band so. But your father and Mr. Paget have not been friends for years."

"I know; some old business trouble. I have meant to ask my father to explain it to me."

"And Mr. Paget hoped for an engagement between Leah and the son of his oldest friend."

Talfourd's eyes sent out a flash of something like resentment.

"Yes; Frederick Quinlan."

"Oh, so you know—"

"I know. I think every one knows that Quinlan has been —I might say *is*—a suitor for Miss Paget's hand. That is one reason why I have wished to make our engagement public, to stop Quinlan's follies." He checked himself, and put out his hand with a look of almost boyish appeal. "At least, Mrs. Paget, I have *your* friendship, your toleration? You will accept my services as if—as—if I were indeed your son?"

Up to this moment the brave mother had kept back her tears, and suppressed all outward signs of emotion; but this appeal, this sympathy, touched her keenly. She put out her hand toward him, and burst into a flood of tears.

When Mr. Paget entered his library,—a room which he had long looked upon as his own private domain, and which was seldom visited by Leah or Mrs. Paget,—it was not to occupy himself with either letters or newspapers, except to glance at the handwriting upon each envelope, to assure himself that nothing was there that might in any way throw light upon the mystery of his daughter's disappearance. Once satisfied on this point, the letters were thrust aside; at the newspapers he did not so much as glance.

Abner Paget was a proud old man, carrying his head with soldierly erectness in spite of his sixty-seven summers and winters. He was full twenty years older than his wife; but he still had the same grave, stern face, crisp voice, and keen eye that had seemed to her the embodiment of force and dignity when he had wooed her many years ago.

He sat very erect beside the long library table, and scowled up at the glittering chandelier. It was Max Talfourd, this same impertinent young man, now *tête-à-tête* with his wife, who had changed the even current of his life. And the fact that his daughter, his beautiful only child, had disappeared, and that he had been brought to the necessity of calling for aid from the vulgar police, was mixing itself with a queer jumble of hostile thoughts against the house of Talfourd, when the door opened and his wife entered.

Mr. Paget started slightly, and hastily took up one of the unopened letters.

"Well, Miranda?" said he, affecting to be busy.

She came forward, and stood beside the table, just in front of him, and very near.

"I would like your attention for a moment, Abner."

He put aside the letters, and said, again, "Well?"

"Sometime since, more than a month ago, I showed you a letter, written by Mr. Max Talfourd, asking you to sanction his engagement with Leah."

"*After* he had obtained the sanction of the young lady. Yes, I clearly recall his extraordinary proceedings"

"Mr. Talfourd's 'proceedings', as you choose to call them, were very manly. Our daughter was not reared in France. You know what I think of these old formulas. Mr. Talfourd simply asked Leah's permission to speak with you, and

obtained from her only that permission—nothing more."

"Yes, Leah is a sensible girl. She does not discard all the good old formulas."

"When you declined the honor of an alliance with the Talfourds in so peremptory a manner, and finished by sending Leah a message, through me, forbidding her to think of Max Talfourd, you overstepped the limits of your power."

"Madam!" Mr. Paget sat more erect in his chair—if that could be.

"When I attempted to speak with you upon the subject, you would not hear me."

"And I do not wish to hear you now."

"You must hear me now. For a year or more, I had seen that an affection was springing into life between Max and Leah. When you came between them with your authority, Leah was terribly hurt, although she was too proud to let you see it. I felt grieved and anxious, for Leah never again mentioned the subject, and I knew that was not a good omen. One day Leah came to me in her straightforward way, and put a case. 'Mamma,' she said, 'if you were of age, and had always been a dutiful daughter, and if you had learned to love a noble young man, your equal in birth and breeding, more than your equal in fortune, and if you were sure of yourself and of his love, and you were commanded to give him up for no better reason than that his father and your father had ceased to be friends,— what would you do?'"

"And, pray, what did you answer?"

"It was on that very day that you had told me of Frederick Quinlan's suit, and it was in my mind when I gave my answer. I had not yet told her of it. I said that I could offer

no advice except that she would do well to think seriously, to consult her own conscience. She was mistress of her own fate, and must judge between the duty she owed her father, and the duty she owed herself and the man she loved and who loved her. And then I told her of Frederick Quinlan's offer, and that it was your wish that she accept him. I believe after that she came to you."

"She did."

"And you told her that you would sanction her marriage with no other man. Do you want to know what she said to me, of that interview?"

"Humph!—yes."

"She said you had made it clear to her that you did not expect nor intend that she should marry to please herself; it must be to please you."

Again she paused, but Mr. Paget remained silent.

"I did not mean to make so many words," she resumed. "This is what I came to say: Two days after she put her question, she came again to me, and told me that she had accepted Max Talfourd."

"Accepted him?"

"She said that I need not speak of it to you again. They had agreed to keep the engagement a secret, at least not to announce it formally, for a time, and that when it seemed best to make it known, she herself would inform you. Now, perhaps, you can guess why I sent for Max Talfourd this morning."

Mr. Paget arose quickly.

"Do you mean to tell me, Madam, that my daughter has eloped with that fellow?" he cried.

"Would to heaven it were no worse than that! No; I am more than ever convinced that something terrible has befallen

Leah. Max Talfourd is as ignorant of what has happened as you or I."

"I suppose he has made *you* think so," he sneered, and turning, stalked from the room.

CHAPTER V.

A CALL ON THE CHIEF OF POLICE.

The Chief of Police and Polly Cousin returned together to the office of the former and held a brief conference, after which Cousin took leave. Then the Chief busied himself issuing orders to several trusty men, sending them out upon their missions, and hastily dispatching half a dozen telegrams, or more. This done, he made sundry entries in a small book which he took from a drawer marked *Private*, and returned to it, as soon as done, locking the drawer and pocketing the key. Then he began to write letters, and was thus engaged, when Max Talfourd's card was placed before him.

"Bring him in," he said, promptly, and there was a gleam of satisfaction in his shrewd eyes.

Max Talfourd, in the presence of the Chief of Police, was not the surprised, vaguely-alarmed, tenderly-respectful young man who had bidden farewell to Mrs. Paget a few moments before. He came forward quickly and confidently, and wasted no words. He was very grave, and Connors could see that he was anxious; but he liked the frank greeting and straightforward look that responded to his own.

"Captain Connors," Max began, "I can't expect to be as well known to you as you are to me. I have not come to detain you, but to ask for a little information, which I hope you will give me. I learned from Mrs. Paget that your companion this morning is a Mr. Cousin?"

Connors nodded.

"And that he is to be your assistant in this search for—for Miss Paget. Is that true?"

"He will be one of my assistants."

"Thanks. I hope, when we have had an opportunity to talk matters over, that you will accept me for another. Just now, I am anxious upon one point. This Mr. Cousin, is he one of the reporters for the "*Call*"?

Connors nodded again.

"Have you any reason for thinking that Mr. Cousin intends to make use of this piece of news—of Miss Paget's unaccountable disappearance—in his reportorial capacity?"

"Do you mean, will Cousin make an item of it? I should be very much surprised if he has not already done so."

The young man's face darkened.

"I want to prevent this, if possible," he said. "First of all, for the young lady's sake and for the sake of her friends, her mother—"

He stopped abruptly. The Chief of Police had moved nearer and had placed a hand upon his arm.

"Young man," the Chief began, in a kindly tone, "just let me say a word before you go on. Miss Paget is missing from her home, and her parents, after making inquiries in various directions, have called upon me for aid. Now, when a matter comes into the hands of the police, it is past the point where it may be handled with gloves, and people's feelings made the

first consideration. I sanctioned Cousin's desire to be first in the field with this bit of news. And, I assure you, there will be nothing printed but the bare facts—no flights of fancy indulged in, no prophesies, nothing sensational. I have a strong reason for wishing Miss Paget's friends—the very people from whom you are anxious to keep this news—to know that she has disappeared."

"May I ask—" began Max, but the Chief stopped him with a gesture.

"And unless you have information that shall nullify that reason, as, for instance, where she is—"

"I know literally nothing about it."

"Or unless you know of something that will furnish a probable motive—something that had better be kept dark for the young lady's sake—"

Max Talfourd shook the Chief's hand from his arm, and stepped back. There was a flush upon his cheek, and an angry gleam in his eyes.

"Understand this," he said sternly. "The cause of Miss Paget's disappearance I neither know nor can I guess; I cannot even imagine a possible cause. But when the truth is learned,—if it ever will be,—it will prove her innocent of any wrong in intent or deed."

"There!" exclaimed the Chief, seeming in no way disturbed by his visitor's manner. "I like to hear you see that. Now, hear me finish. I wanted Miss Paget's disappearance announced in the '*Call*', because that is the quickest way of informing her friends and acquaintances of the fact. I mean to visit some, perhaps many, of the society people who know her; and what you have just said, convinces me that I am right in thinking that unless they were prepared for my questions I would

get but short answers. I want these people to know why my men or myself come to interview them, without having to waste time in explanations."

"Still," said Max, looking only half convinced, "I would be glad this were kept out of the papers until tomorrow, at least. I know the people of the '*Call*' slightly, and I intended to visit the office."

"Very well," said the Chief;"but you will fail. Can I see you again tonight—say, at seven o'clock?"

"Yes, I'll be punctual. Thank you."

He had the door open before he had ceased speaking, and was gone in a moment.

As the Chief of Police resumed his seat before the desk, a smile hovered around his lips.

"I'm afraid he won't be in time," he muttered, looking not in the least afraid. "But it pleased him, and establishes a sort of confidence between us."

His hands were moving about the desk as he soliloquized, and presently he laughed, as if among his scattered letters and papers he had unearthed a good joke.

Meanwhile, Max Talfourd was being driven rapidly to the office of the "Evening Call", and the result of his visit, or its lack of result, has already been told.

CHAPTER VI.

FATHER AND SON.

When Max Talfourd re-entered his cab, he gave the driver a number upon Irving Place, and added, as he shut the door, "Drive fast." This order was obeyed, and he was soon set down before a stately dwelling. He entered the house with a latch-key, and as he was about to cross the hall, a maid-servant came tripping down the stairs.

"Ah, Annette," he said, as she approached him, "we're very quiet here."

"Yes, sir. Mrs. Talfourd has sent William out on some errand, and I think the other servants are down stairs."

"Where is Mrs. Talfourd?"

"In her little sitting-room, sir."

"And my father?"

"He is there too, Mr. Max. He hasn't been down stairs today."

"Not worse?"

"He says not; he thinks the stairs tire him too much."

"I dare say. Annette, you can go back and tell them that I am coming to them."

"They'll be glad of that, sir."

The girl ran lightly up stairs again, and the young man followed more slowly.

Mrs. Talfourd, seated in her dainty sewing-chair near a low window filled with blooming plants, received her son's mes-

sage with a little ejaculation of delight, and looked for sympathy over at her husband. He lay stretched upon a couch near the flower-burdened window and opposite the little sewing-chair.

The little sitting-room was a favorite with the mistress of the house, and was connected with her dressing-room, and through that with her sleeping-room beyond. And so far from modern was the fine old house, that Max Talfourd, in recalling his happiest childhood days and his calmest and most restful hours of later youth, connected them all with these rooms, and chiefest of all, with " mother's little sitting-room".

" Ah, you runaway boy !"

It was Mrs. Talfourd's soft voice that first greeted her son, and she half rose from her low seat, gathering up some fleecy lace-work with one little thin hand.

But in one quick stride Max was beside her. " Sit still, mother," he said, putting her back in her chair with a caressing movement, and stooping to kiss her forehead.

" And how are you, sir," crossing to the couch and taking the outstretched hand of the invalid. " Did you think I had turned Prodigal Son ?"

The invalid laughed the cheery laugh of a strong and happy man.

" Gad, you *are* growing a dissipated fellow," he said, smiling lovingly at his handsome son. " Away, let me see ; four—no, five, six—how many days, little mother ?"

" Three days and a half, just," smiled the little woman.

" Well, three days and a half, then. That comes of putting him into apartments down town. Apartments will be the ruin yet of this country, or rather, this city. I shall not be surprised to hear some of our city belles setting themselves up in apartments next, and making it the fashion."

"Horrible!" ejaculated Mrs. Talfourd. And then, as her eyes sought her son's face, her light speech was hushed, and a look of anxiety spread over her countenance.

"Max, dear," she said, anxiously, "you look pale, and worn. Are you not well?"

"I am quite well, mother," the son answered, in a low tone. "But I am in serious trouble."

Mrs. Talfourd, a small, fair-haired, sweet-faced woman, had been an invalid so long that she had ceased to be numbered among the Queens of society. Although, when upon some rare occasion she opened her home to the friends to whom she still clung, they came gladly, and went away regretting anew the loss of so much gentle sweetness, and old-time courtesy, from their midst.

Thirty years ago, when Max Talfourd, senior, led Helen Rossiter to the altar, people said, "What a contrast, and how did they ever come to make choice of each other!" For Max Talfourd was big and robust and jovial, fond of good dinners, good society, good horses; not in the least a ladies' man, although he was boyishly fond of the dance, and his keen wit and unflagging spirits were much in demand where gaiety reigned.

But Mrs. Talfourd began her married life with the love that begets understanding, and the tact to seize and to use in the right way such knowledge as daily contact brought. And her husband had a generous nature, a profound respect for good women, and an innate love of home, its comforts and repose.

Two children, two delicate baby-girls, had come, and gone back to the home of the seraphs. Now, in this sturdy young Max, growing up in the image of his father, they centered all their hopes and love. And he was in trouble, serious trouble.

Instantly, the light bantering tone of the father was changed,

and the humorous twinkle faded from his eyes. He put out his hand and rested it upon his son's knee, but remained silent.

For a moment the mother was also silent. Then she leaned forward, and, looking earnestly into his eyes, asked :

" What is it, Max ? Can't you tell us ?"

A great sigh escaped his lips.

" Thank Heaven ! I can tell you everything, little mother— you and my father." Again, he was silent. Then he turned toward his father.

" Sometimes," he began, " during the past winter, you have rallied me on what you call my evident *penchant* for Leah Paget, and charged me to beware of her ' cruel parent'."

" Yes," assented Talfourd, seriously.

" Perhaps, I should have told you before this, that for a month past I have been engaged to Leah. But we preferred to keep it a pleasant secret between ourselves, partly for reasons which you might call sentimental, and partly because Leah, knowing her father's prejudices, wished to manage the announcement in her own way. It remained our secret until today."

Mr. Talfourd listened to Max with increasing interest ; then slowly raised himself upon one arm until he came to a sitting posture.

" Do you mean to tell me that old Abner Paget has refused his daughter to you, and for no better reason than that he had quarrelled with your father somewhere in the middle ages ?"

" Mr. Paget did that, sir, a month ago, when I wrote asking his sanction to our engagement ; or rather, he chose to misunderstand my letter, and commanded me not to offer myself to Miss Paget."

" Which you had already done ?"

"Which I had already done. We were both of age, social equals, and I had no fear of being considered a fortune-hunter."

"Umph! I should think not, indeed. But to-day—if all this happened a month ago, what was the cause of this morning's outbreak?"

And now, Max Talfourd turned from his indignant father to the sympathetic face of his mother.

"Something has happened to Leah Paget. Mother, she is missing from her home."

And before they could voice their surprise, he dashed into the story of the morning, telling it in detail, from the moment when he entered Mrs. Paget's presence, to the time he had turned his back upon the Editor of the "*Call*."

When he had done, there was a moment of silence. Then Mrs. Talfourd drew her chair close to her son, and put her hand upon his.

The touch was a caress, and Max took the small thin hand between his own.

"Max," she whispered, "have you perfect confidence in Leah Paget?"

He started, and loosened his grasp upon her hand.

"I have perfect confidence in Leah. Mother, *you* know her—haven't you?"

"Yes, my son. Leah Paget seems to me the last young lady to attempt an escapade."

"Thank you, mother!" He lifted her small hand to his lips.

"I can't believe that Leah has left her home of her own will. I would as soon think it of—"

"Sara?" put in her husband.

"Yes, of Sara; or of myself."

"But think, mother, you who know your own sex so well, is there anything, *any* reason, sufficient to justify a young girl in leaving her home clandestinely?"

"My son, that is a difficult question to answer. Leah has a good mother."

"Oh, yes. Mrs. Paget told me that she had her daughter's confidence. She was aware of our engagement."

"Mrs. Paget is a good woman," his mother said, thoughtfully. "I have always regretted the cause of our estrangement," glancing quickly at the half-recumbent form of her husband, and as quickly away.

"The *cause*, my dear?" he said.

"Well, the fact, then. I confess, I hardly recall the cause."

"Gad!" sitting erect again, "no more do I—in detail. A business difference began it."

"And a difference in temperament has helped to keep it alive?"

Mrs. Talfourd smiled as she completed her husband's sentence, and sighed as her glance came back to the grave face of her son. Max turned toward his father.

"Was this hostile feeling, on your part, sir, so strong as to have caused you to look unfavorably upon my engagement with Miss Paget?"

"Hostile fiddlestrings! Would I turn my back upon the prettiest girl in town, because her father happens to be an obstinate old pig?"

"Thank you, sir." The voice of the elder was cheery, and his eyes smiled into those of his son. But the face and the voice of the latter were grave. "Then there is no question of that. You and my mother will accept Leah when—when I bring her to you?"

Instantly, the face of the elder Talfourd became grave.

"Max," he said, slowly, "is that just the question to ask of us now?"

"Yes. It is just the question. It is the only question." His brow darkened. He arose, and stood midway between the two, looking from one to the other. Then, in the momentary silence that followed his firmly-spoken words, and with his eyes upon them, he made a backward movement toward the door.

"Max!" cried Mrs. Talfourd, rising hastily and putting out her slender arms imploringly, as a look she knew well—a look of fixed determination—settled upon his handsome features. "Max, my son, what is it? Tell us—tell us the worst?"

"Max!" began his father. There was a tone of sternness in his voice, and a sudden gravity overspread his face, bringing out, and emphasizing, the strong resemblance between father and son. "Max, are you keeping something back?—something that—"

He checked his speech suddenly, for the girl Annette opened the door, and coming forward, presented a card to her mistress.

Mrs. Talfourd took it mechanically, glanced at the name upon it, and then, with a look of surprise and uncertainty, turned toward her husband.

"It is Mrs. Paget," she said.

CHAPTER VII.

"LA BELLE FABRICE".

"My dear, I can't think what's come over you."

"I don't want you to think what's come over me, Conny. I want you to drop this subject, and to let it discreetly alone."

"Oh, very well. Only, you know your own saying, I hope —'a secret between friends'—"

"Yes, yes;" impatiently. "I'm awfully sorry, Conny darling. I'd give more than you know to get back the past forty-eight hours or so, or to forget them. I would indeed! But don't ask me another question, for if you do—"

The plump and serene-faced woman, half buried in a lounging chair close to the open window, uttered a low mellow laugh.

"There! there! I am mute as a fish from this moment. Bless your heart, child, when you have seen as many moons as I have, you will know that there's nothing in this world worth getting into a rage about."

"No, I won't, Conny. It isn't in the grain."

The little figure, turning and twisting about in front of the Queen Anne mirror, pirouetted away from the swinging glass and then back again, gave a twitch to her hair, caught up a huge feather-duster, and then turned toward the window with a sudden gravity.

"How is it?" she asked, briskly.

The lounger at the window eyed the questioner smilingly, the costume critically.

"It's perfect," she said, after a slow survey.

"Perfect? how?"

"The real thing; jaunty but not too fine."

"Yes. That's it. Does it look—do *I* look, like a *soubrette?*"

"My dear, you look like a very youthful, a very pretty, a very saucy little housemaid; one of the sort that's certain to lose her place in six weeks, to come to grief in three months, and then—"

"That's quite enough, thank you. It's all I aimed at. If I look my character, I'm satisfied. Oh, dear!"

Some one was tapping at the door opening upon the landing. The *petite* figure with the duster turned toward this door with a frown and a gesture denoting impatience; then swiftly back again, the frown gone, the face beaming with roguery, a warning finger uplifted. With a final glance at the swinging mirror, and a defiant flap of the duster, she went quickly toward the door, flung it wide open, and stood gazing blankly into the face of the applicant for admission.

But, if the face of the pretty and perfectly equipped little housemaid was expressionless, save for a stare of too evident curiosity, that of the young man before her was mildly and disarmingly bland and confiding. Indeed, the whole was a delightful bit of comedy, for the bland young man was our friend Polly Cousin, and the surprised and staring damsel of the duster, was none other than the dainty little actress "La Belle Fabrice".

For a full minute—it seemed longer to the lounger at the window, who was invisible to the young man—the two sur-

veyed each other in blank, expressionless silence. Then the young man bowed, and there was a faint giggle from the young woman, accompanied by a simper and a little bridling movement that would have won for her, behind the footlights, a round of applause.

Another moment of vacant staring, and then the skirts of the lounger by the window were heard to rustle. Fabrice turned her head slightly, and the hand holding the duster moved ever so little. The rustling, which had been plainly heard by the applicant at the door, ceased.

"Beg pardon, miss," began Cousin, beginning a search through various pockets for something. "May I see the lady that's stopping here?"

"Stopping where?" asks Fabrice, slowly, and with a strong nasal accent.

"Why, here," beginning to dig in a second pocket, "in these apartments."

"Oh!" said Fabrice, glancing again over her shoulder and giving her duster another inconsequent flap, "I s'pose you mean—"

"Miss Fabrice!" interrupts the visitor. "La Belle Fabrice."

The soft rustle is again heard, and Polly Cousin suddenly shifts his position, moving forward, and squarely up to the threshold, where he is rewarded by the sight of ten inches of bright-hued cashmere, trailing itself out of sight behind a tall Japanese screen.

Seized with the idea that it is La Belle Fabrice who is escaping him, he quickly steps across the threshold, at the same time and by a seemingly careless movement, throwing open his coat, thereby displaying a small star upon the inner lapel.

As if this display was unintentional, he hastily jerks the coat into place, and pulls from the last unexplored pocket a handful of cards, and a sealed, unaddressed envelope. Holding these in his hands, he glances keenly at the *petite* figure before him, and is rewarded by a look betokening newly-awakened curiosity, and by the ejaculation, "Well, I never!"

"Do you see this?" He holds a card toward her, and smiles insinuatingly.

But Fabrice turns from him, and seizes upon the nearest chair, which she begins to dust vigorously.

Polly Cousin grasps the opportunity to look about him. He sees a well-furnished sitting-room, strewn with feminine knick-knacks, a rich-hued shawl trailing from a low-backed chair, a strip of embroidery and an open book upon the broad window-seat, near which the softly-cushioned, luxurious rocker is still vibrating. A broad-brimmed hat with sweeping plumes occupies one end of a low couch, while a pug dog sleeps comfortably upon the soft cushions of the other. Gloves and parasols, handkerchiefs and fans, are scattered about; a basket-like affair, big as a small trunk, stands beside the swinging mirror, and through its half-opened lid he catches a glimpse of Oriental color—yellow silk folds, and billows of lace. On the floor, close beside the big Japanese screen, is an open play-book, and some small leaves of MSS., which Cousin instantly recognizes as a "part" in some play. Beyond the screen he sees, over its top, a door, half open; and, recognizing all as the abode of a stage Star, he says to himself, "She is in, then." Again, he turns to the busy figure with the duster, and says, still proffering his card:

"Will you please give this to your mistress?" His tone is very mild, but at the words the flying duster stops.

"My *mistress!*" The little figure is instinct with offended dignity. "*My* mistress!" with a catch of the breath and an angry sweep of the duster. "I'd like to know what you take me for?"

"Eh?" Cousin comes a step nearer. "Come, now," he says, coaxingly, "I know who *you* are, of course."

"Oh!" with a toss of the head and a sniff of derision, "I'm much obliged to you." Again the duster is brought into action, and Cousin is forced to continue his conversation as he follows the little flying figure about the room.

"You're La Belle's maid?"

"Umph!" No other reply does she deign. She has reached a little table upon which rests a basket of cut flowers, and half a dozen bouquets in as many bowls and vases. She lifts the basket gingerly, as if unaccustomed to handle such dainty burdens, and sniffs at the bouquets, holding them at arm's length to gaze and admire.

"Look here, my girl,"—Cousin is beginning to grow impatient—"will you stop a moment and listen to me?"

The counterfeit housemaid throws down the duster with one hand, deposits a bunch of Jacqueminots upon the table with the other, and turns an irate face upon her pursuer.

"What do you want?" she says, impatiently.

"Whose rooms are these?"

"I don't know."

"What! you don't know?"

"No!" shortly, and stooping to pick up the duster, "how should I?"

"See here, my girl, as you won't tell me who you are, let me tell you who I am."

Fabrice begins to dust again vigorously. "I don't want

"BE — BE YOU CAPTAIN CON — NERS?" SHE ASKS DOUBTFULLY.
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to know who you are. You ain't much to look at, anyway !"

Very wise men, very great men, have their weaknesses. Polly Cousin has his. Many a sigh had he heaved before his mirror because of his uninteresting appearance. He took a quick step toward this obdurate young woman, and thrust the card which he held, directly before her face.

"Can you read that?" he asked, impatiently.

She stopped short and looked attentively at the card.

"Cap—tain—Con-nors," she pronounced, slowly, "Chief—of Po—lice. My !" She turns quickly and inspects her tormentor afresh, seemingly with renewed interest; then suddenly drops back a pace, her face taking on a look of gravity.

"Be—be you Captain Con-nors ?" she asks, doubtfully.

"Are you La Belle Fabrice's maid ?" he asks, with renewed earnestness.

"No—no, sir." The change in her tone is marked, and her manner becomes at once apprehensively respectful.

"Who are you, then ?"

"I—I'm the new chambermaid."

"Oh !" Mr. Cousin becomes aggressive in proportion as the saucy face before him changes to one of fearful and hesitating willingness to be catechized. He looks at her keenly, doubtfully.

"You are the new chambermaid, eh? But these rooms—you know whose they are?"

"I—I don't know their names."

"Look here, my girl," drawing nearer and lowering his tone, "who was sitting at that window a moment ago?"

She turned toward the window indicated, and, with slowly brightening countenance, turns back and whispers :

"That was one of them !" Then, before he can ask the question that rises to his lips, she lifts a warning finger, tip-

toes up to the screen, peeps cautiously behind it, and comes tip-toeing back.

And now she is positively beaming.

"It's the old one," she says, her voice just rising above a whisper. "She can't hear very good, and she's gone into the other room, anyhow."

Again she brandishes her duster, this time with manifest carelessness, and Cousin sees at once that she is quite at her ease.

"A pert little simpleton," he thinks; and, still mentally, "rather pretty, though!"

"What do you mean by 'the old one?'" he asks, slightly at a loss how to proceed.

"Why, there's two, you know," she explains, readily. "The other's little and young—something like me," supplements this audacious little impostor.

"Oh! and where is she?"

"My! how should I know?"

"Umph! and don't you know their names?"

"Me? My goodness! I guess you ain't never been chambermaid in a hotel. When I come in here they don't pay any more attention to me than as if—as if I wasn't anybody. I think I'm as good as them." And with a toss of her head she skips over to the couch, catches up the plumed hat, and surveys it with well-affected curiosity.

Cousin stands irresolute. He has come prepared to be refused admittance, to be snubbed by the fair actress, to encounter and vanquish various obstacles. But to be put to rout by such obtuseness as this— He runs his hand over his short scant locks, and gives his injured feelings vent in an impatient shrug of his stooping shoulders. Then he takes a step toward the couch.

"What is the young one like?" he asks, in a tone meant to be insinuatingly confidential.

"Like?" tossing down the plumed hat. "Why, I *said*—something like me."

"Like you? Now, don't you know that you're a very pretty girl?"

"My! Most everybody says that to me!" She tosses her head, giggles inanely, bridles up to the mirror, and standing before it, critically surveys her charms. They consist of two long tow-colored tails of hair, an exceedingly frowzy bang, and a maid's cap, none too smart, yet suited to the entire *ensemble;* a pair of dark eyes, twisted into what seems to be a permanent squint; a small mouth, that constantly vacillates between a simper and a prim pucker; some freckles, so well laid on across the nose and upper half of the countenance as to deceive even astute Polly Cousin; small hands, fortunately concealed by a pair of ragged cotton gloves; a huge blue gingham apron slightly smutched in places, and with a three-cornered tear visible at one side; and a grey stuff gown that disclosed beneath a pair of slippers small and shapely, but down at the heel.

As she stands thus before the mirror, she hears distinctly a sound, that she knows to be suppressed laughter, from behind the screen, and once more is inspired to new mischief.

As she turns away from the mirror and again begins to ply her duster, she says, over her shoulder, "Her ma's awful fat, ain't she?"

"Her ma!" Cousin starts and looks blank. "Do you mean—?"

"The old one," plying her duster recklessly, and approaching by degrees the cushion where the pug dog still slumbers.

Cousin frowns impatiently and approaches the couch from the opposite direction.

"Look here, my girl—just stop that duster, will you?" His

voice sinks to a confidential half whisper, and he is just transforming his frown into an insinuating smile, when the girl turns toward him a face of attentive interest and stops—stops, as she brings her duster with a careless flap down upon the black nose of the sleeping pug.

It is the ludicrous climax toward which La Belle has been artfully working, and it is not to be described.

Cousin has a confused sense of being reduced to breathlessness by the quick concussion of some small but solid body; of clinging arms in the rear, of clinging claws and teeth in front. To add to his discomfiture, the duster had descended upon him, sweeping his face and causing his eyes to brim with tears.

Cousin shakes himself, desperately but uselessly. Heavens, how that small handmaiden screams and clutches his collar! How the pug snarls and claws and tears at his nether garments! In vain he grasps at the clinging hands; in vain he shakes himself, kicks at his tormentor, and ejaculates impiously.

A ringing peal of laughter is heard, and deliverance comes. Something, which for all that he can see, or guess, at the first, may be a big blue cyclone, swoops down upon the writhing trio. The pug is ignominiously clutched by his fat back, vigorously shaken, and deposited, rampant and snarling, upon his cushion. The clinging hands are wrenched from his shoulder, and our reporter stands released, but wretched, face to face with a stately woman in a blue *peignoir*. With one hand upon the shoulder of the wicked little housemaid, the lady stands struggling with the laughter, that will have its way, as she scans the figure before her.

Suddenly, she controls herself and turns to the girl, who stands like an affrighted criminal, cowering under her hand.

"Leave the room, miss," she says, with much severity, and

a vigorous push toward the screen, behind which La Belle instantly vanishes. Then she turns again to Polly Cousin and simply points toward the door.

"Madam, will you allow me—"

"Not a word." Madam's face is instantly grave; she sweeps toward the door, and the pug springs down and lands directly at the reporter's feet. He retreats immediately.

Madam opens the door with a magnificent gesture. "Now, sir," she says.

Cousin looks at the menacing pug, at the frayed knees of his trousers, at the tatters below, and then up into the face of the lady beside the open door.

"Madam—"

"Will you go, sir?" She lifts her hand toward the bell; the pug growls and presses closer.

"If you will just—"

Madam touches the bell. The pug growls again and lays hold of a fluttering rag. Cousin mutters a malediction, and hears, at the same instant, a sound which he recognizes. It is the elevator coming down. He glances once more into Madam's uncompromising face, shakes off the pug with a force that sends him yelping half across the room, dashes out, and into the elevator as it halts on its downward way.

As he steps from the elevator at the street's entrance, miserably conscious of his tattered knees, a young man briskly enters. There is a momentary halt as a party of ladies flutter forward, crowding the elevator, pressing Cousin to the wall in their haste, and causing the young man to step outside while they arrange their draperies. In the moment of waiting, Cousin surveys the serene-faced young man.

One glance at the square stalwart shoulders, the florid feat-

ures, the wide blue eyes, the mutton-chop whiskers, and close-cropped fair hair, is enough, without the thoroughly English cut and cloth of his garments, and formal, punctilious courtliness, to assure him here was an Englishman, fresh from his native land.

Before the elevator had reached the first landing, Cousin had apparently found his senses.

"An Englishman," he said, as he turned from the up-going elevator; and then, with an ejaculation, he added as he halted at the entrance, "Two to one, that Englishman is Sir Felix Wyntoun!"

Suddenly he paused, slapped his right hand against his left breast, walked deliberately back to the long leather-covered seat near the door of waiting, and, utterly ignoring his tattered condition, sat down and drew from his breast-pocket a thin square leather case. It opened, in his hand, displaying a photograph—the pictured face of La Belle Fabrice, given him that very morning by Manager Horton.

For a long moment he gazed at the pretty, piquant profile. Then, closing his eyes, he seemed to be taking a mental view of something otherwise invisible. A moment more, and Polly Cousin is upon his feet again.

"*Sold!*" he mutters, lifting an angry face toward the elevator shaft. "Sold completely by that little sinner! Very good, La Belle Fabrice; very good!" He thrusts the case back into its place, and drops again upon the seat, his face flushed, his lips compressed. Polly Cousin, who seldom loses his temper, has lost it now.

When the elevator comes down opposite to him, and the door slides open, Cousin steps in, and says, as he seats himself.

"Back again."

"Same floor?" asks the boy.

Cousin nods, and in a moment steps out upon the landing, just half a dozen paces from the door of the room which he has so lately left.

There is no one on the landing save himself. The door of Fabrice's room stands half open ; the elevator moves on.

Through the open door he sees a tableau. Madam Congreve, sitting upon the couch with the pug nestled contentedly in her lap, is extending a welcoming hand to the young Englishman, and the little Comedienne is standing near by, holding in her fingers a card,—his card,—telling something, at the conclusion of which they join her in a ringing peal of laughter.

A sudden movement on the part of Fabrice brings her face toward Cousin. She sees him and instantly comes to the door. There is no laughter in the eyes that fling at him one haughty, contemptuous glance ; no smile upon the curling lips that say, as the owner steps across the threshold and flings the card at his feet :

" Last evening, sir, you were pointed out to me as an ' enterprising reporter.' Allow me to thank you for this peculiar specimen of American enterprise and impudence."

The door closes, not noisily, but with a firm swift click, and Cousin hears a sound like the shooting of a bolt into its socket. He takes up the card, steps into the elevator, and in a moment is at the entrance of the great building.

His face assumes its usual outward calm, but he glances upward as he moves away, and mutters between his teeth :

" To day is your day, La Belle Fabrice ! But you and I are sure to meet again, and my day will come !"

Alas, for Fabrice ! It came only too soon. And its shadows enveloped more than La Belle Fabrice, and more than the man who uttered the threat in a fit of professional pique.

CHAPTER VIII.

CONFIDENTIAL.

La Belle Fabrice came away from the door, when she had closed it in the face of the too-presumptuous reporter, with a very grave look. Her little farce was ended; and the dignity with which she now turned toward her latest guest, was almost as absurd as her former impromptu comedy, because of the incongruity between her costume and her manner.

"I was trying the effect of a gown for my new comedy, when that person forced his way in," she said. "You will excuse me, Sir Felix, while I make myself more presentable. I leave you in good company." She bowed toward Madam Congreve, and flitted behind the Japanese screen.

La Belle Fabrice—there was no one, it was said, who knew her by any other name—was fresh from a season of brilliant success abroad, social as well as dramatic; for she possessed not only undisputed genius in her chosen profession, but great personal beauty, sparkling wit, a captivating piquancy of manner, an untarnished reputation, and, last but not least, a mystery.

It was small wonder, therefore, if she had brought in her train, as a living testimonial of her social successes, a live lord, —and a very devoted one,—in the person of Sir Felix Wyntoun of Wynne Merton. Indeed, as Madam Congreve was fond of saying when singing the praises of her favorite, the wonder was, that she came with only one suitor out of the

scores who had helped to form her goodly court in so many London drawing-rooms.

During Fabrice's absence, Madam Congreve regaled the young man with a description of the late episode, and, being a fluent talker, with a keen sense of the ludicrous, the absurd dialogue lost nothing of its absurdity in the telling. Fabrice could hear, through the half-closed door behind the screen, the mellow voice of her friend, and the hearty peals of laughter with which Sir Felix frequently interrupted the flow of Madam's words.

Presently, however, the voices took a different and a lower tone, and she knew by the sound, and by the soft rolling of a chair across the carpet, that the talkers were moving further from the screen, and that their conversation was growing confidential.

"More whispering of secrets," mused Fabrice, as she smiled back at her reflections in the three-sided mirror. "About me, of course. Poor Conny!" And then, more softly, and with a little sigh, "Poor Sir Felix!" She noiselessly closed the door, shutting out the low hum of voices, and went back to her toilet with another sigh.

As the closing door shut out the sound of his voice, Sir Felix Wyntoun was looking anxiously into the kindly eyes of the lady sitting near him, and saying, half deprecatingly:

"I came, you see. Pardon me, I couldn't take your advice."

"Could not keep it, you mean," replied Madam Congreve, smiling indulgently. "To be perfectly frank with you, Sir Felix, I didn't believe that you would be guided by it."

"Oh, but I was—at first."

"At first—yes; from the sailing of one steamer to the next. Why, you poor boy, you might as well have come with us!"

"I only wish I had," said Sir Felix, so ruefully that Madam Congreve laughed outright. "You can't think how hard time is on a fellow when he wants to kill it."

"Can't I?"

"And then, somehow, she seems to have changed—to have gotten further away from me in these few days."

Madam Congreve sighed.

"Sometimes I think she has drifted away from me, too," she said, and then she bit her lip, and frowned. "I didn't mean just that, Sir Felix," she added, hastily. "Fabrice has too kind a heart to hurt me by word or deed. And I believe she is too kind, too good, to hurt you in any way. You know how it was in London—always surrounded; so much society *en masse*, that society *a dieux* was not to be thought of. And it's much the same now, with this difference: Fabrice finds many old friends here. And now she has her own way, her liberty, so much more. Perhaps, I have selfishly taken advantage of this. I like to stay at home and read my novel, when I can. And Fabrice kindly humors me. She's wise enough to respect the proprieties, and too sensible to be a prude. I believe that I'm the only living Englishwoman without a talent for the dragon business. I'm not a born *chaperone*."

Sir Felix laughed. "It's almost equivalent to saying you're not an Englishwoman."

"I know it, she answered, lightly. "But, about Fabrice. When I promised to help you—did I promise?"

Sir Felix Wyntoun lifted his head, and there was a ring of hurt pride in his tone. "What I asked of you, Madam Congreve, was, I trust, no more than a gentleman might honorably ask of a lady whom he esteemed and trusted. I am sure, you promised me nothing that a lady might not grant."

She made an effort to interrupt him, but he hurried on:

"I asked you to be my friend—to give me your confidence. I told you what my feelings and my aspirations were. I ask you again, now, to tell me if you think I have any reason to hope. Of course, I know that I must be patient."

"Indeed, you must!" she returned, earnestly.

"And I ask you, too, to tell me, now or at any other time—I hardly know how to say this, it is so hateful to me—but if you see—if you are sure—there is no hope—"

"Oh, do not think I meant that!"

"No, I do not think it. I won't think it; not yet. Mind, I do not ask you to betray confidences, only to stand my friend, and to speak as well of me, to her, as you can."

"I can say nothing that is not good of you, Sir Felix. But, let us understand each other. I love Fabrice dearly, but we are only friends. I have not her entire confidence; that you understand?"

"Oh, yes!"

"But she calls me her best friend; I mean to be her truest."

"Not that superlative, please."

"Well, as true as the truest, then. Will that suffice you?"

Sir Felix nodded.

"I do not question Fabrice; I trust her. You must do the same."

Sir Felix looked at her startled—a question in his face which she was quick to see.

"I mean, that you must let her see that your regard for her is without question; that you require nothing; that you can bide her time. And now, we have been dealing in confidences long enough. I do not believe that you have, as yet, any need to fear or to complain. Fabrice never gushes; but she likes

you, she respects you, she speaks well of you. I do not think she cares more for any one. You have a clear field; but you must not expect too much help from me. We modern fairy-godmothers are sadly deficient. We do not inherit the wings, the talismans, of our ancestresses. Even our broomsticks have been diverted from their original uses."

"I have heard so," said Felix, with a hearty laugh, which was echoed by a voice behind him.

"And I heard that speech about broomsticks," said Fabrice, coming forward and seating herself near Madam Congreve. "What was the subject, Conny?"

She took her friend's hand between her own, gave it a little significant pressure, which Madam Congreve perfectly understood, and smiled frankly across at Sir Felix.

In the instant of silence, natural to the situation, which followed the coming of Fabrice, Sir Felix turned guiltily scarlet, and Madam Congreve, glancing askance at the fair smiling face beside her, wondered if Fabrice had not heard more than those few last words. Then the young man spoke.

"You cannot think how lonely I felt in that big box last night. The music was really good—you would have enjoyed it, I am sure. Oh, how I regretted that previous engagement!"

He spoke as if addressing both ladies, and his eyes rested last on the face of Madam Congreve, and lingered there.

"Engagement?" Madam Congreve said, and then stopped suddenly, as her imprisoned hand felt a second quick pressure. "Oh, yes," smiling vaguely; "you are very kind, Sir Felix."

"It was all my fault," broke in Fabrice; "Madam Congreve would never have missed a symphony concert of her own

free will. Don't blame her, Sir Felix, and I will confess to you that I too regretted it."

Again her fingers pressed those of her friend. And then she glided away from the subject. "Are you going to like New York, Sir Felix?"

"I really cannot say," with a nervous laugh. "I havn't as yet, I'm afraid, begun to do so."

"No? And you've been here—"

"Just seven days."

"Sir Felix, that's treason! The city will rise against you."

Madam Congreve stirred uneasily, and withdrew her hand from that of her friend. "Has Jane returned, dear?" she asked, as if suddenly remembering something important and overlooked.

"Yes; just a moment ago."

Madam Congreve arose. "It is my turn to be 'excused'," she said, with a smile meant entirely for Sir Felix. "Only for a moment; I have a commission for Jane."

She moved away from the window, ignoring an appealing look from Fabrice, but casting back at her, as Sir Felix arose and moved back a pace, a glance of mingled reproach and offended dignity.

Again, for a moment there was silence, and then Fabrice lifted her eyes and saw that her guest was still standing, and that his countenance wore a look akin to that parting glance of Madam Congreve's.

Their eyes met, and Sir Felix put out his hand, and was about to take up his hat.

"You are not going, Sir Felix?" she asked, quickly.

"Perhaps it would be best." He hesitated a moment, and

flushed. "My call is inopportune, I fear. I am unfortunate—"

Fabrice arose now, and her own cheeks glowed rosily.

"One moment, please," she said, quickly. "I want to say something to you, Sir Felix—to ask a favor, or rather, your—your indulgence, for a time, at least. I must get it over before Madam Congreve returns."

The color burned hotly in her cheeks, her eyes drooped before his. For the first time, Sir Felix Wyntoun saw embarrassment in the face and manner of the self-controlled little actress. It restored his own self-possession, and brought back his courage.

He replaced his hat upon the table, beside the numerous floral offerings, and stood looking down upon her with patient deference.

"It's about your invitation to the symphony concert," she began. "When you mentioned it to me, Madam Congreve was out. She had gone to call upon an old friend, and it was quite late when she came back. In fact—" As she hesitated, there came a tap at the outer door, followed by the entrance of a servant, who presented a card.

She took it and glanced at the name, while a little frown contracted her brows. Then she lifted her eyes to the face of Sir Felix.

"Do you know Mr. Frederick Quinlan?" she asked.

"I have met him, at his club."

Fabrice turned to the servant.

"Show the gentleman up," she said.

As the servant went out, she tossed the card down among the bouquets and vases, and turned, to see that Sir Felix was again flushing hotly, and once more about to possess himself of his

hat. But La Belle Fabrice was now mistress of herself and the situation.

"Sir Felix," she said, "you will oblige me if you can remain until this gentleman has paid his call."

He hesitated, and then, as he turned to resume his seat beside the window, La Belle took the place opposite him, lately vacated by Madam Congreve.

"Thank you," she said, when the door opened and admitted Frederick Quinlan.

CHAPTER IX.

A BEAUTIFUL MYSTERY.

Frederick Quinlan was a figure in New York society. He was not only the son of a millionaire, but he was the only son of a millionaire. And while society boasted many sons of millionaires, and some only sons, young Quinlan possessed, besides, a fortune of his own, descended from the maternal grandmother. He held, also, by right of an early partnership, a full half of his father's riches under his control; for Frederick Quinlan was a man of business, as well as a man of society, and was known as well in Wall Street as in the Park and upon the Avenues.

In person, he was a slender, fair-faced young man, of medium height, with pale regular features, large light blue eyes, and a high forehead, from which his thin light hair was

brushed carelessly back ; he wore a short pale mustache above his thin, straight-lipped mouth and white gleaming teeth, and his dress was at all times faultless almost to foppishness.

He was a fluent talker, when he chose to talk, and his manners were, or could be, affable and winning. He was said to be at home in all places and among all people, and his self-possession was proverbial. "Quinlan is always cool", they said of him at his club.

He had seen and admired La Belle Fabrice abroad ; but it was only as others admired her—at a distance. He had been among the first, however, to seek her acquaintance upon her arrival in New York. Frederick Quinlan was not the one to do anything by halves that he thought worth doing.

For a few moments they chatted in the conventional way. Madam Congreve had rejoined them, the clouds all vanished from her brow, and every one seemed at ease.

They talked of Europe and America, of London and New York, of society on this side of the Atlantic and on the other, of music and the drama, and so on to personalities, and of the *debut* of La Belle Fabrice.

"I shall be a private citizen for two weeks yet," Fabrice said. "We are not all here."

"You mean your support, I suppose," said Quinlan. "You are too modest, Mademoiselle."

"I mean Manager Horton's Company," she persisted. "*My* support is all here," and she nodded laughingly toward Madam Congreve.

While the talk went on, the maid placed upon a small table near Quinlan half a dozen papers, moist from the press. Madam Congreve put out a hand and drew one of them toward her.

"I have always had an appetite for fresh news," she said, beginning to scan the columns. "And, true to my profession, I look for the dramatic items first."

Fabrice laughed lightly.

"Don't be selfish, Conny. Read us the interesting items, if they are not too long."

"Interesting items in print are never long," said Quinlan, sententiously. "May I distribute the mail, Madam?"

Madam nodded. He tossed a paper over to Sir Felix, with a smile, and presented another to Fabrice, with a courtly bow.

Suddenly, Madam Congreve uttered a sharp exclamation.

"Hear this, Fabrice," she said; "and you too, gentlemen. You are sure to be interested."

She lifted the paper, folded it for more convenient holding, and read aloud the following paragraph:

A BEAUTIFUL UNKNOWN.

For nearly two months our parks and avenues have been brightened, seldom at first but more frequently of late, by the presence of a beautiful woman, sometimes driving a pair of jetty ponies, and accompanied only by an equally jetty small tiger perched behind, and sometimes mounted upon a superb English hunter. Splendid equipages and lovely ladies are not rare sights among us; but when a beautiful woman riding or driving such horses, is seen day after day, wherever wealth and beauty and fashion are oftenest on display, the question "Who is she?" at once arises. Until now, no answer to this inquiry has been found. Society, though interested, and admiring, knew her not. Day by day she came and went—an exquisite picture of warm tropical beauty, perfectly costumed, as befitted her equipage, and seemingly serenely unconscious of the curious and admiring eyes that followed her as she whirled through the park, speaking to no one, recognizing no one, always alone. But some one has whispered the secret; the Beautiful Mystery is a mystery no longer.

There are few travelled New Yorkers who will not remember, at

least by name, Hortense Novalis, the charming young actress who set all London wild two or three seasons ago, and who suddenly disappeared from the London stage. Her coming and her going were both meteor-like, and now she shoots athwart the vision of the New World and society. It is said that M'lle Novalis occupies, at present, a charming suite of apartments in one of our up town monster palaces, and that her suite and service are marvels of Oriental taste and luxury, such as only boundless wealth can bestow. We have not yet learned whether the lady contemplates a *debut* in this country or not.

Madam Congreve let the paper fall upon her lap, and crossed her hands upon it, looking, as she did so, from face to face.

"Comments are in order," she said, and added quickly, turning to Fabrice—"Why, my dear, it must be—it *is*—the one I described to you the other day." Then, addressing the young men: "A perfect brunette;—a clear, pale olive complexion, scarlet lips, big dark eyes, hair like soft black velvet. I have seen her twice, in the park." She lifted a hand to her face, and the newspaper slid from her lap to the floor. "Who else has seen her?" she asked.

At first no one answered. Quinlan was smiling slightly, and Fabrice looked a trifle bored.

"Not I," said Sir Felix, seeing that the others were slow to speak. "I used to read of her, now and then; but I was abroad when M'lle Novalis gave London such a stirring up."

"I have seen her," said La Belle Fabrice, carelessly.

"Here?" queried Madam Cougreve, "or in London?"

"Here, and in Paris."

"But not in London?" interpolated Quinlan.

"When M'lle Novalis was taking London by storm," said Fabrice, turning her eyes full upon him, "I was making my bow, very timidly, in the provinces."

"And so was I," broke in Madam Congreve. "Not very timidly, perhaps; not for the first time, by any means; but I was making nightly bows somewhere in the provinces, or in Australia, I really forget which. But certainly *not* in London." She turned again to Quinlan. "We have not heard from you. Of course, you have seen Mademoiselle the Beautiful?"

"I have seen her—yes, both here and abroad."

"Then you have seen her on the stage?" Madam bent upon him an eager face, and drew her low chair nearer his.

"Yes."

"You do not speak with enthusiasm. I want to hear your impressions."

Sir Felix, whose gaze was not long absent from the face of Fabrice, fancied that she looked bored. He held in his hand the paper tossed him by Quinlan, and he now shook it open.

"Perhaps, I too may find an item of interest," he said, lightly.

Fabrice smiled, and stooped to take up the paper which had been dropped by Madam.

"And, perhaps, I may find another," she said. "Pray, go on, Mr. Quinlan; while we look we'll also listen." And she began to turn the uncut sheet.

"M'lle Hortense Novalis is an actress of the intense school—if there is such a school," began Quinlan, readily; "and her acting is certainly exquisite—of its kind."

As he spoke these last words, his eyes rested upon the face of Fabrice.

Suddenly, a movement and a sharp exclamation from Sir Felix called their united attention to him, and Quinlan broke off his comments to ask:

"What is it?"

The young Englishman let the paper fall upon his knee.

'Oh, I say—" he began, "this is *too* bad! I must have misunderstood the name. It cannot be the same."

He glanced again at the paper, and then turned to Quinlan, a look of actual distress in his eyes.

"On the evening after my arrival, I was taken to a party, a reception, by a friend—you know him, I think—young Talfourd?"

Frederick Quinlan bowed gravely.

"Mr. Talfourd made me acquainted with a lady—a lovely girl, and I am *sure* that he called her Miss Paget, and that afterward, I heard some one speak of her by her full name, Miss Leah Paget."

"Yes?" Quinlan's face now wore a look of annoyance. "Does your paper contain any special mention of Miss Leah Paget?"

The eyes of the two met in a look that was almost a challenge. Then Sir Felix turned, and placed the paper in the hand of Madam Congreve.

"I hoped that I was mistaken in the name," he said, addressing himself to the two ladies. "Will you favor us again, Madam Congreve?"

She took the printed sheet with an indulgent smile. "We seem to find the evening papers interesting," she said. "And this is the '*Call*'; that, at any rate, is said to be reliable." She glanced meaningly at the paper in the hands of Fabrice, and then began to read:

"A MISSING HEIRESS! Worse and worse," she commented. "*Strange Disappearance of Miss Leah Paget.*" She caught her breath, and looked up quickly.

"Leah Paget!—Leah—" It was Frederick Quinlan who

spoke thus. He started up and then sank back in his seat. His visible effort at coolness was not quite successful. "There must be some mistake. Will you allow me—" He held out his hand, and Madam, after favoring him with a surprised glance, took one more look—this time a very deliberate one—at the startling head-lines, and gave him the paper without a word.

As he caught it and scanned the paragraph, made conspicuous by its huge-lettered head-lines, she arose and began to gather up the other as yet unopened papers.

"We are getting too sensational," she said, smiling down upon Sir Felix. "No more news this evening; I forbid it."

When he had read the last word of that fatal paragraph, Quinlan arose hastily, put the paper into the hands of Sir Felix, and exclaimed:

"Read that article! In Heaven's name, what can such a thing mean! Is it some horrible blunder, or some—some dastardly practical joke?"

He was quivering with excitement; he, the man known among men by the *soubriquet* of "Cool Quinlan." He seemed unable to comprehend, or to reason.

Sir Felix favored him with a long slow look of surprised inquiry, and seeming to realize his mental condition, he read, slowly and aloud, the announcement of Leah Paget's strange disappearance. Then he arose. He looked shocked, startled, sympathetic, but still puzzled.

"It's very strange!" he said; "very strange. But I think this paper, the '*Call*', is named among your reliable organs. You knew the young lady, Mr. Quinlan?"

"Knew her?" said Quinlan, hoarsely. "Knew her? Yes. She was a dear, an old friend. I must learn something more

"La Belle Fabrice had fainted!" Page 81.

about this." He turned half round with a quick nervous movement.

"Will you allow me to go with you?" asked Sir Felix, with ready sympathy.

"Thank you. I shall be glad. Ladies—"

As he turned toward them, a sharp cry broke from his lips.

La Belle Fabrice was sitting in the big low chair beside the window; the newspaper had slipped from her fingers to the floor; her right hand hung loosely at her side; her left rested upon the cushioned chair-arm, and her head had fallen forward. She neither spoke nor stirred, and she did not lift her head when Madam Congreve called sharply·

"Fabrice! Fabrice!"

"*Fabrice!*" echoed Sir Felix Wyntoun, and he flung himself upon one knee beside her and lifted her head.

La Belle Fabrice had fainted.

CHAPTER X.

COUSIN AS A DETECTIVE.

Sir Felix Wyntoun and Frederick Quinlan went silently out from the apartments of La Belle Fabrice, having waited only to be informed, by her maid, that she was fast recovering under the care of Madam Congreve. But when they had reached the outer entrance they turned, and faced each other.

"I beg your pardon," began Sir Felix, with some hesitation. "I hardly know if it is right, or a—a breach of confidence in

a certain way, to mention it, but, as I have said, I was presented to this young lady—Miss Paget—by my friend Talfourd—we are quite old and familiar friends—and I supposed—not from anything *he* said, understand—but I have got hold of the idea somehow, that they—Talfourd and Miss Paget—were something more than friends. May I ask—"

He had floundered among his words from the first, and his embarrassment seemed to increase as he neared the point of his sentence; until, at last, he broke off abruptly, checked, in part, by the look upon Quinlan's face.

Sir Felix Wyntoun was a cultured young Englishman, and, in a certain sense, a man of the world; but he was, as yet, too honest a young Englishman to be, at all times and under all circumstances, absolutely at his ease.

As for Frederick Quinlan, he was again externally calm. Rather, he was again master of his features and his voice, but not, perhaps, of his words.

He favored Sir Felix with a cool stare.

"If you mean that Max Talfourd told you, either by plain words or innuendo, that Miss Paget is more to him than an ordinary friend—"

But now Sir Felix was again his serene self. Quinlan's look would have been enough without the words.

"I believe, I said there were no such words. At least, I meant that. And my friend Talfourd is not the man to make use of 'innuendo' in speaking of a lady."

"I was about to say," resumed Quinlan, "that if such were the case you were better informed than I."

"Oh, that!" Sir Felix looked at his watch. "Have you any definite plan, Mr. Quinlan?—anything wherein I can be of use to you?" His tone was frigid.

"I must own," said Quinlan, with a short laugh, "that in the first shock of seeing in the list of the 'disappeared' the name of a young lady whom I know and esteem, I felt like making the case a personal one; I have sisters, you must know. But on second thought, Miss Paget, in any emergency, is not the person to need Quixotic championship from gentlemen friends, however willing they may be to mount spurs in her service or defense. For a moment, I believe, I must have had some vague notion of calling on the Chief of the Detective force, or challenging the '*Call*'. Upon second thought—I shall go to the club. One generally gets at the truth of things there; and, unless you will join me at table, I don't see that I can make use of your friendly services just now, much as I may feel inclined to monopolize—" He broke off abruptly to hail a passing cab.

"Thank you," replied Sir Felix. "You are very good, but it is not quite late enough to dine, and I think I will make a call."

He went down the steps, followed by Quinlan, whose cab was drawing up to the pavement, and a second was approaching, also empty. Sir Felix beckoned, and the vehicle drew in close behind the other, beside which Quinlan stood, talking in a low tone to the driver. As Sir Felix entered his cab, Quinlan overheard his order to the driver.

"So!" he said, to himself, "he's going straight to Max Talfourd." Then he entered his own cab, saying, after he was comfortably seated: "Drive slowly, and stop at the first newsstand."

When Polly Cousin turned away from the stately "front" after his unsatisfactory call upon La Belle Fabrice, he was full of anger and chagrin. It was too late for office work or item

hunting for the '*Call*', and too early for his next visit to the Chief of Police.

He walked discontentedly southward for nearly a block, and then turned and paced slowly back to the great hotel. Several fine equipages were stationed before the splendid entrance. Perhaps, one of them had brought the young "milord." Fabrice might be about to take the air in his society—who could tell? He wanted to see her face, and he didn't care much if she saw his. He was feeling unreasonably vindicative.

The splendid drive was full of life; carriages, landaus,—all sorts of vehicles of pleasure,—were passing and repassing. Hansoms, full and empty, dashed hither and thither. Cousin stopped, and watched them until, among the unoccupied hansoms, he saw a driver whom he knew. He signalled him, and said:

"James, I want you to drive me up and down within sight of this place for half an hour, more or less. Walk your horse, and keep him on the further side of the street."

The driver nodded knowingly, and began his slow perambulation.

When Frederick Quinlan and Sir Felix Wyntoun came forth together, Cousin, who was then almost opposite them, leaned forward and said, "James, make your turns short enough to keep that entrance in view."

He saw Quinlan signal the first cab, and Sir Felix beckon the other. He waited until Sir Felix had given his order, and while he hesitated, the first cab dashed away.

"I'll follow the last one," he muttered. "*He's* going up town to dinner somewhere, most likely. Follow that cab," nodding toward the one occupied by Quinlan, "and be care-

ful." Then he settled back, and muttered to himself, "Fred Quinlan's always worth watching."

He saw Quinlan stop at a street-stand and buy two or three papers, then stop at a book-store, and come out with two or three more in his hand.

"Looks as if he was laying in a full line of evening papers," muttered Cousin. And then he saw that Quinlan was paying his fare and dismissing his cab.

"Fare's goin'," said the driver, with a grin; "want me to foller him?"

"Yes; follow him," snapped Cousin.

Quinlan sauntered on for two blocks, with the roll of papers stuck carelessly underneath his arm. Then he turned a corner and began to walk briskly for two more blocks, and another turn brought him to a cab-stand.

Here, again, he took a vehicle, and this time was driven briskly up town, but upon a different street.

It was a drive of more than half an hour, and Quinlan had doubtless found time to skim the cream from the evening papers; for when he again dismissed his driver, Cousin passed near enough the empty cab to see the little heap of newspapers lying upon the seat.

Quinlan had stopped before an apartment house, not so large as many of these palatial hostelries, but new and elegant. He went in at the general entrance, ascended the broad flight of stairs, traversed a square hall or court lighted from a glittering dome high above, and touched an electric bell beside a double-arched door, upon one panel of which was tacked, in an unpleasant foreign fashion, a small gilded card which bore the name.

Mademoiselle Hortense Novalis.

CHAPTER XI.

CAPTAIN CONNORS OPENS THE CASE.

At an early hour on the evening of the following day, Chief of Police Connors sat in his inner office, alone, and carefully scanning what seemed to be a list of names in one note-book, alternating with sundry memoranda in another.

After some minutes he apparently finished with the book of memoranda, and dropping it into an open drawer, which he closed and locked, he drew back in his chair and glanced over his desk, putting away one or two written documents, closing a ledger, casting a wary glance down at the floor and into the waste-basket, lest a dropped letter or a misplaced paper might fall into wrong hands.

All being as it should in the sanctum of a careful and methodical Chief of Police, he rang a bell.

"Are they here?" he asked of a man who promptly appeared.

"All but Marcus."

"Very well." The Chief took out his watch, glanced at it, and then, from force of habit, up at the clock opposite his desk. "Send in Waters."

Waters came and seated himself in a chair drawn up before the desk of the Chief, and very near it. He was a small, spare man, grey-haired, and quiet of manner. He said nothing until the Chief addressed him, merely looking up with the calm air

of a man accustomed to the situation, and smiling slightly as their glances met.

"Well, Waters?"

"I think I've exhausted Grammercy Park, sir. The Carters are an old family there; wealthy, highly respected, etc. The solid sort. The family, that is, the old people, are not especially intimate with the Pagets."

"You're sure of that?"

"Quite sure, sir, It's very clear, though, that they, with the rest of social New York, hold the Pagets in high esteem."

"Yes."

"It's the daughter, only daughter, Miss Gertrude or Gertie Carter, who is the friend of Miss Leah Paget. The young ladies were chums at school."

"Yes, I see."

"They have not exchanged many visits—the young ladies, I mean, because Miss Carter has been absent until quite recently, pursuing the study of music in Germany. I do not think they can have seen enough of each other since their school-days to become intimate up to the confiding stage."

"And how far back do they date—these school-days?"

"Considerably more than a year."

"Oh, indeed!"

"The family have no more idea of the present whereabouts of Miss Paget than I have. They are thoroughly startled by the news. If Miss Paget had a secret of any sort, I don't think she would have confided it to Miss Gertie Carter."

"Why?" quickly interjected the Chief.

"Miss Paget," Waters went on, imperturbably, "is, I am told, a young lady of much intelligence, brilliant, talented, soundly sensible. Miss Carter is a pretty, good-natured,

chattering little magpie; utterly incapable of taking serious things seriously; of giving good advice or taking it, or of keeping a secret."

Captain Connors leaned back in his chair and laughed. "You're a model hand with a verbal report, Waters. I feel quite well acquainted with Miss Carter. We will drop her and all the Carters, or rather, I will drop them, and leave them to you, unless—is there anything else?"

"Nothing, except this: Miss Gertie is not merely the only daughter, she is the only child. They live alone—a family of three."

"Ah, Waters! you don't forget. I wish some of my youngsters were like you. About the others, now—did you find time—"

"Plenty. The Lathrops are soon disposed of. Miss Amy Lathrop is an orphan, an heiress of a modest sort—twenty thousand or so; another school-friend of Miss Paget's. The Lathrops, uncle and aunt, are summering at Point Comfort; they live somewhere over in Jersey, and know the Pagets only by reputation, or through their niece. Miss Amy Lathrop is a rather dignified young woman, with decided tastes and manners. The two young ladies, Miss Paget and Miss Lathrop, certainly hold each other in strong regard, but they are not, in any sense, intimates or *confidantes*. There is nothing to be gained by cultivating these people."

Captain Connors heaved a sigh, not deep but suggestive of a business-like disappointment.

"I feared or thought as much, Waters. Here are some other names," holding a strip of paper toward him. "Try if there's anything for us in these tomorrow. Let the others drop. That's all, Waters."

Waters withdrew, and the Chief, after a few moments of grave thought, again touched his bell.

"Send in Nickerson."

Nickerson came with much breeze and bustle. He closed the door with noise and fussiness, looking back to see that it *was* closed; sitting down and getting up again in the same instant; fussing about himself as if in search of a concealed treasure, only to produce, at last, a brown silk handkerchief, with which he vigorously mopped his face.

Evidently accustomed to the ways of the man, the Chief lay back in his chair and waited until stillness had succeeded this preliminary confusion. Then he said, "Well, Nickerson, are you ready now?"

Nickerson smiled as if sharing with the Chief the little grin, discernible behind that official's shaggy mustache, at his own foibles. "All ready," he said.

"Well, go on, then—about the Pagets?"

"There is nothing about the Pagets that isn't perfectly fair and square and straight—absolutely nothing," began Nickerson, bluntly. "Miss Leah Paget is an only child, petted, courted, flattered, beautiful, heiress to two fortunes. Father and mother both rich. She is in perfect physical health—if the word of the family physician is to be believed. Has never had a week's illness, never had a sorrow nor a disappointment, never had an ungratified wish—"

"Oh, come, Nickerson—" remonstrated the Chief, smilingly, "don't go off in that way."

Nickerson's eyes rested upon his superior with a shade of reproach. "You know a man can talk best in his own fashion," he said, "and since we don't write—"

"Confound it!" broke in the Chief, "if you wrote your re-

ports, I'd have to read a chapter out of a three-volume novel every day. But go on, old fellow ; you and I are too good friends to argue over whims. Go on, and take your own way. If you have formed an opinion, let's have it."

Captain Connors and John Nickerson had indeed seen service together ; first, as common policemen, and later, upon a select staff for special duties and dangers. The Chief was too genial to preserve, even with his younger and less well-known subordinates, that dignity usually found in the bearing of an official of his high degree,—vastly helpful and becoming when it is the gift of Mother Nature, eminently absurd and lacking of its proper impressiveness, when, as often happens, it is donned and doffed like a garment of state.

Nickerson drew his chair a little nearer his Chief, and smiled, evidently appeased.

" Well," he said, leaning back and inserting two thumbs into two waistcoat pockets—a favorite position,—" well, I *have* formed an opinion, and I don't believe I am going to find cause to change it right away."

" Oh !" The Chief settled back in his chair, folded his arms across his chest, and looked very alert. " Now, then ?"

" First ; every moment spent in interviewing, shadowing or burrowing into the history or character of the Paget servants, is so much time thrown away."

" Yes, I begin to think so."

" So, too, is every moment given to the past or present of the Pagets. I mean, of course, Paget and his wife."

" Um—m !"

" Oh, you'll find that I'm right ! I'm almost prepared to say as much of the missing young lady."

" Almost ?"

"Yes; I said *almost;* not quite, however."

"Very wise in you, too."

"Well, I don't know. I may as well say that, already, I incline strongly to the belief that the young lady is not absent by her own wish or will."

"That's making a long jump, Nickerson. What does it lead up to, first and most naturally, in your mind?"

"It leads, first, of course to all manner of conjectures; abduction, for instance; sudden insanity, suicide, elopement, a possible family quarrel, some secret trouble, or sorrow; a possible accident that might have rendered her insensible—"

"Pshaw!"

"You asked what were my first thoughts concerning this disappearance, didn't you? Well, I'm giving you some of them. Then, there's abduction followed by murder; there's abduction to rob; there's revenge, there's jealousy."

Connors groaned aloud.

"Then, there's such a thing as injuring the child to hurt the parents. There might be a rejected lover with a bad temper and an appetite for wine; or a jealous and, perhaps, jilted rival. Don't you remember the story of the rival singers of Italy? The one carried off the other, and spoiled her face scientifically with hot irons."

"Nickerson, if it wasn't you, I'd shut down on this."

"Well, you asked a question. I'm answering to the best of my ability. There's another thing,"—here Nickerson grinned behind his hand,—"there's the madhouse business."

Again Connors groaned; and as if in answer to the sound, some one tapped lightly at the office-door.

"Open it, Nickerson," said the Chief.

Nickerson complied, and Polly Cousin stood revealed in the doorway.

"Come in, Cousin," called Connors. And the reporter, nodding familiarly to Nickerson, entered the room and closed the door.

"Lock it," said the Chief.

Nickerson turned the key, and Cousin pushed a bolt into place.

"You're just the man for us, Polly," began the Chief. "Sit down, both of you. I want you to hear Nickerson propound theories."

"Theories?" Cousin drew a chair so close that he touched Nickerson's elbow. "Easy work, that."

"Yes; and Nickerson's good at it."

"It's about the only easy work we have," Nickerson retorted, "and it is usually the way we begin, I guess."

"I guess so, too," said Cousin. "Is it the Paget business?" There was neither interest nor curiosity in the question. Cousin spoke and looked like a man whose mind is already too full to admit of another idea.

"Yes," replied the Chief, "it is the Paget business. And I may as well say, right here, that it does not progress. I've had a dozen men out, and they've come back empty-handed."

Cousin brushed a hand across his brow, as if to exorcise all outside thoughts, and said, in the same indifferently quiet tone:

"You mean, that our first idea has been carried out, I suppose?"

"Yes. Miss Paget's parents, friends, neighbors and servants have all passed under the microscope — to no purpose."

"And among them all," said Cousin, "could they not furnish you with a single peg big enough to hang one of Nickerson's theories upon?"

"Or one of yours?" suggested Nickerson.

"My good fellow," retorted Cousin, "I haven't such a thing about me."

"If you had," broke in the Chief, "it would be thankfully received—by me, at least."

"Yes; and by me," agreed Nickerson, "even if it's a very small one."

"Well, I have an idea," said Cousin. "Of course, if you have learned absolutely nothing, you haven't found out who are Miss Paget's enemies?"

"Her enemies?" exclaimed Nickerson.

"Her enemies?" echoed the Chief.

"My good souls," began Cousin, as if remonstrating, "don't you know that there are only two kinds of women who don't make enemies?"

"Umph!" from the Chief. Silence and a long stare from Nickerson.

"The first are in the insane asylum," went on Cousin, "and the others are in their graves."

"Oh!" cried Connors, "this grows worse and worse!"

Cousin went on, heedless of the interruption:

"To fancy that a woman as young, as fair, as fortunate as Miss Leah Paget could live in this world and make no enemies, is as absurd as to say that envy and jealousy and avarice and all uncharitableness have gone out of the world. Connors, if I were you, I would trouble myself less with looking after her friends, and try to locate her enemies."

For a long time there was silence, except for the sound of

Cousin's cane tapping lightly and regularly against the toe of his boot. Then Nickerson turned, and put out his hand.

"Shake, boy!" he said. "You'll lead us all, yet. Gad! you *did* have an idea!"

"Well," said the reporter, carelessly, "you people had better utilize it then, and be ready for the next."

"Have you got another?"

"Almost."

"We will utilize this, Polly," said Connors. He hesitated a moment, glancing askance at Nickerson, and then, seeming to think of something worth remembering, drew a blank card toward him and wrote a few words hastily; then he said, "Your other idea, Cousin,—can't we have that, too?"

"Yes; it is this—and a good job it will be for Nickerson here; Find out what the friends and enemies of Miss Paget were doing during the night of her disappearance."

"Good!" exclaimed the Chief, with new animation; and he began to cover another card with his peculiar scrawl. "Now the wheels are beginning to move."

A knock at the office-door caused him to pause, and then he signalled Nickerson to admit the applicant.

It was one of his men, who silently presented a card to the Chief. Connors caught it up and glanced at the name thereon, and at the words pencilled below—

M. B. TALFOURD.

Will Captain Connors spare half an hour to one personally interested in the case of Miss Paget?

The Chief re-read the name and the words below it, and then passed the card to the reporter.

"Do you know him?" asked Cousin, after glancing at the card.

"Slightly. Pass it on to Nickerson."

Nickerson took the card and perused it in his turn.

"I don't know him," he said, as he returned it to the Chief.

"Tell the gentleman I will see him in five minutes," said the Chief to the waiting messenger. And when the door had again closed, he turned to Nickerson.

"I am going to let you work up Cousin's last idea, Nickerson, and it won't be a small job, I'm thinking. Take your own way, and as many men as you need; only be lively."

Nickerson arose with alacrity.

"I'll take half an hour to think things over," he said, "and then I may want to see you again."

"Very good," replied the Chief; and Nickerson went briskly out.

Then Cousin arose, and stood a moment silently leaning against the desk before Connors.

"You'll wait?" said the latter, in a confidential tone

"I'll come back," Cousin replied.

"Do you know Mr. Talfourd, Cousin?"

"Not personally. He's a square man, though."

"Yes, I am sure of that."

Cousin took up his hat, went toward the door, and then turned back.

"Don't forget," he said, slowly, "that this man is the father of Max Talfourd, and that Max Talfourd is the *fiancé* of Leah Paget."

CHAPTER XII.

MR. TALFOURD TAKES HIS STAND.

To a man in the position of Captain Connors, all men of note in this city, whether noted for good or evil, must necessarily become known to him, either personally or by reputation ; the word reputation meaning, in the case of a thorough-going Chief of Police, report, well-founded, and in many cases thoroughly investigated. But the father of Max Talfourd was known to Captain Connors even better than many of the other "notables". Indeed, it would have been strange if a man at once so bluff and so genial, so large-hearted and free-handed, so shrewd yet companionable, and so wealthy, were not well known, well loved, and well hated. So Mr. Talfourd and the Chief, who came down from his desk platform, met as pleasant acquaintances meet; then sitting opposite and very near each other, they settled themselves for their half-hour talk.

"After receiving that Quixotic visit from my son, I do not suppose you are surprised to see *me*, Captain?" began Mr. Talfourd.

"No," admitted the Chief; "and I am glad to see you."

"Thank you, Connors. Of course, you can see how it is that I am interested in this affair. Are you willing—is there any reason why you should not talk with me freely about it? You see, I come straight to the point."

"There is no reason why I should not talk with you about

it ; certainly not," said the Chief, slowly. " In fact, I am glad of this opportunity. May I ask if you have formed an opinion upon this subject ?"

" No. My mind is a blank."

The Chief looked grave, and, for a moment, both were silent.

" Then, I suppose, your sympathies are with the Pagets ?"

" My sympathies are with Leah Paget, which is only another way of saying that they are with my son."

Again, for a moment, the Chief meditated.

" Would you mind telling me how this came to your knowledge ?—the news of Miss Paget's disappearance—and how much you know of the affair—of the Paget family, and of your son's engagement ?"

" No, I don't mind in the least. But I'll reverse the order of your questions. I know nothing of my son's engagement, except that it exists. My wife had more than half suspected it for some time, and had hinted her suspicions to me. For myself, I gave the matter little thought. I have always believed my boy to have a tolerably level head. Yesterday, he came to my wife and me, and told us, first, that Leah was missing, and then, that she was his promised wife. The boy is sadly cut up."

" Yes, I should think so. However, he carried himself pretty well during his call here."

" Thanks," said Mr. Talfourd, smiling. " I'm rather proud of my boy, and it tickles my vanity, of course, to hear him praised. That's human nature, I suppose. Perhaps, before I answer your next question, I'd better tell you what happened yesterday when Max came home with his bad news. You must know, that while we were discussing the matter, the

girl's mother 'appeared upon the scene,' as they say in the play reviews."

"What, Mrs. Paget! If you'll give me an account of that —your son's story and Mrs. Paget's—give it in detail—I'll be obliged to you. Never mind the time; one can't tell a story in a minute."

"I'm more than willing to tell it," responded Mr. Talfourd.

And he did. When he came to the point in his narrative where Mrs. Paget surprised them all by presenting herself, he hesitated a moment.

"Now that I have come to Mrs. Paget," he said, "I feel almost as if I were violating a confidence; and yet, I'm not. Mrs. Paget knows that I meant to pay you this visit."

"Yes," assented the Chief, rather tamely. He was too thoroughly an officer of the law, to fully appreciate these scruples.

"To preface this part of my story, let me say that Mr. Paget and myself are not on very friendly terms. The fault, I suppose, is mutual. The difference was caused by our getting in each other's way in a business transaction. Each wanted the same bit of property. I've almost forgotten the details. I don't suppose that matters to you, though?"

"I don't see how it can, at present."

"Nor I, unless for want of a clue to work upon, you choose to turn eyes of suspicion upon me."

"Upon you?" the Chief exclaimed.

"Yes; you might choose to fancy that for revenge upon Paget, I had stolen his daughter, you know."

Mr. Talfourd spoke smilingly, and the Chief laughed outright.

"Since you have suggested it, perhaps, you had better tell us who came out ahead in that little business transaction?"

"If you are always so thorough, Captain, you would lose many a pretty-looking clue. I believe I was the head man that time. It was a principle with me always to win if I entered into any transaction. I did not care so much for the profit of the little speculation. Indeed, once the property was in my hands, I was prepared to be magnanimous, and offered to sell out to Paget at cost. But his Dutch was up. He wouldn't hear of it, of course. Seriously, I never felt a shade of rancor after my first blaze cooled. *I* have no animosity where Paget is concerned.

"Natural enough, that! you were the winning horse."

"I was about to say," Mr. Talfourd resumed, "that somehow we have met very seldom of late—Paget and I. The ladies used to exchange visits—I mean, my wife and Mrs. Paget,—Mrs. Paget, now and then, but not often, with her daughter,—each ignoring the differences of their lords, as good women will. But lately that has fallen off somewhat. There has been no abatement of kindly feeling, however; I am quite sure of that. I think it was, most likely, that certain odd sort of womanly or motherly delicacy and pride which has kept them apart. They saw, or guessed, how the young people were drawing near each other. However this may have been, they are certainly on most cordial terms now."

"Yes; misfortunes sometimes soften the heart. And women—well, I suppose a good woman is always made better, if not happier, by the exercise of fortitude."

"I believe so. Well, the question now is, will misfortune soften the heart of Abner Paget? I'll be in a position to enlighten you soon, for I am going to see him at once!"

"I hope you will come to me immediately after."

"I will. And now I will go back to my original subject. Mrs. Paget, it appears, was wholly in her daughter's confidence, and she knew that Leah was engaged to my son. Of course, it was a private engagement; it could not be otherwise."

He paused, and the Chief said, earnestly, "I wish you would tell me all you can about this engagement."

"I can tell very little. My son is progressive enough in some respects, but he is as punctilious in others as his old-fashioned father would have him. Feeling assured of the young lady's regard, he asked her father for permission to pay his addresses."

"And it was given?"

"And it was denied him. His suit was roundly rejected, in the good old Capulet fashion. Mr. Paget had other views for his daughter. He forbade them so much as remaining friends."

"And they disobeyed, in the good old fashion?"

"Not at first. Max, of course, being once committed, was committed for all time. He held himself bound, but refused to so hold her, hoping that her father's unreasoning displeasure might pass away. I think the young fellow felt that better treatment was due him. But Mr. Paget had another card to play. Shortly after he forbade Leah to Max, he bade her consent to receive the addresses of the other fellow."

"And the other fellow—who is he?"

"Again I feel like a social sinner. I believe this *is* a breach of confidence. But no; it isn't. Mrs. Paget told me to use the information she furnished as I thought fit. The name of the young man who has found favor in Mr. Paget's eyes, is Frederick Quinlan."

"What! The son of E. G.?"

"The same."

The Chief of Police pursed up his lips, as if about to whistle, thought better, and coughed instead.

"What do you know of young Quinlan?" he asked, after a moment's thought.

"Very little, except that he is the only son of E. G. Quinlan. There are also daughters—two, at least, for they are already in society."

"Well, what was the result of the Quinlan wooing?"

"Just what might have been expected from a spirited girl like Leah Paget. She utterly refused to receive Quinlan, and boldly declared for my son." He paused, and seemed as if considering something.

"Excuse me a moment," said the Chief, rising. "I want to send a message."

Mr. Talfourd nodded, and the Chief went out and across the hall to a small office where an old man was writing briskly at a high desk, and two or three younger ones were seated at a long narrow table, also engaged in writing.

"Has Cousin been in again?" the Chief asked of the man at the desk.

"Not yet, Captain," replied the man, without stopping his pen, or looking up.

"Then I'll write a line for him."

He took a card and pencilled a few words upon it, standing beside the desk with one foot upon the edge of a chair, and the card resting upon his knee.

"There," he said, placing the card at the old man's elbow; "that's for Cousin if he comes within twenty minutes. If he *doesn't* come within that time, see to it yourself, Pappy. Only, if you put it into other hands than Cousin's, cut off the last four words at the bottom of the card. Tell Cousin that I'll see him later."

The old man nodded, and Captain Connors went back to his private office, to Mr. Talfourd.

When the door had closed behind the Chief, the old man at the desk put his pen behind his ear, turned over the card which lay with its blank side uppermost, and read it, the last line, of four words, first :

" *In the Paget case.*"

Then the preceding lines :

" Frederick Quinlan, son of E. G. Q., look him up—his character, habits, haunts, companions ; his amusements, and standing, socially, and at the clubs. Put a shadow on him, and, if possible, *get his photograph.*"

CHAPTER XIII.

NICKERSON'S THEORIES.

When Captain Connors and Mr. Talfourd parted, at the door of the Chief's office, it was with mutual confidence, and a very clear understanding.

A moment later, Nickerson again appeared before his Chief.

" Well, Nickerson," said the good-natured personage, " have you considered to your heart's content ?"

Nickerson shut the door and came close to the desk.

" I thought that you might have a new idea to start me with, when you had talked with Talfourd," he said, his eyes searching the Chief's face. " Talfourd ought to know something."

"He does know a little something. Sit down a moment; I'll condense the thing for you. Eh! Cousin, come in."

Polly Cousin had opened the door noiselessly, and now stood upon the threshold, with the Chief's card between his fingers.

"Come in, Cousin. You may as well hear it too."

Cousin approached the desk and stood beside Nickerson. "I've just got this," he said, tapping the card. "I want to say a word about it before we go further."

"Wait!" broke in the Chief, "until I tell you both the little I have learned from Mr. Talfourd."

He ran very briefly over the main points of the interview, and when he had finished, all three were in possession of everything that was known or guessed at by Mrs. Paget and the Talfourds.

"It's a slim starter," commented Nickerson.

"It's a long degree better than nothing," said Polly Cousin.

"Well," said Nickerson, turning to go, "I'm glad I waited. I think now I'll give my earliest attention to Mr. Frederick Quinlan."

Without a word, Cousin laid the card he had been trifling with on the desk before the Chief.

"Connors," he said, quietly, "do you *want* my co-operation in this case? One moment, Nickerson—"

"Of course, I want it, Cousin," said the Chief. "Wait, Nick."

"Then," said Cousin, "I think that you would do well to organize your forces. But first, give that card to Nickerson; it's directly in his line."

Connors looked doubtful.

"I'll tell you why I came in just now," went on Cousin. "I know a little of Fred Quinlan; in fact, we are acquaint-

ances. I wanted to give you the benefit of my knowledge."

"One question," said the Chief. "Do you *want* Nickerson to take this off your hands?"

"You mean the Quinlan business? I would prefer it; yes."

"Then give us what you know about Quinlan, and let him be off."

"Frederick Quinlan, in society, is one man, and Fred Quinlan, at his clubs and in sporting circles, is another," said Cousin, crisply. "He's suave and agreeable in society, and quiet and orderly everywhere. He belongs to one or two, or maybe more, small social clubs. He drives good horses, and keeps a yacht. All this the world knows. But all the world does not know that he belongs to the Daybreak Club, and plays there heavily."

"He couldn't get in *there* if he didn't," said the Chief. "The thing's no more nor less than a select gambling-house."

"Correct, Captain. Quinlan is also in at the dirty turf business pretty often. He owns a jockey on the quiet, and he owns a racer or two in the same way. He bets largely behind some of the regular turfmen. And that is not all. He doesn't depend wholly upon upper-tendom for his society. He's anything but fastidious sometimes, and I guest that yacht of his could tell some queer tales. Is that enough for a 'starter,' Nickerson?"

"Quite," said the detective.

"Then take this; I leave Quinlan to you." Cousin pushed the card toward him, and as he took it he turned to Connors.

"Well, I am off." And Nickerson set his cap upon his head and left them, with a nod to the Chief and a wink to Cousin.

When he had gone, the Chief seated himself before Cousin, who remained standing as at first.

"Now, Polly," he said, "what is it?"

"I'm quite willing to take up Quinlan later," Cousin said, with a preoccupied air. "But just now he's straight in Nickerson's line. Besides, I want to go in the opposite direction."

"Oh, that's it, eh? Which way?"

"I want to go again to Pagets."

"Why?"

"Because, if Mr. Talfourd goes there, and, as you have said, they are not on cordial terms, I'd give something to arrive just after their meeting. Mr. Paget will be in just the mood for such a talk as I wish to have with him."

"Will he? Now, if I know Mr. Paget, he will be in a very ugly state of mind by the time he is done with Mr. Talfourd, or Talfourd done with him."

"Exactly; and that is what I want. The only time to hope for much conversation from that overbearing old aristocrat is when he is goaded to the point where a little added pressure will loosen his tongue in spite of his dignity. And now tell me—you began but did not get far—what are Nickerson's theories?"

"Oh, don't you like your own better?" laughed the Chief.

"Connors, I don't believe you appreciate the value of that man. He's the best reasoner I know; and there's not his equal for patient, thorough, burrowing work."

"That's true. Put Nickerson on the scent, and he's the right man in the right place. To dig up the past, neatly and thoroughly, the man has not an equal. But for looking ahead—well, you know Nickerson."

"Yes, I know Nickerson; and I know that his reasoning, abstract or otherwise, is better than yours or mine. Nickerson can see much farther than he can go. Now, I'll wager that he has favored you with half a dozen plausible causes for this disappearance."

"He has that!"

Cousin took out his note-book.

"Run them over," he said. "I'm willing to utilize Nickerson's peculiar talent."

CHAPTER XIV.

SIR FELIX DEFINES HIS POSITION.

As Sir Felix Wyntoun alighted from his cab at the street entrance before the home of his friend Talfourd, he saw Max himself emerge from a side door which opened upon a *porte cachere*, where stood a waiting carriage. Max was followed by a lady of dignified presence, dressed in garments of sombre richness, to whom he gave his hand, assisting her to her place in the carriage.

As the vehicle rolled away, Max saw Sir Felix, and hastened to meet him.

"I am glad to see you, Wyntoun," Max said, as he took his hand, "although I am in rather gloomy spirits. I'd like to receive you in my home, for the first time, under happier auspices, but—"

"Don't mention it, I beg," broke in the young Englishman, earnestly. "That I haven't been able to respond to your invitations before, has been my misfortune. If my visit now is not untimely, intrusive, I am very glad."

Max Talfourd turned as they were walking toward the house, and scanned the face of his friend. Their eyes met squarely; in one was honest questioning, in the other, honest sympathy. No word was spoken until they had reached the entrance, and then Max said, "I am going to take you up to my snuggery." He led the way across the wide hall, up the stairs with its moss-like carpet, across another hall, and so into a room—Max Talfourd's own.

When they were within, and the door closed, Max again extended his hand.

"You are a friend in need, Wyntoun," he said, pressing the hand of Sir Felix between both his own. "Sit down as comfortably as you can—and tell me, how much will you let me impose upon your good nature?"

"I cannot," answered Sir Felix, sinking into a comfortable seat. "But if you will begin, and go 'right ahead,' as I've heard some of you Yankees say, I will tell you when to stop." Again their eyes met. "Perhaps," he added, "I ought to say that I came just now because I fancied, I feared, that you might be in trouble."

"I am!" broke in Max, letting his eyes droop, and not quite able to keep his voice steady. "I am in deep trouble."

"I was about to say," went on the young nobleman, without withdrawing his gaze, "that I came to offer you all my sympathy, and any service I can render."

Max had just seated himself near his friend, but arose and began pacing the floor, keeping his face half averted as he spoke.

"It seems like a nightmare!" he said, "it has all come upon me so suddenly. Up to the present hour I have hardly had time to think, to face it all squarely. A short time ago her mother came,—Mrs. Paget,—and we have been trying to talk about it—she, my parents, and I. It was she who left us as you came. I think I must have been, at that moment, upon the very point of breaking down." He stopped in his nervous march. "I have not asked you how much you know," he continued, in a more subdued tone, "nor how you learned it."

"I saw it in an evening paper," Sir Felix explained. And then, to give his friend time to recover himself, he went on: "I was calling upon La Belle Fabrice. Young Quinlan, whom you know, I believe—" Talfourd nodded—"young Quinlan was there, and we were glancing over the items of interest in the papers."

"Oh!" Talfourd came back and slowly resumed his seat. "What did Frederick Quinlan say?"

"I can hardly tell. He did not say much, but his agitation surprised me. Are you two great friends?"

Talfourd uttered a short mirthless laugh.

"As great friends as an accepted lover who is rejected by the stern parent, and a rejected lover who is accepted by the stern parent, are likely to be."

"And is that the state of affairs?" Sir Felix looked as if new light were dawning upon him.

"That is the state of affairs. I can say this now, for we have decided that it is best that the engagement be made public. You must understand that it was not announced, because Mr. Paget did not favor my suit; he preferred Quinlan. But Mrs. Paget has been, all along, her daughter's *confidante*. She

sent for me as soon as Leah's absence was discovered. She thinks it right that the truth concerning our engagement be now made known."

"It will certainly be best, for the young lady at least. I'll wager that was your idea, Talfourd."

"You couldn't suppose that Leah's mother would suggest such a thing?"

"I don't suppose it for an instant. And I do not suppose that many in your position would suggest it for themselves—Mr. Quinlan, for instance."

Max Talfourd frowned. "I don't quite see your drift, Wyntoun. What would *you* have done under similar circumstances?"

"You must remember that I do not know the circumstances, even as you know them. As to what I would have done, I would have done, I hope, just as you have; provided, of course, I had full faith in the lady."

"I have full faith in Leah Paget. Let us understand each other. My friends must see her from my point of view. No one can help me who does not look upon my promised wife as above suspicion."

Sir Felix smiled indulgently. "I am quite willing to adopt your point of view, my dear fellow. I assure you that mine is far from lucid. I have seen Miss Paget for just one evening, and danced with her twice. I am not an adept at character reading; I do not pretend to any of that sort of wisdom. But if Miss Paget is not a pure, true, and generous woman, then I will live a single life forever. I never would dare to doubt such clear frank eyes, and a voice that might belong to an angel of truth. I hope that is strong enough? It is not trumped up for the occasion."

"Thank you!" Max Talfourd put out his hand, but something like a sob arose in his throat and stopped his speech.

"It is not a time to intrude my affairs upon you," went on Sir Felix, "but I am going to be quite frank with you, about myself. Can you guess why I came here, to America, at this time?"

"I could not, at first," said Max; "but tonight—not long ago—" He broke off, and, rising, went across the room and took a paper from an open *escritoire*. "That explained it," he said, pointing to a marked paragraph.

Again it was the "*Evening Call*," and the paragraph was the one concerning La Belle Fabrice and her titled follower from over the seas.

Sir Felix scanned the paragraph.

"Confound their American impudence!" he exclaimed, flushing hotly. Then he read it again, and this time he looked up, flushing still, but smiling too. "But it is true," he said, boyishly.

In spite of his trouble, Max Talfourd laughed.

"I have nothing to say," continued Sir Felix, "except what you have just said for yourself. She is an actress. I do not even know her real name, and she does not encourage me. But I am ready to swear by her truth and goodness. I love her, and if she is not Lady Wyntoun some day, it will be because she refuses to look favorably upon the particular branch of humbug that I represent."

"I don't think you could set yourself up for a fair specimen of the nobility and gentry, Wyntoun. But I can't refuse to say 'God speed' to your wooing. I am inclined to think that you are right, too. La Belle Fabrice—" he broke off abruptly.

"Do you know her?" asked Wyntoun.

"I—I suppose every one knows professional people, in one way or another." He spoke in a strangely-constrained voice, and generous Sir Felix, fancying that he was still striving for self-possession, went on, more to give his friend time than to free his own mind.

"Of course, you would hear and read much of her. She was the fashion in London, as she will be here, once she has made her *debut*. But I was more fortunate, or unfortunate; time will tell which. I met her in town often, during the season, and later we spent a fortnight together at a house-party in the country. Oh, she bears every-day inspection wondrously. Most actresses are at their best behind the footlights; *she* is at her best everywhere."

"Of course," assented Talfourd, trying to smile. "And have you—" He paused, and looked his question.

"Have I declared myself? No. She won't give me an opportunity. But, Talfourd, my dear fellow, let's talk about your affairs. Are you going to take me into your confidence?"

"I am only too glad to do so." He drew his chair closer to that occupied by his friend, and told him the story of the day,—of Mrs. Paget's summons, and his visit to Leah's home; of his visit to the Chief of Police, and the Editor of the "*Call*;" of his talk with his parents, and lastly, of the visit of Mrs. Paget.

"All has been done that could be done, it seems," he concluded. "The resources of the city police and detective force will be exhausted, if need be, in the search. Paget will leave no stone unturned, of course. And yet, I do not feel satisfied. I feel as if there were something, perhaps under our very eyes, that would give us the keynote to this mystery—a motive of

some sort, on the part of some one, now unsuspected; and I feel as if this were being overlooked."

Sir Felix was silent a moment, seeming to muse.

"I think I understand," he said. "If one could only have his family Paul Pry, his private detective! Now, why may it not be true, that, say in a case like this, a gentleman, a man of the world, knowing its ways, its ins and outs, as only such a one can, is not just the man for the office? Because your crack detective, perhaps, can run down his assassin or his burglar nine times in ten, does it follow that he is the man to unravel a mystery of this sort? There should be detectives *and* detectives; don't you think so?"

"I suppose there are. But those of the sort we want, are few."

"Naturally. Do you know your Chief of Police?"

"Connors? I know that he is an honest man, and second to none in the line of work that is most often brought before him. We cannot demand everything of our police and detectives. They cannot be expected to be prepared for remote possibilities. I am not disparaging Connors and his men. But I will say this, Wyntoun: If Leah Paget is not restored, or her whereabouts accounted for, within the next twenty-four hours, I shall look for nothing further from the police. The cunning that can baffle them for so long, will be more than their match in the end."

"And then—?"

"And then—what? Advise me, Wyntoun."

The face of the young Englishman brightened. Max had again arisen, and was pacing the floor. Sir Felix arose also and slipped his hand within his friend's arm.

"First," he said, "tell me just how you stand, relatively to

this search. Are you going to be known as one of the instigators?"

"Not at present; not unless I see some new clue to follow, some fresh avenue. We have agreed that the fact of my engagement is to be made known, in the quietest way possible. I do not mean to send it to the newspapers, understand. Of course, they will get it. But not from me. *You* can help me there, Wyntoun."

"I? How?"

"By saying, at the clubs, or when any one speaks of this, that you know of our engagement. It is delicate work, but you can do it gracefully, if you don't mind."

"Of course I don't mind. Do not let us have any more of that. I will do what you wish. When you are convinced that everything has been done, and if the result is still failure, have you any plans?"

Max shook his head.

"I would give all I possess to know, at this moment, where to find an untrammelled, independent, well-informed, gentlemanly private detective; one who is master of his own time, and could furnish both brains and working power."

"And how would you use him?"

"I would retain him privately. I would let Paget and the police go on as they would, and I would give my man *carte blanche*."

The face of Sir Felix brightened. He gripped his friend's arm tightly between both his hands.

"My dear fellow," he said, "I know the very man you want!"

Talfourd turned upon him, his face flushed with excitement. "Who is he?" he cried; "where is he?"

"He was in London a month ago; he may be at the North Pole now. He is an English gentleman, and a genuine one, cultured, refined, and clever. He is a detective, too,—a private one, of course,—working only upon such cases as he finds interest in. Money cannot hire him to work upon a force or to do common work. He never touches robberies, forgeries—anything that simply means money, and does no harm to life, or character. I believe he is the best detective in the world."

"And his name?"

"His name? I dare say you have heard it. It is *Francis Ferrars.*"

CHAPTER XV.

COMPLICATIONS.

If the father of Max Talfourd had not been a semi-invalid, unusually harrassed by the events of the preceding forty-eight hours, suffering from frequent twinges of gouty pain, and hungry for his dinner, it might, perhaps, have been otherwise.

Or, if Abner Paget had not been left too long to himself, fasting, and thinking alone, gnawed by his pride, pricked a little, as even a very well-behaved father may reasonably be sometimes, by his conscience, fearful for the fate of his missing daughter, and wroth because he must needs be questioned and commanded like any common mortal, by Chief of Police Connors and his minions,—it might not have happened.

As it was, with the best of intentions upon both sides, Talfourd senior and Paget *pere* quarrelled, each man being sure that his point of view was the only reasonable one.

They met in Abner Paget's severely-splendid library, where all the books looked so painfully new, and saluted like two courteous hostile gentlemen of the old school about to fight a duel; and, indeed, that is pretty much what they did.

It is a sad, absurd, and tedious thing—a polite and courtly quarrel between two stately, well-intentioned, opinionated grey-beards; and its end was confusion.

It began with the two duellists sitting directly opposite each other in two huge leather-covered chairs, in which each could be at ease and still maintain a becoming dignity. And it ended with the two standing erect, facing each other squarely, and not an arm's length between them. When it was over, Mr. Talfourd walked to the door as prim and erect as if he were not wincing because of the twinges that were writhing their way through his right limb, turned there, and said:

"I am sorry for the spectacle of mistaken, yes, wicked pride, that you have shown this day. It makes it impossible that I should lift a hand to help you, were it in my power. It compels me to bid my son withdraw entirely from his present position as openly-announced *fiancé* of a girl who is mysteriously missing. It forces me to close my doors to you and yours. You have insulted me, sir, and only your age and the fact that you are a man in affliction, saves you from chastisement. One thing more: you have given me a new idea, a new hint, which I shall not be slow to follow up. I leave you, sir, to visit the Chief of Police."

"James," said Mr. Paget to the servant, who had just answered his ring, "show that gentleman the door."

When Mr. Talfourd came out from the inhospitable house of Mr. Paget, it was growing late, but he told his coachman to drive him once more to the office of the Chief of Police.

"Well," said that individual, when Talfourd was again seated in one of his comfortable office-chairs, "have you made that call?"

"Paget will doubtless inform you that I *have*, when you see him again," said Talfourd, with a short laugh. "It is my first call upon Abner Paget in—I don't know how many years," he went on, in answer to an inquiring look from Captain Connors. "And I cannot fancy myself repeating it; at least, not for some time. You are a pretty shrewd fellow, Captain, but I will wager you cannot guess what that old man charged me with."

"Carrying off the young lady?" queried Connors, with a grin at his own facetiousness.

"*Yes, sir!*"

"You don't mean it!"

"But I do! I told him that my son, thinking it might be best, and wishing that he might have the right it would give him to assist in the search for Miss Paget, would make it known at once that she was betrothed to him. Paget flew into a rage, declared that it should not be done, and ended by vowing that he believed the whole thing a scheme gotten up by us—my son, myself, and his daughter!"

"By Jove!" ejaculated Captain Connors, and for some time he said nothing more. "What did you say to all this?" he asked, finally.

"Well, I am afraid that I spoke rather hotly, but I guess I did not say any more than I meant. I told him that after such an outrage I could do but one thing—that I must forbid my son

to put himself forward as Miss Paget's *fiancé*, or to mix himself up in the business in any way."

"And you meant that?"

"Yes; I meant it, and I mean it now. My son is of age, to be sure, and I shall not go into the casting off, disinheriting business, or anything of that sort. But if he persists, it will be against my expressed wishes, and without my aid or consent. I think, too, that he must see the necessity for withdrawing altogether, from this moment; otherwise, old Paget will pronounce the whole thing a farce."

"Yes; it is a most extraordinary state of affairs," assented Captain Connors, thoughtfully.

"Now, I think I will go home and inform my wife and Max of the result of my visit to that unreasoning old idiot; that is," with a smile, "if you do not share Paget's suspicions, and so put me under arrest."

"Not tonight," laughed Connors.

"Well," taking up his hat, and rising, "you had better have us watched. Is there anything else, Captain? If not, I will be off before Paget arrives. He is sure to come, to tell you of his brilliant new idea."

There was little else; and Mr. Talfourd went home to catechise his son.

Max was alone in his room, and he received his father so eagerly that the elder Talfourd felt his courage deserting him. But he got his story out at last, and waited for its effect.

"My poor Leah!" said Max. "If I can only find her alive— Ah, she shall not go back to *him!*"

And then the elder Talfourd astonished his son by announcing his determination.

"You will have to drop it all, Max," he continued. "There is no other alternative."

He waited for his answer, but none came. His son sat opposite him with set lips, looking him squarely in the face.

"Well!" said Mr. Talfourd, at last, "are you going to say anything?"

"Not on this subject," said Max, quietly. "It would be useless. The fact of my engagement has been already announced; and if it were not, it should be—all the sooner for this.

"Max!"

"We will not discuss the matter, father. We have never yet differed in anything of importance. This is very important to me. You promised, yes, proffered your help. Let that go; I release you from that, from any promise you like. Be neutral—be even opposed to me, if you will, but do not lay any commands upon me. I shall have to disobey them. And now, will you excuse me? I have an engagement with Wyntoun."

Captain Connors did not expect a visit from Mr. Paget. But he did expect a full account of the meeting between Messrs. Talfourd and Paget, through the medium of Polly Cousin; a repetition of the story told by Talfourd, from the Paget point of view.

It was Cousin's plan to arrive at Mr. Paget's house directly after the departure of Mr. Talfourd, then to return to the office and report to Captain Connors. But he did not come. And, after an hour of waiting, the Chief began to yawn.

"Cousin was never so late before," he murmured, sleepily.

Another half hour and then the monotony of waiting was

broken by the arrival of a note. It was from Abner Paget, and ran as follows :

To Captain Connors, Chief of Police, City. Sir :—I have, this evening, received a visit from one of your agents, Mr. Cousin. I hope that the questions you have thought it necessary to ask, through him, have been answered satisfactorily.

I have some ground for thinking that the clue to my daughter's strange disappearance may not be so difficult to find. I have learned that she had engaged herself, against my expressed commands, to a young man in whom, I have reason to believe, there is much that is reprehensible. The young man's father has cherished for years an enmity against me, and has encouraged his son in the pursuit of my daughter. I will not go further into this painful subject. Were it not for your assurance that my confidence would be respected, I could not write as above. I have not mentioned this suspicion to Mr. Cousin. The name of the young man who has clandestinely won my daughter's affections, is Maxwell Talfourd. A word to the wise, etc.

Yours,

ABNER PAGET.

"Upon my word!" ejaculated the Chief, when he had perused this missive, "that's an astonishing thing! I'll—give this letter to—Nickerson."

He waited half an hour longer and then prepared to leave for the night, somewhat dissatisfied at Cousin's non-appearance.

"I can't think what has overtaken Cousin," he muttered. "It's the first time he ever failed me."

CHAPTER XVI.

SARA.

Polly Cousin had meant to arrive at the Paget mansion before Mr. Talfourd had taken his departure. But the unexpected difference between Mr. Talfourd and Mr. Paget had hastened the going of the former, who was already out of the house before Cousin appeared before Mr. Paget, whom he found pacing the floor in a manner betokening perturbation of mind.

Perhaps, his recent encounter with Mr. Talfourd, a foeman worthy of his steel, had served as a sop to his wounded vanity, or possibly he had begun to take a less personal and more pathetic view of the case; to think less of the Paget pride and more of the Paget loss; less of Abner and more of Leah Paget. Be this as it may, it is certain that Polly Cousin met with an almost gracious welcome when he appeared for the second time before Abner Paget.

The greetings were barely over, and Cousin was inwardly congratulating himself upon the improvement in the bearing of his host, when that gentleman touched a bell, and said to the servant, who appeared with much promptness, "Ask Mrs. Paget if she is able to see—ah—Mr. Cousin; or, say a messenger from Captain Connors." Then turning toward Cousin: "I have decided," he said, "in fact, it is the advice of her physician, that I will make Mrs. Paget one at our counsels. To know all that has been and is being done, is, we think, the

best relief, yes, the only relief, we can as yet offer her. Is there any objection to this on your part?"

"None whatever," Cousin answered, composedly. "I think it an excellent idea."

They waited in silence for a moment, when the door slowly opened, stopped half-way, with the hand of the footman visible upon the knob, and a slow, soft, and pathetically sweet voice spoke outside:

"Is Mr. Paget in his library, Henry? May I see him, just for a moment?"

Before Henry could frame a reply, Abner Paget was at the door.

"Sara—Mrs. Volney!" he exclaimed, with more eagerness than might have been expected from him. "You certainly may come in. Have you seen Mrs. Paget?"

He swung the door open, and then Polly Cousin was conscious of blushing violently, as, glancing up, he encountered the gaze of a pair of eyes—whether brown or blue or grey he could not have told for days after—deep, luminous eyes; the strangest eyes, the saddest eyes, the loveliest eyes, he thought, his own had ever rested upon.

These marvellous eyes were set in a pale exquisite face; a face all lily, with no hint of rose except in the thin delicately-curved lips; a Madonna face, so he named it to himself, framed in a mass of rippling pale-gold hair.

What a vision it was!—the tall, lithe, rounded figure in the flowing, fleecy, black garments; the grace of each movement! And then the voice: soft, slow, sweetly pathetic; and over all, through all, the sympathy, the pity, the pathos, that strange serenity never ruffled, the low cadences never raised or roughened!

As they stood face to face in the center of the stately library, the stiff old aristocrat unbending even toward her, the beautiful woman with her hand in his, Cousin, for one dazed moment, saw clearly what was meant by the hitherto meaningless phrases, "old family" and "blue blood." And he did mental homage.

"I went to Mrs. Paget's door," the gentle voice began. "She is too ill, the poor mother; she cannot come down Mr. Paget, is there any news?"

No conventional words of sympathy; only the little white hand resting in his; only the sweet indescribable lowering of her always soft tones, as she spoke the last words; only the sad questioning eyes upraised to his face.

Abner Paget gently released the dainty hand, and drew forward a chair, in which he placed her with grave courtesy.

"No," he said, "there is no news."

"Ah," she breathed, softly, "it is too sorrowful! I have just heard of it. I came home today." She clasped her hands in her lap and looked up into his face, and then slowly turned her mild gaze upon Cousin.

Her host noted the glance.

"We have begun a thorough search," he said. "The detectives are at work, and this—" He hesitated, evidently at a loss as to how he should characterize Cousin, who sat before them both like a graven image, his eyes riveted upon the hem of the lady's black robe.

Instantly she came to the rescue.

"This young man is a detective?"

Paget nodded.

"Ah!" She bowed to Cousin and let her eyes rest upon his face, with a glance of kindly interest. "Then I am in the

way, perhaps." She made a slight movement, but did not rise. Instead, she turned her eyes once more upon Mr. Paget. "Is there anything I may do?"

Mr. Paget shook his head.

She seemed to be thinking. Then she arose and came close to him. "If there is anything that I may know—" she said plaintively. "I am very anxious, very unhappy, about this." She put out her hand again.

"Wait," Mr. Paget said, and turned toward Cousin. "I was saying, Mr. Cousin, that I wished my wife to be present at our interviews. And this lady, Mrs. Volney, is an intimate family friend. Is there any reason why she should not remain?"

Percy Cousin had arisen when the name of the lady was spoken, and she had recognized the movement by a second inclination of her dainty head, while her lovely pathetic eyes rested gravely upon his face. She did not withdraw her gaze when Mr. Paget paused, nor while Cousin made answer:

"That rests with you, Mr. Paget. Upon my part I see no objection. If the lady is a friend of your daughter's, she may, perhaps, aid us by some suggestion"

"Oh," sighed Sara Volney, "if I could!"

She arose and seated herself in a low ottoman midway oetween the places occupied by the two men. She listened very quietly, sitting as noiseless as the statue behind her, while Cousin, in brief detail, ran over the history of the movements of the officers during the past twenty-four hours. He was conscious, while he addressed himself to Mr. Paget, that the lady's eyes were riveted upon his face. Involuntarily, as he ceased speaking, he turned, and met her glance.

There was a moment of silence. A long sigh from Mrs. Volney broke the stillness.

"Then nothing has been accomplished," she asked, sadly, "with so many keen hunters, so many able detectives and police? And such a highly esteemed Chief at the head of the search! How does it look to you, sir? Is it not disheartening?"

"It would be," he replied, "if the search had started thirty-six days ago, instead of about that many hours."

"Oh!" she sighed again, and turned her pathetic eyes upon Mr. Paget.

"We think now," went on Cousin, feeling a little inward surprise at his recovered self-possession, "having exhausted all the ordinary methods of inquiry, that it is time to organize a systematic search in new lines of inquiry. I have here, Mr. Paget, a list of questions, to which I hope you will give the most direct answers possible. Captain Connors feels that the case is a serious one, and there will be no time lost, and no ground overlooked by us, if we have from you all the information you can give, or put us in the way of obtaining from other sources."

"Eh!" ejaculated Mr. Paget, wrinkling his brows. "Well, young man, go on; I'll try to follow."

Cousin turned to Mrs. Volney. She was leaning slightly forward; her clear pale face, rendered almost statue-like by its framing of dead-black crape, was turned fully upon him. She had drawn off her gloves, and her small ringless hands were clasped together in her lap, holding between them a fold of her sable drapery. As he looked she did not withdraw her gaze, but let her eyes meet his and rest upon them, full of wistfulness.

Again the silence was unbroken, while Cousin drew from his pocket a small memorandum-book and a pencil. He was about to make use of Nickerson's "theories."

CHAPTER XVII.

BEWITCHED.

Polly Cousin was nothing if he was not direct. He could be discreetly silent, and subtly talkative, each as needful. After running his eyes over certain closely-pencilled lines in his memorandum-book, he looked up and said:

"Mr. Paget, if my questions are painfully personal, please remember that they are quite necessary. Is there, or has there ever been, either in your family or your wife's, insanity?"

He was looking at Mr. Paget, but he was almost certain that the white hands lying upon the sable folds of Mrs. Volney's gown, moved slightly, as if their owner had started suddenly, and then as suddenly brought herself back to stillness.

"Insanity!" cried Abner Paget. "Good heavens, no!"

"Then you think there is no possibility that Miss Paget, in a fit of temporary aberration, may have wandered from her home?"

"Gracious Powers!" cried Paget. "No! I say. Leah Paget is no more likely to have become insane than I am."

"Very strange things happen," said Cousin, making a straight mark across certain words in his note-book. "There have been instances when evenly-balanced persons have suddenly lost their reason. A fall, a blow on the head, may have been the cause—" He paused; Mrs. Volney was looking at him earnestly.

"Do you mean," she began, in her low even tones, "that she

may have been hurt in some way, and been taken, insensible, perhaps, in charge by some one, or— ?"

She paused. Abner Paget had arisen suddenly and was nervously pacing the room.

Cousin's eyes followed him as he answered her unfinished question.

"If such a thing has happened, which is barely possible, we shall soon know it. That sort of thing can be easily ferreted out. The best work of our city detectives is directly in that line."

He glanced again at his note-book.

"Pardon me, Mr. Paget, these questions are necessary. Has there been, of late, or at any time, any difference or misunderstanding between Miss Paget and—any member of your family ?"

Mr. Paget stopped his walk, and turned to face the questioner.

"There are but three members of this family," he said, curtly. "Between my wife and my daughter, perfect confidence has always existed. Between myself and my daughter there was a difference—" In the momentary pause, the eyes of Mrs. Volney were turned full upon him—"but it was not sufficient to cause her to leave my home—her home."

Again he paused. Mrs. Volney was still intently regarding him. But the interviewer remained silent, and his eyes were upon his note-book.

"Our difference was not an uncommon one between parent and child," Mr. Paget resumed. "It was concerning her choice of a young man of whom, as a suitor for her hand, I could not approve." His eyes met those of Mrs. Volney's as if this was a subject she quite understood.

"Yes," said Cousin, "I am already aware of that. Have you no suspicion that she may have left her home because of this?"

Mr. Paget waved a hand toward the lady.

"Women understand women," he said, stiffly, "and Mrs. Volney knows my daughter well. Let us have her opinion."

"Leah never left her home, and her mother, for such a cause," the lady said, slowly but with decision.

Again Polly Cousin fell back upon his note-book and meditation, and his reflections were something like this:

"Here is a man who is reserved to his own hurt. I may as well hope to draw information from one of his bronze busts over the doorway. And here, as a friend of the family and of the missing girl, is the fairest, the stillest, the most self-contained woman I ever met. Each is a slight damper, perhaps, upon the communicativeness of the other. This will be a fruitless interview unless I can separate them."

He slowly fingered his note-book, and, turning to Mr. Paget, began a list of questions concerning his lost daughter. "What were her tastes, in music, for instance, and was she fond of reading? What were her habits? Did she walk much, and if so, where to? Was she at all venturesome? Did she ever wander out of the fashionable thoroughfares? Did she often visit the Parks? Did she drive and ride frequently? Was she fond of yachting? Was she connected with any charitable societies? Was she apt to notice, upon the street, children, beggars, etc.? Was she enthusiastic, was she courageous, was she approachable?" These questions, and many others, he asked and the two answered. Then, suddenly, he shut up his note-book and arose.

"Mr. Paget," he said, "you must understand that, where there is absolutely no clue to work from, we must first inform

ourselves as fully as possible of personal characteristics and personal matters, and then begin to construct theories. You are sure that your daughter had no sufficient motive for abandoning her home, and we are already prepared to believe, for many reasons, that she did not abandon her home voluntarily. Now, there are two or three possibilities. I will merely name them to you, and you may think them over. Sometimes a man like yourself, of property and extended influence, makes an enemy. In the career of a successful business man this is pretty sure to happen. Have you ever made such an enemy? Is there anywhere, to your knowledge, any one, man or woman, who has breathed a menace against you or yours?—years ago, perhaps. This is not a time to hesitate from motives of pride or from false delicacy. If you have ever had an enemy, or if your wife or daughter has any reason to fear one, you will do well to make it known to us—to Captain Connors. Your daughter is beautiful, they say; may she not have made, in some discarded suitor or unsuccessful rival, a foe to be feared? I do not wish an answer to these questions now. But I ask you to think, and as soon as possible talk with your wife. Do not keep back the slightest hint, the vaguest suspicion. The very thing that you might consider hardly worth a thought, may be just the clue we need."

Cousin's speech, before it had reached its end, had produced two effects, each a surprise to him. It had caused Abner Paget to drop into the nearest chair, staring at the brusque speaker, with all the pride and haughtiness gone out of his face. It had brought Mrs. Volney to her feet, and half-way across the room, where she stood with her hands locked together, her lips parted, and her eyes fixed eagerly upon the young man's face.

For a moment all were silent, moveless. Then Mrs. Volney came swiftly to the side of Mr. Paget, and resting one hand upon his shoulder, said :

"Mr. Paget, I beseech you, listen to what this young man has said! Heed him! He knows of what he speaks. He can help us, I am sure!" Then without turning or even glancing at Cousin, she consulted a tiny watch. "I must go, but I shall soon come again. Good-bye, Mr. Paget."

She extended her hand ; he took it listlessly and without rising. As he released it, she turned toward Cousin, bowed, and then, as if by some sudden inspiration, swept up to him and put out her hand.

"We shall expect much from you," she said, with her eyes upon his face. "Good-day, sir."

And as Percy Cousin stood reddening and dazed, she bowed again and swept to the door, which Abner Paget, suddenly recovering himself, hastened to open for her exit.

When Mr. Paget closed the door and came back to his place, Cousin had put away his note-book and was standing hat in hand, as if waiting for his host to speak. But Mr. Paget was silent.

"If you have nothing to suggest—" began Cousin.

"Nothing!" broke in Mr. Paget, sharply ; "nothing whatever."

"Then I will go." Cousin walked toward the door, but paused upon the threshold. "I shall not be likely to interview you again, Mr. Paget," he said, quietly. "You will communicate, when you have anything to say, with Captain Connors."

He bowed formally, and Mr. Paget responded stiffly, without quitting his place.

When Cousin reached the street, a handsome close coupé was turning away from the carriage-steps, and he raised his hat as he saw the fair face of Mrs. Volney looking out.

Instantly, her hand was lifted in a gesture meant to detain him ; and the coupé turned and was again drawn up to the pavement.

" Will you take a seat with me, sir ?" said the soft voice of the lady as she leaned out toward him. " I am going down town." And then, while Cousin seemed to hesitate, she added, almost in a whisper, " Oblige me, please. I want to talk with you."

Those splendid eyes were rested upon his burning face. There was a note of appeal in her voice. Dimly, dizzily conscious of his own awkwardness, and with all the blood in his body, as it seemed to him, surging toward his face, Cousin entered the coupé.

CHAPTER XVIII.

" A WRONG AND A MYSTERY AND A MAN SHE LOVES."

When Sir Felix Wyntoun opened his eyes, on the morning after his interview with Max Talfourd, and found himself waking to a medley of remembrances not exactly pleasant, his first thought was of La Belle Fabrice.

How would the morning find her ? Would she see him today ? And would the hour, the very earliest, most unconventional hour for calling at her hotel, ever come ?

At least, he might see Madam Congreve, for next to Fabrice his thoughts went most naturally to that amiable woman, who was, in some sort, a connecting link between himself and the object of his admiration.

But at breakfast a note from Max Talfourd was put into his hand. He opened it eagerly, anxious at once for his friend and glad of a diversion. It was as follows:

MY DEAR WYNTOUN:—

I am under a new cloud, but one which I hope will soon turn its bright side toward me. I may not see you today; in truth, I think I would better not. I trust all to you as we planned it yesterday. And one thing more: Will you kindly wire to your friend Ferrars, or in such way as you think best find out by cable if Ferrars is in London, and at liberty? I leave it to you to say as much or as little as you think fit. Let me hear the result at once. I remain at home to-day.

Yours,

TALFOURD.

P. S. Will you breakfast with me here tomorrow?

MAX.

It was this note that sent Sir Felix forth that morning with a new animation, and a business-like air that was quite "American." Soon this message was speeding Londonward, to one Lord Louis Barham, George Street, Hanover Square:

Is Ferrars in London and disengaged? What address, and for how long?

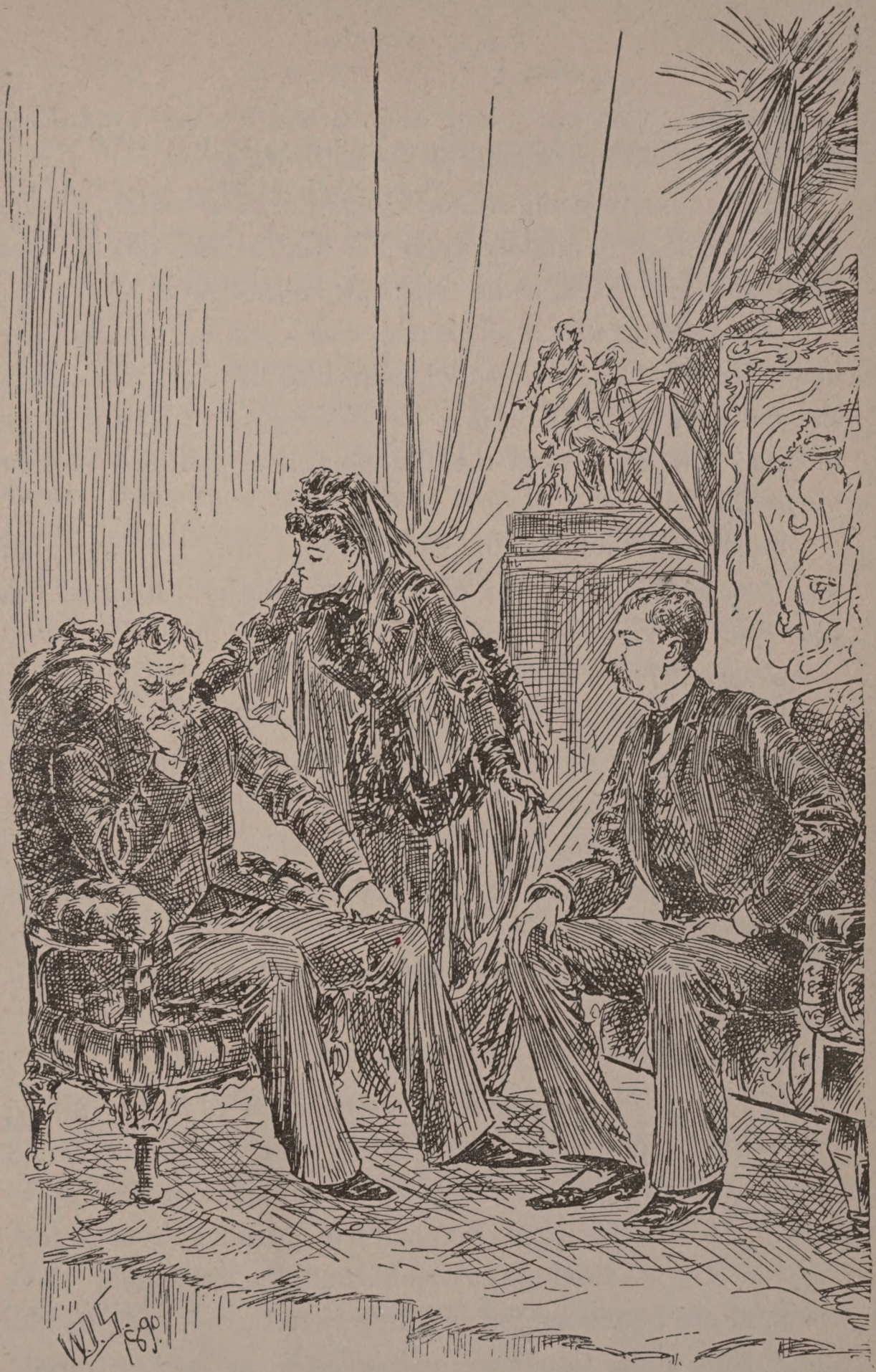
WYNTOUN.

To this message the answer came promptly:

Ferrars in Germany. Can't be got under seven days. At your service.

BARHAM.

This message, with an explanatory note, Sir Felix sent at



"Mr. Paget, I beseech you, listen to what this young man has said!" Page 130.

once to Max Talfourd ; and then turned his face toward the quietly-splendid apartments of La Belle Fabrice.

Madam Congreve alone came forward to receive him. There was a new look of anxiety upon her face, as she put out her hand, and he fancied, as he took it, a look of relief also.

Their greeting was a silent one, and when he released her hand, Madam Congreve sank again into the seat from which she had risen to receive him. Sir Felix glanced all about the room, as if to make surer the disappointment plainly visible in his face.

"Sit down," said Madam Congreve, at last. "I am glad that you have come ; glad of this opportunity. Fabrice has gone out."

"Gone out ?" he echoed. "Then she is—"

"Oh, she is well ; quite well. But—" She laughed nervously. "I really do not know how to say it. Somehow, I feel as if our positions, yours and mine, have been reversed. I am coming to you for counsel, and advice, perhaps."

"To me !" The anxiety deepened in his face. "What is it ?"

"I don't know what it is. I only wish I did. It's about Fabrice, of course."

"What of her ?"

"Listen. I am going to wash my hands of all this I must ; it's too hard a position—I can't fill it. Sir Felix, I am afraid I must advise you to give it up !" Again she laughed nervously. "I do not suppose you will listen to me now, or rather, that you will not heed me any more than you did before. But you shall not blame me for anything that may go ill in the future. I am going to tell you just what has happened since—since you left us yesterday—you and Mr. Quinlan. By the

way, Mr. Quinlan left his compliments and that basket of roses at the door, half an hour ago."

She indicated, by a gesture, a gilded basket of Marechal Niels upon a little table near him; but he did not turn his head.

"You were going to tell me—"

"Yes; and I'll get it over. Fabrice came out of her faint almost immediately, and locked herself in her room straightway. Something in that newspaper troubled her greatly; it must have been so. She took it with her, when she left the room, and she did not appear again last evening. Several times her maid went to her door, but was denied admittance, and we could not help from knowing that she was in great trouble. We could hear her sobs; she was moaning and walking the floor. Finally, she admitted me. It was as if she could not bear to be alone any longer. But she would not talk to me, and I could not comfort her. I had never seen the child in any but her merriest moods. Her distress went to my heart, but I was powerless to help her. Finally, when it was almost morning, she sobbed herself to sleep upon my shoulder."

She paused, and a flush came into her cheeks.

"All I know of her trouble, is the little I could guess from her disjointed murmurings in that sleep." Again she paused, her embarrassment evidently increasing. "I have always said, and always believed," she went on, hesitatingly, "that Fabrice was heart-free—that there was no one—" She checked herself as Sir Felix suddenly arose and walked to a window that overlooked the street.

"Go on!" he said, hoarsely, as he stood with his back toward her.

"But—but, there is some one, somewhere, whom she loves —whom she longs for. It is not a parent, for Fabrice is an orphan and brotherless. It may not be a lover. I can't repeat her words," she floundered on. "But they were strange —too incoherent to comprehend. But there is a wrong and a mystery—and a man she cares for—somewhere."

She paused; there was a slight movement of the muscular shoulders, but otherwise no sign from Sir Felix that he heard.

"This morning," Madam resumed, "she was awake before me, and at her desk. She wrote half a dozen letters, and then destroyed them. But at last one was written that seemed satisfactory. When this was done and folded, she rang for some envelopes from the hotel office, and put her letter into one of these. She was quite calm this morning, but very silent and sad. When her letter was finished, she prepared to go out, and by the time she was ready she was looking quite eager, and somewhat excited—and so preoccupied! There, Sir Felix, I have told you all—all but this: I must tell Fabrice that I have told you all these things. You see my position else?"

Sir Felix came slowly away from the window and resumed his seat near her.

"Tell her," he said. "It is best."

For a moment both were silent, Madam plucking listlessly at the tassel fringe that depended from the arms of the chair she occupied; Sir Felix sitting with his head bent upon his hand, his fair face in the shadow. At last he lifted his head, and there was a world of anxiety in his honest English eyes.

"You have been very good," he said. "I had no right to ask so much of you. Somehow—" and his boyish smile broke through the gloom of his countenance, "in spite of my liberal

tendencies, don't you know, I feel awfully glad that you are an Englishwoman."

"And an actress!" There was a shade of bitterness in her tone. "Do you include that fact in your list of things to be thankful for?"

"Come now, Madam Congreve, that's too bad of you. Were you not an Englishwoman, a gentlewoman, first—before you were an actress?"

"I am an Englishwoman and a gentlewoman still, I trust," she said. "And as an Englishwoman, I have asked myself over and over, how all this is to end—your attachment for Fabrice. Suppose she returns your regard? I know no more of Fabrice than I see from day to day, but I know that she is proud with the best, the only pride that is safe for a woman—the pride born of self-respect. And there is your mother, Sir Felix, and your sisters—"

He threw back his head impatiently.

"I wish I had only my mother and my sisters to dread. Why don't you mention my father?"

"Because I happen to have heard that the Marquis of Bolton is as radical as his son."

"Well, my mother is one of those good and wise women who believe in letting a man follow his chosen pathway. Mind you, she is as thoroughly an aristocrat as can be, but she would be shocked at the mere thought of questioning the movements of the Marquis of Bolton, even when she could not admire and sanction them. She would acquiesce, because Lord Bolton is—Lord Bolton."

"I am English enough to comprehend. And Lady Bolton is certainly an exceptionally desirable mother."

"Undoubtedly. Well, my sisters, you will remember, have

had the advantage of being reared by such a mother. They may stick, just at first; I won't say it's impossible. But in the end, Lady Louise, that's my eldest, and she's a bit poetical, will ask, 'Is the pretty and fond of books?' And Lady Flo will merely want to know if she's jolly, and not afraid to take a seven-barred gate. Lady Flo's no end of a good girl, and pretty, too. But she's just a bit horsey and counts a hunt ahead of a ball."

Madam Congreve smiled and nodded.

"I know the kind," she said. "And when it's enthusiasm, and not affectation, they're the cream of English girls."

"When I want to reprove my younger sister," he said, with a slow, half smile, "I tell her she's too out-spoken for her own good, and for a girl. Pardon me, Madam, but may I know when she will be back?"

"I suppose you mean Fabrice?"

"Of course."

"She did not tell me her intentions."

"And she went alone?'

"Yes.'

Sir Felix arose and took up his hat.

"We were to drive today, later. Did she speak of this?"

"Not since yesterday."

"Then I shall call for you as was arranged."

He turned, and she arose and walked beside him to the door. There he hesitated.

"Tell me," he said; "advise me. I want to speak to her. I want to understand—at least, I want her to understand me. Will it be too soon? Is it the wrong time? Ought I to wait?"

Madam Congreve sighed.

"I am truly your friend, Sir Felix," he said; "yours and hers. But I cannot advise you further. I wish you all good. I will aid you when I can. But I am sick of all this mystery. I dare not put my hand upon a thing so sacred with my eyes bandaged. You must rely upon yourself. Your own tact and frankness will serve you better than I can. Only, be patient, I beg of you; patient, and charitable."

He took her hand and bowed low over it.

"Thank you," he murmured. "I appreciate all that you have said to me."

CHAPTER XIX.

"IN TROUBLE. IN DANGER."

In telling Sir Felix of Fabrice's troubled night, Madam Congreve had exaggerated nothing. And yet, in spite of her sleeplessness, her sighs and groans and tears, La Belle Fabrice was a very lovely creature to look upon when she turned her steps briskly up Fifth Avenue that morning.

Sparkling eyes, charming faces, and bewitching toilets are the rule upon this aristocratic thoroughfare. But the charming face and daintily-poised head, the easy, self-reliant springing gait, and the perfectly-adjusted, elegantly-simple street-dress, with its unmistakable "English" air, drew many eyes and elicited many admiring comments.

A few minutes of brisk walking brought into the face of

the pretty little Comedienne a brighter look, for youth and health yield readily to the influences of a fair morning, and Fabrice possessed a naturally brave and buoyant temperament.

In her hand, concealed under the fringes of her mantle, she carried a letter. After she had walked for half a dozen blocks in the direction of the Park, she gave a swift glance up and down, crossed the street, and deposited her letter in a box, standing for a moment after the deed was done, upon the shady corner, and looking about her again.

After a final glance at the letter-box, as if to assure herself that the letter had been quite swallowed by it, she walked toward Central Park, recrossing the street after a block or two, and turning finally upon 57th Street, going eastward, and coming out with slackened step and alert eyes upon Lexington Avenue.

At the corner she paused, and involuntarily put up her hand, as if to pull closer down the filmy veil which half covered, but did not conceal, her piquant face. It seemed as if she were about to turn and go back as she came, but the hesitation was only for an instant. She set her red lips together and walked on slowly, with her eyes fixed upon the object of her momentary surprise and seeming alarm.

This object was a woman, elderly and ugly, with eager black eyes and a hooked nose,—a woman in shabby garments which yet bore evidences of having been donned with an effort at tawdry smartness,—a woman whose bonnet was younger than her years, and whose step was so steady and brisk that Fabrice was compelled to quicken her own pace in order to keep close behind her.

The woman hurried on, and the face of Fabrice became very grave and determined as she followed.

When the old woman slackened her pace, as they were approaching a long row of apartment houses, the girl halted and took up a position beside a fruit-stand near the street-corner.

"Yes," she said, half aloud in her preoccupation, "she's going there."

The old woman was already half-way up the long steps, and in a moment had disappeared behind one of the stately double doors of the entrance.

"I shall make no call today," La Belle Fabrice murmured, as she turned away. "I may as well go back."

Madam Congreve was seated in her favorite place by one of the long windows, with a book in her lap, and she welcomed Fabrice with a smile.

"You have just missed Sir Felix," she said.

"I know it," said Fabrice. "I saw him going."

"And he saw you?"

"No, I think not."

Madam looked down at her book and out of the window.

"He expects us to drive with him," she said

"Yes," tossing aside her hat and mantle.

"Shall you go?" The face of the elderly woman was actually flushing.

Fabrice was quick to see it. She went over and sat down on a hassock near her friend.

"Conny," she began, seriously, "I came in feeling like a culprit, but, really, you look like one." She drew the hassock closer and rested her arms on her friend's lap. "Have you been abusing Sir Felix?"

"Abusing Sir Felix!" Madam Congreve could speak now, and she did. She had thought of herself as confessing;

owning up to her share in a little plot; well meant, to be sure, but a plot for all that. But now she was telling her story, and the story of Sir Felix, in a tone more narrative than confessional; telling it pithily, sarcastically; telling it well, throughout.

From the first, Fabrice had listened with downcast eyes and drooping head. Once or twice only did she look up or change her position. When the end was reached she was sitting with her hands clasped about her knees, and the hassock drawn close to Madam's feet, so that her curly head rested against the lady's arm.

When Madam finally ceased, the girl drew a long sighing breath, and nestled closer to her companion, her head drooping so that it could not be seen.

For many moments they both so sat in silence. Finally, Madam broke the spell.

"Fabrice," gently stroking the soft hair, "are you angry?"

"No, Conny."

Another long silence; then.

"My dear, answer me one question."

"Well?"

"In telling you all this, have you been surprised at anything? Have you not guessed as much all along?"

"I have guessed, I have known, of course, something."

"How much?"

"Conny, that is two questions."

"I know it. Fabrice, don't you realize that you are an especially fortunate woman?"

"Unfortunate is the right word, Con."

"Nonsense, child; you make me angry with you. Youth does not last always; even beauty, and talent, and popularity

such as yours, will wane some day. Look at yourself as you are now, this very day: The foremost actress in this great country, with all the world of wealth and fashion at your feet; with such youth and beauty, such health and strength; with one fortune already half made, the other half at your beck. A second fortune, a title, a noble name, and peace and serenity to your dying day are also at your command. You know what it will be when you have once made your bow before these New Yorkers. Next week will be an ovation. Do you think there is a woman in all this great city who would not be glad to stand in your shoes? And then—Fabrice, think—from the very zenith of success, with the city ringing with your name, with society at your beck, it is in your power to step from fame to fame, from the stage to an earldom. Think; even La Belle Fabrice must lay down her honor some day and lose her name in oblivion; but from La Belle Fabrice to Lady Wyntoun—ah, think, dearie!"

She bent over the bowed head and tried to lift it. She was surprised, and pleased, to find her favorite so quiet, so seemingly susceptible to reason.

"Fabrice!"

Suddenly, the still little figure sprang erect, and standing a little aloof from her friend, the girl faced her—faced her in silence for a moment, with blanched cheek, parted lips, and eyes that burned in their sad intensity and glistened with unshed tears.

"Think!" She flung herself down beside her friend once more, and, burying her face in the fold of Madam's flowing gown, gave way to a burst of tears.

For many moments the sobs shook her frame, and Madam sat quietly, passing her hands caressingly over the bowed head,

and letting the storm rage on. At last the sobbing became fainter, then ceased altogether, and only long shuddering sighs were heard. Finally, she lay quite still, with her arms clasping her friend's knees, and suffered her tear-stained face to be dried upon Madam's soft handkerchief.

The lady still sat patiently caressing the humbled head, when, after many minutes of silence, the girl sighed heavily and breathed out, in disjointed syllables, her friend's name.

"Conny!"

"Yes, my dear."

"Conny, listen. When we left London—I didn't think—I didn't think, surely—that he was serious."

"Serious? He was always sincere, child; from the very first moment. Why, Fabrice, you ought to know, girl as you are, that such a man as Sir Felix Wyntoun could not trifle."

Fabrice sighed heavily.

"I suppose I ought. But, Conny, I want to believe, I want you to make him believe, that if I had known, if I had been sure, that he would follow me here, I would have tried to prevent it, I would have forbidden it."

"Fabrice! Nonsense, child!"

"Yes, I would. I—I am sure that I would. I must have done it."

"Fabrice, what are you saying? Are you going to refuse him now?"

The girl raised her head with a weary motion. "He must not ask me. You must not let him ask me, Conny."

Madam Congreve rung her hands despairingly.

"Oh, child! child!" she cried, "do you think I can control him now? It is too late, Fabrice. You must hear him and answer him. There is no other way."

Again the girl's head went down upon Madam's lap.

"Oh!" she moaned, "this is so hard! Conny, you have been his friend; be mine now. Don't let him talk to me of this. Tell him he must not. Tell him anything!"

"I wish I could tell him anything reasonable." There was a note of sternness in Madam's tone. "I wish you would trust me, Fabrice. What has come over you since yesterday? Would you have talked like this, or felt like this, two days ago?"

Up again came the bent head, and in the eyes that met hers, Madam saw a new look—a look of terror, of startled remembrance. And then, in a tone of deepest self-reproach, the girl answered:

"Oh, Heaven forgive me, I had forgotten—base, ungrateful little wretch that I am! Conny," catching her friend's hand convulsively, "you must have patience with me. You must let me think."

Again she hid her face in the friendly shelter of Madam's gown, and remained thus, silent, for many long moments. Then she looked up, passed a hand over her forehead, smoothed the ruffled rings of hair above her brows, and, rising from her half-crouching, half-kneeling posture, resumed her place upon the hassock as at first.

"Conny," she began, quite humbly, "bear with me for a little longer. I can't tell you much—anything, in fact—at least, not now. Stop—oh, I know how well I can trust you! It isn't that. I know how you would try to comfort me. But it mustn't be—not yet. It is punishment, not comfort, that I deserve. Conny, dear old Conny, how long have you known me?"

"Why, for two good years. What a question, child!"

"Yes, I know. But this is what I mean: Ask yourself what I have been in these two years? Have I been good? Have I been frank and true? If you had a sister, would you like her to be what I have been, or seemed to be, in these two years?"

Madam Congreve was too thoroughly English to relish a scene, even of a moderate and private sort, off the stage. But she was fond of Fabrice, and she felt sure that the girl's distress was genuine, though possibly, she thought, the cause was exaggerated.

"Honestly, my dear," she said, "in all the time I have known you,—and remember, I have known you under no ordinary circumstances, no ordinary temptations,—you have been an honest, kind, true-hearted girl. You have been generous, unaffected and modest in the midst of flattery that would have turned the head of a saint. Do I need to tell you that in your profession you have been a paragon, and in and out of it always the lady? I should be very proud of such a sister, my dear."

Fabrice laid her cheek caressingly upon her friend's hand, and then sat down beside her.

"I am grateful for your good opinion, Conny." During Madam's long speech she seemed to have regained her composure, and she now spoke like her usual self, although with unusual gravity.

"In the eyes of the world, I may be all that you say, and in the eyes of Sir Felix Wyntoun also. You have known me two years, and that is sufficient for you. All that remains behind, you accept upon faith. But Sir Felix—for him, should I listen to him, all that lies behind these last years must be unveiled; for him and for his family. You realize that?"

"Yes; I suppose so—of course."

Fabrice got up and stood before her friend. For a moment she was silent; then she clasped her hands, lifted them above her head, and with an impetuous gesture flung them apart and let them fall at her side.

"I wish with all my heart and soul," she cried, "that I were not and never had been an actress!"

Madam regarded her in silence, but with a shade of coldness in her glance.

"If I were Fabrice the milliner, Fabrice the mantua-maker, Fabrice the saleswoman," the girl went on, "I might do as I would. But as La Belle Fabrice, favorite for the moment, my every act blazoned in the newspapers as soon as I have stepped before the public—I am alone."

Madam Congreve arose.

"One would think that you were rehearsing a new part, child," she said.

Fabrice caught her arm and walked beside her slowly the length of the room.

"I may never rehearse a new part, Conny. I am in trouble, and I may be in danger. Don't ask me any questions, please. Sometime, soon I hope, I may speak freely. I may need your help. But now, just now, oh, be patient with me!"

There was a sob in her throat, and Madam Congreve, alive to the present and all that was practical, turned upon her and put two firm hands on her shoulders.

"If we are going to drive with Sir Felix, you must not show him, and half New York, a pear of tear-swollen eyes. Haven't I told you, child, that there's nothing in this world worth crying about?"

"Oh!" sighed Fabrice, "if I could only make myself be-

lieve it!" She slipped from under her friend's caressing hands. "At any rate, I won't cry now," she said, and vanished behind the tall screen.

CHAPTER XX.

PROPHETIC.

Shortly before the time appointed by Sir Felix, as Madam was attiring herself for their drive, some one tapped gently at her door, and the voice of Fabrice called softly:

"Conny, may I come in?"

"To be sure, my dear."

Fabrice came in quickly and carefully closed the door.

"I have been thinking," she said, in her old straightforward fashion, "and I want you to do a little bit of diplomacy now. I want you to say a few words to Sir Felix, for me."

"Oh!" Madam turned from the mirror with a beplumed bonnet poised upon one hand.

"I have not said that I would not receive Sir Felix' addresses," the girl went on, smiling a little, "nor that I would. But, as he has asked your help, you can offer him one more bit of good advice."

"Umph!" Madam turned back to the mirror and began putting on the plumed bonnet.

"I want you to tell him that he must not approach me upon this subject at present. I admit that I like Sir Felix, that I value his friendship, and that I am loath to lose it. But I can-

not put him in a position from which he might wish to withdraw. And I dare not make my own position worse, more painful, than it now is, by accepting him. I can explain nothing now. I may even need his advice, his help, very soon—if he will give it to me as a friend. Mind, it must be as a friend only. If he will agree to this, I shall be truly grateful. If not —well, I cannot receive him upon any other terms."

Madam continued tying on her bonnet. It seemed to require all of her attention. When it was done she turned upon Fabrice.

"All this is very hard upon an old woman who loves her ease," she said, whimsically. "But I am committed to both of you. I accept the commission, of course. But, don't tell me, Miss, that you don't know just what Sir Felix will say. We couldn't drive him off the field."

"We shall see," replied Fabrice; but there was a little smile hovering about the corners of her lips, and she kept her eyes turned away.

"Tell him in your own way, Conny. Be as frank as you please."

"I will," said Madam, beginning to labor with a long brown glove. "My dear, the situation will be perfectly farcical. It's lucky that Sir Felix is Sir Felix. Fancy such a position with Mr. Quinlan in his place."

"I can't," promptly replied Fabrice. "With such a man it would be impossible."

When Sir Felix came, Madam was awaiting him, and she lost no time in telling him of the result of her conference with Fabrice, adding all else she was told.

"It's not worth while to try an appeal from this decision of hers; not yet. It's a position that would try a saint. But if

you can accept it—if you've got the necessary faith, hope, and charity,—not to mention the patience,—I'd be glad to have you stay in your old place."

"I shall do that," he answered, promptly, "since I must. And I mean to make the most of even the small advantage she gives me." He smiled into her face, and she secretly rejoiced in his hopeful tenacity. "I know well enough that I've not got the eloquence to win my case by my tongue; but if faith and hope and patience will win, she'll have to give in sooner or later—or order me off the ground."

Madam's face brightened.

"Ah!" she began, impetuously, then checked herself and held out her hand.

When Fabrice joined them a few minutes later, he was telling the story of Leah Paget's disappearance, but he checked his speech and took her hand with cordial frankness.

"I have been telling your friend about Miss Paget," he explained.

"Oh! that poor girl! You must tell it over for me."

"Yes," he said, when they were seated; "in fact, I have a message for you."

He took a letter from his pocket and opened it.

"It is from my friend, Max Talfourd," he explained. "It's a sort of reply to a note which I sent to report my success in doing a little commission for him. We're good friends," he added, in a half apologetic tone, "and I suppose I must have mentioned my engagement with you, for he says here,"—referring to the letter as if to refresh his memory,—"he says I am to present his remembrances, and to explain to you his present position, and that you will understand why you have not seen him here. Talfourd is in deep trouble. It was not

yet generally known, but Miss Leah Paget was his *fiancée.* And then in reply to numerous sympathetic questions and ejaculations, he told the story, as he knew it, of Leah Paget's disappearance and of Max Talfourd's troubles.

"I feel that I may give you these details," he said. "Of course, the thing is bound to be circulated; that's a penalty one pays for being in 'society.' Besides, Talfourd has given me *carte blanche,* and I've already enlisted in his service. I'm bound to see him through." And he laughed as he turned his eyes upon Fabrice. "Who knows that I may not yet go in for some regular detective business of my own."

"Oh!" ejaculated Fabrice, "I only wish *I* could."

Sir Felix laughed again.

"I shouldn't wonder if you would make a good one," he said.

Fabrice was, for the time, full of the subject of Leah Paget's fate and of Max Talfourd's troubles, and oblivious of her own.

"I do not know Mr. Talfourd well," she said, after some talk. "I dined with him, or rather, he was my *vis-a-vis* at a dinner once—and I never saw Miss Paget. But how sad and strange it is! You will keep us informed, Sir Felix—that is, as far as you may?"

He was only too ready to promise, and Madam took up the thread.

"Was any motive guessed at? Was there any theory?" Madam had read many novels, and was versed in mysteries, and she suggested one possibility after another, each more hideous than the last.

"Oh, I hope it will not turn out such an awfully lurid af-

fair, Madam. I confess, I'm not good at guessing, and there's only one thing that suggests itself to me as probable."

"And what is that?"

"Blackmail."

"Blackmail!" Fabrice started and then closed her lips.

"Yes,—getting hold of the young lady and keeping her imprisoned until the father consents to come down handsomely for her ransom."

"Such things have happened, of course," mused Madam. "In fact, blackmail is heard of, in one way and another, too often."

"Yes," he replied. "It's safer than highway robbery, and some of our rascals are finding it out."

"It shouldn't be safer," said Madam, severely.

"No, it shouldn't. And it wouldn't be if the parties victimized would only keep their heads. Everything is on their side,—the law, public opinion and all that, even when they're guilty. And when they're innocent—yet they say that an innocent man is just as apt to be scared into giving blood-money as a guilty one, on the ground, perhaps, that every man has something he would rather not see advertised, I suppose. He submits on that general principle."

"And how," asked Fabrice, slowly, "how is it when it is a woman?"

"A woman?" Sir Felix turned toward her quickly. "A woman who submits to blackmail, innocent or guilty, simply sacrifices herself. She might as well commit suicide."

"You are right there," said Madam, rising. "If I were the guiltiest woman living, I would risk all other dangers—yes, dare them—before I would put myself into the power of the blackmailer."

When they came out upon the street, Fabrice glanced up and down as she stood beside the carriage, while Madam was being helped to her place ; and as Sir Felix offered his hand, her eyes encountered those of a person who was approaching them at a rapid pace.

It was a woman in a shabby dress,—a dark-faced, hooked-nosed, black-eyed woman. As she met the gaze of Fabrice she hastened her pace ; but there was neither haste nor hesitation in the movements of Fabrice as she gave her hand to her escort and took her place beside Madam.

"Do you know, dear," said that lady, looking back over her shoulder as they rolled away, "do you know I almost fancied that that ugly woman beckoned to you. Really, she is looking after us yet."

"Is she?" returned the little actress, carelessly. "I dare say, it's your new bonnet, Conny."

Fabrice was in good spirits during that drive,—was so much her usual bright, sparkling, self-possessed yet simple-mannered self, that Madam was filled with wonder and Sir Felix with delight. They talked of the coming "season," Fabrice's season, when she would make her *debut ;* and Sir Felix predicted a triumph.

"I am going to send you a basket," he said, lightly ; "some of our own English roses. I am thinking of organizing a *claque.*"

"A *claque,* indeed !" she laughed. "Fie, Sir Felix ! do you think that I shall need it ?"

Madam laughed. "When it comes to that," she said, drily, "you may safely trust Manager Horton."

They had been driving northward on Fifth Avenue. It was just the hour when all society was out of doors, and they en-

tered the Park at the scholars' gate. The place was a perpetual delight to Madam Congreve, although she never failed to introduce Hyde Park, making more or less invidious comparisons, and ringing the praises of the Mall and the Row. She was an observant pleasure-seeker, and soon she broke in upon her own discourse with a sharp exclamation.

"Look, Fabrice! look, Sir Felix! Didn't you say that you had never seen her? There is the Mysterious Beauty—there, upon that tall mottled gray. Yes, that is Hortense Novalis."

Both Sir Felix and Fabrice looked as she bade them.

"Yes," said Fabrice, quietly, "it is she, and—your glass, Conny— is that not Mr. Quinlan beside her?"

They were riding away from the carriage, the beautiful woman, with her glowing brunette loveliness, set off by a habit of shining black. At her corsage, she wore rich crimson roses, of the very hue of her full smiling lips, through which shone two rows of gleaming tiny teeth. Beside her, looking his usual cool and graceful self, and managing his powerful horse with careless-seeming skill, was Frederick Quinlan.

Sir Felix gazed after them until they were lost in the crowd.

"She's a splendid creature," he said, addressing Madam Congreve.

"She's magnificent," said that lady.

"I never saw a finer equestrian picture," said Fabrice. "How well they both ride."

"She's the grandest brunette I ever saw," said Madam Congreve. "Fabrice, you ought to have her for the rival part in your new play. What a superb foil for you!"

There was an angry gleam in the eyes that turned upon the speaker, and a flush on the girl's fair cheek, as she said, with energy :

"Do not suggest such a thing, please. Sooner than appear with M'lle Hortense Novalis, I would throw up my engagement, and bury myself among the Digger Indians!"

Alas, Fabrice!

CHAPTER XXI.

A BLACKMAILER.

On the following morning La Belle Fabrice was, to all seeming, herself again, and Madam Congreve noted the fact with much satisfaction.

"You gave me a shock, child," she said, as the two sat at breakfast in Fabrice's own boudoir. "When one has settled down to the conviction that she knows her friend thoroughly, such a series of new phases as you have treated me to of late is—is a moral earthquake."

"To tell the truth, Conny," replied the girl, frankly, "I have surprised myself. But what kind of a character had you invented for me, I should be glad to know?"

"A very independent, a very self-contained and courageous character, my dear, is yours by nature, and, I should think, by cultivation also."

"By experience is better, Con." She helped herself to a morsel, and turned the conversation into other channels.

They were still seated at the breakfast-table, although the

meal had been finished sometime, when Fabrice's maid approached her and said, in a low tone :

"There is a woman in the corridor, Mademoiselle. She says she must see you, and she won't go away."

"What kind of a woman ?" asked Fabrice, composedly.

"An ugly woman, very shabby, and with little black eyes. Shall I make her go away ?"

"You may show her in, and you may remain in the anteroom. See that no one else comes while she is here."

The look of astonishment upon the face of the retreating maid was reproduced in the countenance that Madam turned upon Fabrice.

"I thought you had vowed a quarantine against agents and beggars, child."

Fabrice laughed an odd, hard little laugh.

"You know your promise, Conny," she said. "You are going to stand by me ?"

"Going to—"

"I do not think I am to be solicited, Con," she went on ; "I am going to be blackmailed, and I want you to stay just where you are."

She spoke in a low tone and pushed her chair a little away from the table, but she did not rise as a shabby woman, whom Madam instantly recognized as the one who had stared after them as they drove away with Sir Felix, entered the room. The visitor halted a moment under the swinging *portiere*, which the servant held back for her to pass, and then came slowly forward, her eyes fixed upon Fabrice, a slow cunning smile widening her countenance, a smoky gleam in her beady, black eyes.

She paused directly before Fabrice and seemed to hesitate.

Evidently, something was not to her liking. She glanced furtively at Madam sitting serenely at the table, supping luxuriously at a cup of chocolate and seemingly oblivious to the presence of the ugly woman in her faded finery.

Whatever had been the woman's intentions upon entering, it was evident that she had lost her hold upon them, and she now stood before Fabrice with a shade of irresolution in her manner and face.

The girl sat perfectly still, making no pretense at occupation with the breakfast things, or the newspapers at her side. She let her hands lie idly in her lap and looked coolly at the newcomer. She waited a moment to give her visitor the first word ; then she said, quietly :

" You wished to see me ?"

" Ah, my dear child, when haven't I wished to see you ?" She put out her hand to Fabrice, and her smile grew more expansive.

" What can I do for you ?" The hand and the smile were both ignored.

The woman started back and a shade of anger darkened her face. But she controlled herself and said, in a wheedling tone :

" My dear, I've been unfortunate, and I'm not fit, I know, to come into your splendid rooms. But you can't have forgotten who I am ?"

" Oh, no," said Fabrice, composedly ; " I know who you are."

" What, and you receive me like this ?" The smoky smile was all gone and the black eyes gleamed.

" My reception must be a very brief one," the girl replied. " My engagements are numerous."

The old woman cast a sharp glance upon Madam Congreve,

who had finished her chocolate, and was, to all appearances, immersed in the columns of a morning paper. Then she turned again to Fabrice.

"I want to see you alone," she said, shortly.

Fabrice bent forward and possessed herself of the long gloves at her side. She was dressed for the street.

"Anything that you may have to say must be said here," she returned, decisively, "and said now. I am going out." She began to draw on one of the gloves, as if her whole mind was in the effort.

"What I've come to say," exclaimed the now enraged woman, "you'd better hear in private—for your own sake. You know what I mean." As she spoke the last words she swept some unfolded papers from a chair near Fabrice, and seated herself with an air of dogged determination.

Madam Congreve lowered the newspaper slightly and looked over at Fabrice. That cool young lady was buttoning the long glove, into which she had inserted her left hand, as calmly as if she were alone in her dressing-room. When it was done, and she had taken up the other glove, she turned, and touched a bell at her elbow.

Instantly, her maid was behind her.

"Janive," she said, quietly, "see that I have a carriage at the door in ten minutes, and be ready to go out with me."

The maid hastened away, and Fabrice turned again to her visitor.

"You see," she said, "how little time I can spare you. What is your object in coming to me?"

"You won't talk like that in a day or two, Miss," exclaimed the irate woman. "You can't afford to put on airs with me."

"That is for me to judge. Will you make known your errand?"

"May I see you alone?"

"By no means. You will not see me alone, and you will not see me again." She began to pull on the other glove, while the woman sat silent, biting her under lip and clenching and unclenching her hands. Again the attention of Fabrice seemed centered in her glove. The room was so still that the rustle of Madam's paper sounded noisy, and the light opening and shutting of a door near at hand was distinctly heard.

It told Fabrice that the maid had accomplished her errand and returned.

When the last button was secured, she turned again to the woman.

"If your errand is an honest one," she said—"if you are in want, or if your coming here is from any proper motive, you need not hesitate to make it known. But I have already told you that my time is limited."

The woman glared at her sullenly, moving her head from side to side with a slow dogged movement.

"She looks like some baffled animal," thought Madam Congreve, watching her furtively, while seeming to see nothing but the newspaper.

"You don't receive all your old acquaintances like this," the woman sneered.

"I am not receiving you, Madam; I am simply tolerating your presence."

"Perhaps you don't acknowledge me as an old friend?"

"Certainly not."

The old woman got up hastily and took a step toward Fabrice.

"You'll be sorry for this," she hissed. "I had something to say to you on my own account, and for your good. But that was not all; I had a message for you. Never mind; there's plenty of people who will be glad to hear some of the things that I can tell them. You ain't in a position to make an enemy of me, Miss; you—"

She stopped short. Fabrice had put out her hand and touched the bell sharply. Something in the girl's face caused her to hesitate in the midst of her wrathful tirade.

Again the prompt and not-to-be-astonished maid was at hand.

"Speak to the hall porter, Janive, and tell him to get a policeman here at once. Or, wait; if this person is ready to go—" She stopped, but seeing that the woman preserved her dogged aspect, she made a quick gesture, which the maid understood, and who departed, smiling.

Then Fabrice arose and confronted her unwelcome guest.

"You have shown your intentions," she said, in her calmest, firmest tones. "And you have overreached yourself. You need not come here again; it will do you no good. You must carry your blackmailing talents to another market. You cannot harm me, and you cannot frighten me. I intend to teach you that you do not know me. Go your way. Say what you will and do what you can. But if you care for your own welfare and safety, keep my name off your lips and keep out of my sight. I am not a good subject for blackmail. There is nothing in my past or present to conceal or to be ashamed of. Now go. If you open your lips again in my presence, I will send you to the Police Station, charged with an attempt at blackmail—and worse."

She pointed to the curtained entrance, and then, seeing that

"YOU'LL BE SORRY FOR THIS!" SHE HISSED. Page 160.

the woman stood still, quivering and speechless with rage, she swept past her and held aside the *portiere.*

There was a sound in the corridor without, and the door of the anteroom opened.

"Is he coming, Janive?"

"Yes, Mademoiselle," said the maid, from without; "by the elevator."

Fabrice turned toward the woman.

"You have one chance," she said; "by the stairway."

Without a word, the woman stalked past her, turned in the door to give her one black, menacing, baffled look, and went hurriedly toward the stairway.

"She'll have plenty of time," said the maid, composedly, as she closed the outer door. "The elevator is going down."

"Get your hat, Janive," said Fabrice, at the same time putting on her own. "We must go at once."

When the invaluable maid had gone, Madam Congreve made her first sign of animation and interest. She arose quickly, went over to Fabrice, and took her in her arms.

"My little girl," she said, "I do not understand you, but I am proud of you! I will not ask again for your confidence; but remember, that with it, or without it, I stand your friend. I am going to trust you. Try to trust me, and let me help you when I can."

She kissed the girl's cheeks, first one and then the other, in that charming way women have, and then gently released her.

For a moment Fabrice seemed struggling with some strong emotion; then she turned toward her friend.

"Heaven bless you, my good, true friend," she said. "You see, now, that I was right yesterday. Innocent or guilty, could I have braved that woman and conquered her, if I had

been the promised wife of a good and loving man, for whom I cared? And this, I fear, is but the beginning. But it won't last long, Conny; it can't. Ah, my dear, if the world could know what I carry here"—she put a hand upon her breast, and smiled a little woful smile—"how many do you think would envy La Belle Fabrice?"

She crossed to the swinging mirror, adjusted her hat, and came back to the place where Madam stood.

"Conny," she said, gently, "I am going on an unpleasant errand. But I won't be long. When I come back I shall know, at least, whether I am to have peace or war. It's a wretched business, and I wish you knew the worst of it. But I've held my peace while the sun shone; I'll hold it yet a little longer. I appreciate what you are doing for me. Don't think I am not grateful. God bless you, Conny!"

She caught her friend by her two plump shoulders, kissed her swiftly, and went hurriedly out.

CHAPTER XXII.

A STRANGE ALLY.

Mrs. Volney and her passenger were silent, while the little coupé rolled swiftly and almost noiselessly down the broad street. The lady leaned tranquilly back among her cushions, and seemed to have forgotten his proximity; and Cousin almost held his breath while he stole furtive glances at the fair, sweet profile beside him.

For sometime she so sat, her little black-gloved hands crossed lightly in her lap, her lips half parted, her eyes looking absently straight before her, their expression that of wistful sadness.

How beautiful she was! And with what dainty, what exquisite beauty! Plain, shrewd, practical Polly Cousin felt the spell of her loveliness to his finger tips. But, because he was practical, and in spite of her charm, he was asking himself as they rolled along:

"Why has she done this? What does she want with me?"

Presently, she stirred slightly, sighed softly, uncrossed her little hands and turned toward him.

"Pardon me," the sweet, low voice began; "pardon my preoccupation. Am I carrying you too far, or out of your way? Where shall I set you down?"

"I won't trouble you to go out of your way," he said; and he was angrily conscious that he was reddening again under her soft glance. "If you are going in that direction, you may drop me at Union Square."

"But will that serve you?" she said, smiling a little. "It will be a poor favor that I shall do you if I put you out, and then seeing you walk off to complete your journey. I am quite at leisure. Don't let me feel that I have not saved you trouble after all."

Cousin was silent a moment, and then he said, with something like his usual unconventional ease of manner:

"I was going to Police Headquarters."

"Oh," she said, softly.

"To report," he went on, with a half smile at the recollections of its futility, "to report the result of my interview with Mr. Paget."

"Oh," she said again, this time with another little sigh. Again she was silent a moment; then she turned her face full upon him, with a pathetic half smile and a hesitating manner.

"Will you let me ask you one or two questions, Mr.——"

"Cousin."

"Mr. Cousin, do not think me simply curious. Leah Paget was my dear friend. And I have heard nothing, except the newspapers' reports, and the little I learned at Mr. Paget's. Can you tell me anything—not of your professional work, but about Leah;—the manner of her going, and if you have any clue, any hope. I feel inexpressibly shocked. Leah was so much to me, who have no sister, no nearer friend; and then, she was betrothed to my—" She stopped suddenly and drew back, as if startled by her own words. "Pardon me," she said, "I took it for granted that you knew all of the family secrets."

"I shall be very glad to tell you anything that I can, Madam," Cousin said, a touch of eagerness in his tone. "I am acting in this matter for my friend, Captain Connors."

"Captain Connors?" She had again turned her face toward him. "Pardon my ignorance, but—"

"Captain Connors is the Chief of Police," he explained.

"I see; and you?"

"He has asked me to assist him, and I am endeavoring to do so."

"Pardon me. You say you are asked—you are a detective, are you not?"

There was a little drawing back in the dainty figure, a little added dignity to the tone.

"Not quite that." He was somehow conscious that he was glad to be able to answer her so. "Although I belong to a calling as inquisitive; I'm a reporter."

"A reporter?" with a soft little laugh. "I think I was beginning to be afraid of you, under the impression that you were a detective. I am not sure but that I stand in some awe of you as it is. You will not consider this an interview, I hope?"

"If it is, it is your interview. I won't appropriate it."

"Thank you." Again she smiled upon him. "Shall I drive you to the Station, Mr. Cousin?"

There was a touch of hesitancy in the way she put the question. And he smiled in turn, now quite at his ease.

"I won't ask that of you. I fancy your driver wouldn't quite like it," he said. "You will put me down at the corner."

"You put it clearly," she said. "My driver! Yes, I will put you down at the corner. Are we near?" She looked out and gave the necessary order. When she again turned to him, her face had regained its wistful earnest look. "I feel that I am doing a very unusual thing, a bold thing, Mr. Cousin. I do hope that you will not misunderstand me. I am so anxious and so at a loss. The ones that I would naturally go to for information are those that are most grieved, most shocked, by their trouble. I want to hear in full, in detail, that which would hurt them most to tell. I am going to confess that it was to ask you about these things, quite as much as to do you a favor, that I asked you—"

Again she paused: her passenger was flushing to the very roots of his hair.

"I did not flatter myself, Madam," he said. "I am not accustomed to such little kindnesses for my own sake. I am quite aware that I am only of value in my place."

A sudden gesture stopped him, and the beautiful dark eyes,

fixed upon his own, seemed to grow larger and deeper, and to silence and awe him with their look of mingled reproach and wounded dignity.

When she spoke again it was with gentle decision.

"Mr. Cousin, is your engagement with Captain Connors imperative? Are you expected at a given moment?"

"Not quite that."

"Then can you—it will be a real favor—can you give me a half hour of your time, now?"

"If you wish it." He would have given her ten hours just as readily, if she had asked it. Ten hours or ten days, and at any cost. He did not realize this while he was speaking, but he knew it well enough afterward.

Again she addressed the coachman.

"Home, Eugene."

Mrs. Volney was silent until her coupé had stopped before a fine stately old residence upon Madison Avenue. Then she said, very gently:

"This is my home. You will come in, Mr. Cousin. I will not detain you long, and my carriage shall take you back."

Wondering much, he alighted, and she let him hand her out, walking before him up the long paved footway to the stately entrance-door.

It was not a modern dwelling, that was evident from without, and the interior was in harmony with the outer appearance—of quiet, old-time, but not worn-out, elegance. How dignified and stately it all was!—dignified, but not cold; stately, but not forbidding.

As he followed Mrs. Volney across the square hall, noting the quiet splendor about him, the thought swept over him that the lithe, tall figure, going on before, was the right finish

to a fine picture, while he—(he caught glimpses of himself from glimmering mirrors as he traversed a long narrow reception-room)—he was certainly a discordant note.

Having crossed the upper end of a splendid drawing-room, Mrs. Volney paused before a heavy *portiere*, swept it aside and held it so for him to pass.

"If you will wait here, one moment," she said as he entered, "I will be with you again. You have been busy, and, is it my fancy, or are you fatigued? You will let me offer you something?"

He shook his head, and began an awkward protest; but she only smiled, waved her hand, and with the words "For only a moment," lifted the curtain and let it fall again behind her receding figure.

In a whirl of contending sensations, in which curiosity, admiration, distrust, and a sense of his own uncouthness and rusticity, which, up to the last hour, he had fondly imagined he had shaken from him like an old-fashioned garment, Cousin looked about him, and waited.

He was standing in a high-walled and magnificent library, splendid in its piled-up shelves and cases of richly-bound books, and its fittings of bronze and soft forest-green; and while his gaze yet rested upon a pair of antique bronzes, a man-servant in quiet livery came in.

He carried a tray, upon which rested a decanter and glasses; and when he had put this down he poured out a glass of wine and presented it to Cousin. He remained standing beside his tray while Cousin drained the glass and refused another, then bowed and withdrew.

The wine, he thought, was what he needed. He felt it warming his veins and restoring his self-possession.

In another moment, Mrs. Volney had returned. She had removed her mantle, and gloves, and bonnet with its perplexing widow's cap and shrouding veil. And how beautiful she was! The long straight folds of heavy trailing black enhanced the height and slenderness of her lithe swaying figure. The band of jets at her wrists made the small, long-fingered hands seem more like carved ivory. A similar gleaming band emphasized the curves of her delicate white throat, and heightened the beautiful pallor of her exquisite face, with its glowing lips, its dark bewildering eyes, and its crowning glory of lustrous hair, drawn away in rippling richness from the blue-veined temples, and coiled loosely at the nape of her graceful neck.

"Please, take that place, sir," she said, indicating a seat near that into which she sank. Then, glancing toward the tray, "Have you been served? Will you take another glass?"

He stammered out his thanks, but again declined, and took the place she had pointed out.

"Now," she said, "I will try and explain myself. And I beg of you, Mr. Cousin, that you will look upon me as a loving, sorrowing friend of Leah Paget's; a friend who knew her heart; knew it better than even her mother could; and who may, perhaps, be able to give you some help, some hint, that will aid you in your search."

"Ah," Cousin breathed, and involuntarily drew his chair a trifle nearer that occupied by the lady, while his hand went of its own volition to the pocket that contained his note-book.

"One moment," she said, softly. "Mr. Cousin, I place myself at your mercy. Before we begin, I am going to ask you to regard all that passes between us—all—as sacred, and to let the fact of our acquaintance even be a secret between us. I

am a woman alone in the world, without parent or brother."

How pathetic her face was! There were tears in her eyes as she went on:

"Leah Paget was my dearest friend, my only friend almost. I loved her tenderly. I believe she has been foully wronged. Will you let me help you? Will you be my friend, for her sake? Will you promise what I have asked?"

She put out her hand in a beseeching gesture. Her glorious eyes were searching his face.

With his heart throbbing, his head burning, and a wild whirl of new and strange emotions surging through his whole being, Percy Cousin, the practical, the uncouth, caught the outstretched hand between both his own, bent over it and kissed it, gallantly, like a knight of old.

CHAPTER XXIII.

DIPLOMACY.

The *debut* of La Belle Fabrice was literally the talk of the town. It fully occupied the allotted "nine days," and then, in defiance of general usage, bade fair to repeat itself.

Her opening night was a "hit," an "amazing success," to quote the jubilant Manager Horton. The second night confirmed the first. It "indicated the tone of the popular pulse,"

so said the "Morning Bulletin." "It more than confirmed first impressions, and emphasized the certainty that the charming little Comedienne from over the sea, would here, in New York, repeat and add to her success in London," said the "Social Echo." "It made the probability that La Belle Fabrice, the beautiful little English Comedienne, would score such a success as had not been registered in annals theatrical for many a day—a certainty," etc., etc.—this from the "Indicator." And other enterprising daily papers piped more or less to the same tune. There was but one dissenting voice.

Manager Horton, who, over his morning cup of coffee and cigar, and in the privacy of his own room, scanned, with keen and anxious eyes, the morning papers, one after another, (and who seasoned his necessarily early dinners with the afternoon issues,) uttered an oath as he put down the "*Call*," on the day after Fabrice's *debut*.

Last night, La Belle Fabrice, the latest importation of Manager Horton, who usually knows what he is about, made her first appearance upon an American stage. No expense had been spared in making the way to the popular heart smooth to this new candidate for fame, and the maxim of the enterprising Manager, "Advertising is all," was proven good once more. The Theatre was filled long before the fashionable hour; standing-room was at a premium, and a long line of baffled theatre-goers waiting for an entrance, and failing to get it, went away disconsolate. The initial programme, "Queen Mab," written expressly for the leading Actress, will be repeated tonight.

"I'd like to know what ails that———paper!" the Manager muttered. "And I'll take an early opportunity to find out."

Upon Fabrice's second night, public approval reached a climax, and society set its seal upon her.

La Belle Fabrice was the fashion.

After due reflection, Manager Horton, wise as a serpent in all that pertained to his calling, decided to wait and see what the "*Call*" would say after La Belle Fabrice's second night.

The second evening of "Queen Mab" was even more brilliant than the first. Long before the opening hour there was an ever-lengthening line before the theatre, and the box-office was under siege. It was Fashion's field night. Not since the sublime Patti's last appearance, has there been such a display of exquisite toilets and lovely faces, such a profusion of flowers and waving of fans, such sparkling of jewels and sheen of rich apparel. The house was beautifully decorated, and the stage setting was wonderful. Manager Horton certainly knows how to do things, and "Queen Mab" is likely to have a long run.

The Manager threw down the paper, and relieved his feelings in mankind's favorite manner. Then he picked it up, reread the paragraph, and laughed long but not loud.

His leading-man, who figured on the bills as "Osmond Traverse," occupied the room opposite his own, and the Manager pulled on his smoking-coat and went to Traverse's door.

"Come over a moment," he said; "I want to show you the '*Call.*'"

Traverse was a good-looking Englishman,—not o handsome by daylight, however, so said the ladies, as he was upon the stage; in fact, quite a disappointment. He came out and went with Manager Horton back to the room of the latter.

"Read that," said the Manager.

"By Jawge!" exclaimed Traverse, when he had read the lines, "that's a jewced shame, don't you know. Worse than yesterday. Jove! why, they don't even name La Belle, the duffers!"

"Then you saw the other?"

"She showed it to me last night."

"La Belle? She's a cool one! What did she say?"

"Only some of her nonsense. You know how she takes these things."

"Umph! She never had such a thing as this to take, since I've been her Manager. I know how independent she is. A little too independent, sometimes."

"Well," said Traverse, rubbing his chin thoughtfully, "she can afford to be independent, if any one can."

"Any one can't," snapped the Manager; "especially a woman—and a woman always before the public. I'm hot about this. I'm going to see her."

Traverse released his chin and turned to look at his Manager.

"I may be wrong," he said, slowly, "but I give you the hint for what it is worth. I think she knows why the '*Call*' is so cold."

"Eh! Why? Did she say—"

"She said nothing. It was something that Madam Congreve let drop; only a word at that, and a laugh."

"I'm going to see them," the Manager said again.

He found them at home, and he found Sir Felix Wyntoun there also.

The rooms were filled with the atmosphere of success. Flowers—some of them trophies of her two triumphant nights, and others sent with cards and notes and messages—had been arriving all day; they covered the tables, and hung from brackets and chandeliers; they were bestowed wherever flowers could be placed, and a pyramid of bouquets rested upon the floor.

Fabrice was dressed in a bewitching carriage costume, and Sir Felix stood in an attitude of waiting.

"Going out?" said the Manager to Fabrice.

"Yes, Mr. Horton. Is it something urgent?" She

glanced from Sir Felix to the Manager, and then named them to each other.

"I will not detain you," the Manager said. "Madam Congreve has a look of being at home and at leisure."

"If you have come to scold," said Fabrice, "I shouldn't like to miss it."

The Manager hesitated, glanced at Sir Felix, and then made a bold stroke.

"I've come to ask you what you know about the '*Evening Call?*'"

A smile flitted across the face of Fabrice, leaving it demurely sober. Madam Congreve laughed unreservedly; and even Sir Felix smiled broadly.

"Ah," said the Manager, as he looked from one to the other, "I am out in the cold."

"Has any one asked you to sit down?" asked Fabrice. "I am going to leave you at the mercy of Madam Congreve, Mr. Horton."

He glanced approvingly over the charming figure standing out before him. He was an admirer of dainty costumes, and a very good judge of them, as well. He knew their value, on or off the stage. He was a kindly man, and accustomed to treat those with whom he had to deal, in a familiar, fatherly fashion, that never became oppressive. He had a genuine liking for Fabrice, and his pride in her success was not based solely upon the advantages he would thereby reap.

"It's an important occasion, I see," he said, smiling, as he seated himself. "Don't let me detain you; only, I warn you, I shall besiege Madam here, the moment that you are gone."

"About—" she began.

"About this '*Call*' business."

Fabrice laughed musically.

"Then, it's Madam whom I must leave to *your* tender mercies," she said; and entrusting her fan and bouquet to Sir Felix, went her way.

The Manager drew his chair nearer to the favorite window of Madam's. She had been a member of his Company for years, and he knew how to appreciate her. In fact, the good lady had been dubbed by the comedian of the party, "Horton's Mentor," and it was not altogether a misnomer.

"May I ask the occasion?" he said, taking up a bouquet from the pyramid near his feet, and sniffing at it from time to time as they talked.

She understood him. "I believe it's an art collection; private gallery opened to a small party, especially for the benefit of Fabrice and Sir Felix."

"Oh, indeed—*and* Sir Felix?"

"That is what I said. It's something quite swell, I should think—Poultneys'."

The Manager pursed up his lips in a pantomimic whistle.

"Poultneys'! That *is* swell—a private collection and a rare one—not often opened. Well, our Fabrice has taken the city."

"Yes; she was sure to do that."

"Heavens, how well she played last night! It's a relief to me, that. Has anything gone wrong with her of late, Madam?"

"With Fabrice?" Madam looked up from a strip of needlework upon which she had not yet made a beginning, innocent wonder depicted upon her countenance. She was thoroughly loyal to La Belle.

"I have fancied sometimes that she was growing listless; didn't take enough interest in her American *debut*. She seemed to have lost all her enthusiasm." He stopped and looked at her inquiringly.

"I suppose we all have our dull days," was her comment. "She certainly plays with all her old vigor and dash."

"Gad! I should say so!. She has scored a grand victory. Everybody is inquiring about her. And when you come to think of it, how little we know of her."

Again his pause was a question. Madam was threading her embroidery needle; it took her entire attention.

"By the way," he began again, wise in his generation; "are you going to tell me about this '*Call*' business? I want to stop it."

Madam laughed; she had succeeded in threading her needle, and now began work.

"Yes," she said, "I'll tell you about that. I'm sure Fabrice won't mind."

And she told, in her own way—and the Madam could tell a story well—about the visit of the '*Call*' reporter—whose name she did not know—and its absurd ending. She told her story so well that it set him off in shouts of laughter, although after all was told he began to look grave.

"A perfect farce, by Jove!" he exclaimed. "But what a daring thing! Who but Fabrice, on the very eve of a first appearance, too, would have dared to trifle so with a reporter? They're sometimes powerful fellows, in their way; and dangerous, too. How did the fellow look? Describe him."

Madam did so, and the Manager slapped his knee and cried:

"I know him. It's Cousin—one of their best men. I wish it had been somebody else." Then he seemed to take a more cheerful view of the case. "But I think I can fix it somehow. What a reckless thing for Fabrice to do!"

"I'll tell her you say so," said Madam.

"Umph! much she will care for that. But I'm glad that

you've told me." He dropped the subject and did not recur to it again.

"Are you willing, now, to tell me about this young Englishman?" he asked, after some desultory talk.

"About Sir Felix Wyntoun?"

"Yes."

"I know very little about him."

"You know something about his intentions, his relations, his friendship for Fabrice, don't you?"

"I know nothing about Fabrice and her friends, Mr. Horton, that I feel at liberty to tell. You must interview Fabrice, or Sir Felix, on that subject."

Mr. Horton laughed. "Well, well!" he said, "I won't press the subject. By the bye, did you notice Janet Marshall last night?"

"I noticed that her movements were rather languid, and her voice, in one or two places, not quite up to the mark. Fabrice spoke of it. She's quite interested in Janet."

"I'm anxious about that girl; I'm really anxious. If I had known when I brought her over—"

"Has anything happened?" Madam asked.

"Oh, only the usual thing. Traverse told it to me the day after we landed. I wish it had been the day before we sailed!"

"May I know what it is?"

"Oh, it is only the old story. It seems that she has left a sweetheart playing in the provinces. They had quarrelled when she signed with me. Now she learns that he's going out to Australia with Noble's 'Merrymakers.' They were to have been married and gone out together. He has written to her, and wants her to join him, and she's pining after him. That's

the long and short of it. The trouble, and the cold she caught on the boat, moving about when she ought to have been in her berth, has already told on her. I'm afraid of her breaking down."

"Poor girl," sighed Madam.

"Poor girl, yes. I'm human—if I don't often get credit for it. I'm sorry for her, of course. But what, if she breaks down or levants? There's no telling what a love-struck woman will do."

"True," said Madam, in a tone that he did not quite understand.

"And then, there's the 'Two Sweethearts.' Such a comedy as that—and what becomes of it if Janet breaks down? Who can play the rival to Fabrice, or rather, who can look it? Such a perfect contrast, such a perfect foil—" He broke off suddenly and looked fixedly at Madam.

"Do you know Hortense Novalis?" he asked.

Madam started. "I have not the honor," she replied, coldly.

"Oh, all the women freeze at the sound of her name," he said, irritably. "She's a good actress."

"So I have heard."

"And a deuced handsome woman."

"Don't use strong language, Mr. Horton. Yes, she certainly is handsome."

He fidgeted with the flowers he still held.

"Does Fabrice know her?" he asked.

"Really, I think that Fabrice has seen Miss or M'lle Novalis," she answered, evasively.

Again he sniffed at the flowers and seemed to meditate.

"You know she is in New York?"

"You mean the Novalis?"

"Of course."

"I have seen the fact mentioned in the newspapers, and I have seen the person in the Park."

"I was thinking," he said, as if feeling his way, "that if Janet does fail us, the Novalis would fill her place admirably, if she could be got. Heavens, what a pair they would make!"

Silence upon the part of Madam.

"I wish," he said, "that you would tell me what you think."

"About substituting Hortense Novalis for Janet Marshall?"

"Yes."

"I think you would have to substitute some one for Fabrice also. I have heard Fabrice express herself upon the subject. She would not play with Novalis."

"And why?"

"Ask her, Mr. Horton."

Another silence. Then he said in a much milder tone:

"I happened to hear that Hortense Novalis wishes to appear upon the boards here—and I have been sounding a little. If she opens under some rival management, it will make warm times for us. There's plenty of money behind her."

"Whose?" Madam sat erect and folded her arms in her lap—a sure sign that she was keenly interested.

He shrugged his shoulders.

"He's not a professional," he said. "The fact is, I've been interviewed by her agent; I suppose I may call him that. I won't mention names. It was confidential. She, the Novalis, has in some way got wind of the new comedy, and the rival parts. She wants to appear with Fabrice. It would make a strong cast."

"Fabrice will not consent."

He got up and put down the bouquet. "Well, I've said my

say. You need not speak of this to La Belle—but the fact is, I've just received a note from Novalis. She asks me to call upon her."

"Where?" asked the wily Madam.

"At her apartments, on Lexington Avenue."

"And you are going, of course?"

"I am going—now. She fixes the time in her note. If she appears at a rival house, I shan't like it. I'm going to try and stop the game in some way."

"If Frederick Quinlan is behind the scenes," said Madam, rising, "you won't stop it."

He turned upon her a look of surprise, then laughed. "Well," he said, "I see you're posted. Yes, Quinlan is the man."

CHAPTER XXIV.

HORTENSE.

When Manager Horton presented himself before Hortense Novalis, he found her alone in a suite of apartments gorgeous to excess, glowing with tropical color, heavy with perfume, and everywhere, in careless and costly profusion, were scattered rare specimens of Oriental art—curios, tapestries, carvings, fans; while in their midst, reclined the mistress of all, herself gorgeous in a Japanese robe, stiff and gleaming with embroideries.

She half arose to receive him, and then dropped back again among her cushions; a pet dog was nestling beside her, a parrot swung and grumbled in a gilded cage upon the floor at her feet. Clearly, all was unconventional here.

Hortense Novalis, at home, was not one whit less beautiful than in the ride or drive, and she was far more dangerous—a royal brunette, her face aglow with olive and pomegranate, her lips full, curved and scarlet, her eyes blacker than darkness, softer than velvet. She spoke with an accent which was not French nor Spanish nor Italian; and which Horton, being a cosmopolitan, readily guessed to have been acquired, built upon natural foundation of "American-English."

She was a beautiful, but not a subtle creature—born to beguile rather than to convince. They talked for an hour—she with charming smiles, with soft laughter that displayed the loveliest of little white teeth, with pretty pouts and charming cajolery. But out of it, the veteran Manager came unscathed; he knew her and her wishes and purposes thoroughly; she by no means was so certain of his meaning.

He had been charmed, of course, and he had flattered her; men always did. But did he mean to place her upon the stage by the side of La Belle Fabrice, or did he not?

Not long after the departure of Manager Horton, Hortense received another visitor. He came in breezily and without ceremony, and, sitting down beside her upon the cushions, took her brown finger tips between his own aristocratic hands.

"Well, my princess?" he said, inquiringly.

"I don't know about the 'well,' Mr. Frederick," she pouted. "He came."

"And you saw him and conquered, of course?"

"I'm not so sure, sir. The old thing is cunning, and bound

to stick by his La Belle Fabrice. Bah ! I don't believe she can act !"

"Yes? But she can, my dear; she can act charmingly. You had better go tonight and see for yourself."

"I won't," petulantly. "I won't; there. Do you know, Fred, I couldn't make him promise to let me read the new play."

"Obdurate man ! Let me suggest something. The new play is probably the property of La Belle Fabrice."

"La Belle Fabrice ! It's always La Belle Fabrice ! Who have you seen, Frederick ?"

"Several. You can have the Opera House next month, if you like. Organize a new company, and set up in opposition to La Belle Fabrice."

"I don't want that. It would be work. I'll wait a little. I'm sure you can bring him to terms, Fred."

"Who, Horton ? Not so easily. You mustn't have too much faith in me, my dear. I can buy you a manager if you like, but I won't promise that it shall be Horton." He got up and sauntered across the room.

She pouted, and flung herself back among the cushions, watching him furtively through half-closed lids, as he moved about fingering the dainty *bijoutiere* in a careless and accustomed fashion.

"If you keep on," he said, finally, putting down an ugly piece of Japanese carving with a shrug, "you will only have to open your doors, to open a bazaar."

He laughed mockingly and began to play with the dog at her side.

"Virginie says that you are a very fastidious 'Americaine,'" she said, mimicing the accents of her French maid.

"Virginie should know better than to comment upon your friends and guests," he said, sharply. But I must say that I do think your tastes are a little barbaric. I sometimes wonder at your always faultless costuming when you go abroad."

Again she laughed carelessly; evidently, this was not her tender point.

"That's all Virginie's; she is very strict about my dressing. If I don't humor her she won't stay. She says it would ruin her to let me go out glaringly dressed. She almost quarrelled with me the other day for wearing a rose or two in my habit corsage."

"Well, she certainly is a necessary evil," he said, in a tone that brought her to a sitting posture, that she might better scan his face. Very often in his bantering talks with her, he adopted a tone which she found herself at a loss to interpret.

He came over to her and sat down in a low lounging-chair drawn close to her cushions. She pouted prettily and dropped back in her former easy attitude.

"Princess," he began, "are you really bent upon making an appearance upon the dramatic stage?"

"You know I am," she answered.

"Then, why don't you want to appear on your own stage, with your own company?"

"Because."

"Pshaw! don't be a child."

"Well, don't ask me, then. I have my reasons, that's enough."

"Enough for you, perhaps." He was growing a trifle impatient.

She sat erect so suddenly that the little dog was tumbled upon the floor, from which he gathered himself snarling and yelping.

"Well, listen then," she cried, petulantly. "Do you know how long I have been in New York? Two months, and more. Do you know how I live? Like a hermit. Oh, yes, I know I ride and drive, show my horses and my toilets; and people wonder and admire, and the Newspapers notice me and call me the Mysterious Beauty. You like it; and then, you ride with me, and trot beside my carriage, on the Avenue. But I don't meet people and know people. I never speak to any one, while you are bowing and bowing—" She stopped short; her voice had risen above its usual dulcet tone, and was a trifle sharp.

"My dear," he said, softly, but with that slow smile that she found it so difficult to understand, and that acted upon her like an irritant—"my dear, I am always anxious to let my friends see you at your best."

The shaft fell harmless. She was absorbed with her own grievances, and hurried on:

"And now you want me to try the nunnery act?" He drew up his shoulders and shivered. "You want me to pose in the opera boxes, and wear all my jewels, and choicest dresses—"

"Not all the jewels, Hortense. Heaven forbid! We won't put out the eyes of all New York."

"Yes, of course, you want me to be talked about now."

"No, I don't, my dear."

"Well, my jewels, then, and my dresses."

"And your charming face, my dear, and your beautiful plump shoulders, and statuesque arms, and your glorious eyes. Why should I not be proud to let them see you, my princess? You are the most beautiful creature that sun ever lighted on."

He leaned toward her as he said this, and he said it sincerely. He was an ardent lover of all things beautiful, this

blonde, young cynic sybarite. He was not given to talking of himself, or his friendships with women, even to his intimates; only once, after an enthusiastic eulogy upon her beauty, delivered between puffs of smoke, and to a favored listener, Frederick Quinlan had said:

"She is so beautiful and so luxuriously graceful that a man might do worse than to take her for life, and adore her and set her up for his friends to adore, as he would some rare picture or statue—if, like the picture or statue, she were mute. But when she speaks—much—it is—"

"What?" his listener had asked.

"A broken statue."

Praise was sweet to Hortense Novalis. She leaned forward to him and let him take the warm lissom hand.

"Do you really want me to go with you, to sit in a stage-box and help you make a success for La Belle Fabrice?" she said, with her eyes upon his face.

"Hortense," he answered, suddenly holding her eyes with his own, "do you know La Belle Fabrice?"

She started and drew away her hand. "How should I?"

"But you do?"

She stirred among her cushions uneasily. "Why do you ask me that?" she said.

"Because you speak of her so often, and in such a tone. Because, sometimes, you seem to hate her, are jealous of her."

"I'll tell you," she said, sitting erect before him. "Look at me! You say that I am a beautiful woman. You have seen me act, and you say that I can act. All over this town *she* is lauded, trumpeted. She is all the fashion, she is being invited everywhere. Oh, I know, this morning, and all to-day, it has been flowers, and notes, and callers! Everywhere

it is Fabrice! Fabrice !! Fabrice !!! While I—" She was on her feet now, and as she sprang up her splendid hair fell upon her shoulders, where it unrolled its heavy coils and fell about her, looking, at first, not unlike slowly-writhing serpents—at last framing her gloriously in rippling jetty richness. "Look at me! Look well! I am—what you see! My horses, my dresses, my jewels, are fit for a queen. I know that. Well, don't you know that I'd give them all to be in her place, to be invited, to be received! It is not the acting. You know that I'm not so fond of study and training. But I can do it. You know this, too: Put me on the stage beside your Fabrice, and in two days I will be receiving the invitations and the flowers and the calls. I tell you, all I want is the chance to stand beside that girl, to be on a level with her. Then let her win if she can! I want a chance to show her that she has not stepped into a place that I cannot reach! What is she that I cannot be?"

She dropped again upon the cushions, panting with her own vehemence. And he arose and stood before her. She was quiet enough now, and, perhaps, a little startled at her own outbreak. His face was grave, but self-contained, as usual.

"We will leave the question of your reason for wishing to outdo La Belle Fabrice where it lies. When and where you have known her, and how much you know of her, you will have to tell me some day. Just now we will settle this society business. I can't help you there. Young men don't often play the *chaperone* in New York, and I never knew one yet who played it with success anywhere. La Belle Fabrice lives in a severely proper manner, at one of our most exclusive family hotels. She is matronized by a member of her company, who was a lady before she was an actress. Your invaluable Virginie has put some fine notions into your head, but she can't

quite bring herself up to the mark, when it comes to *chaperonage.* Society is a little particular about a few things."

"Yes, I know it. One must have money, of course; that's the most, and it buys all the rest. Why can't it buy a *chaperone?*" She ceased speaking and looked up to him, smiling audaciously. "If money is lacking," she said, after a silent moment, "I'm not exactly poor. If you don't want to help me—"

"Nonsense!" It was not an impatient ejaculation; he looked simply bored, as he turned upon his heel and took up his hat.

"Shall we consider it settled, then?" he asked, carelessly. "You don't mean to give it up. It won't do to trifle, you know."

"I'll not trifle about this. Yes, it's settled, with me." She shut her little teeth together. She had anticipated more objection, longer and hotter argument, and she did not readily adjust herself to new conditions.

"Then, of course, it's settled for me. I saw Van Voort this morning. Next to Horton, he's the best manager I know, and he's not in harness just now."

"Why not?" she asked, quickly. "In the midst of the season, too."

"Ill-health, I believe," replied Quinlan, carelessly. "Van Voort has made a small fortune in the business. If he takes you up, it will be a favor for me. By the way, he and Horton are very good friends. You want to try Horton first, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"Very good. I'll have Van see Horton."

"Why don't you see him yourself?"

"For the same reason that I don't manage for you myself, and *chaperone* you. Virginie must tell you wiser things, my dear; your ideas are very crude."

She tossed her handsome head and pouted. He put on his hat and walked toward the *portiere*. There he turned.

"If you want to come out under Horton," he said, "you'll do well to show yourself in a stage-box, with all your bravery, to applaud and to seem pleased."

She frowned, and looked down at the rug beneath her slippered feet.

"Wait," she said, and sat still frowning and biting at her under lip.

He took off his hat, and stood where he had stopped. Presently, she looked up, smiled, arose and came toward him.

"Come tonight," she said. "We will go. I will do as you say."

He took her hand and drew her toward him.

"And tomorrow," she added, with a little laugh, "I will go and call upon Fabrice."

He laughed now in his turn, and she failed to perceive the satire in the sound of it.

A little later, Hortense was talking with the all-wise Virginie,—talking volubly, as to an equal.

"I wish you would play the *chaperone*," she said.

"Ah, if M'lle had only taken my advice—at first. Everything would have been so much easier."

"Yes, yes," impatiently. "But how could I know? And then the bother of it. I didn't mean to stay, you remember, unless—" She stopped, apparently caught by some new thought. "Virginie, how would my old nuisance do?"

"What—she?"

"Yes. She might do if we made her look fine. Eh?"

Virginie was a middle-aged woman, with a shrewd eye, and a foxy smile. She had spent all of her mature life-time—and she had been very mature at sixteen—in abetting intrigues for her various mistresses. She was bold, clever, unscrupulous; and she was enthusiastic in the service of her mistress.

"I could make that woman," she said, after a moment of reflection—"I could make her passable if—if M'lle could make her hold her bragging tongue."

"How could you do your part, Virginie?"

"By making her have white hair; much of it. It would take a week to make her hands fit to be seen, without gloves. Then if she would consent to be an invalid—that gives one so much excuse. To go about little and to say little; to sit in rich wraps and shiver—any one might do that."

CHAPTER XXV.

"DAYS THAT ARE DREAR."

Habit sometimes saves us from folly. Polly Cousin had left the presence of Mrs. Volney in a whirl of emotions, mentally dazzled, physically dazed. The old prosaic world was changed for him, it would never be the same again, he thought, half with ecstasy, half with contempt, as he tossed upon a sleepless pillow.

It never was.

But, though the old Cousin was to be not quite the old

Cousin any more, there was no perceptible change in him as he went about his business the next day. He performed his reportorial duties in his usual satisfactory manner. He held his customary counsel with Captain Connors, explained in a satisfactory way his non-appearance of the previous night, and gave a weeded-out version of his unsatisfactory call upon Abner Paget.

Of Mrs. Volney he scarcely spoke, mentioning her incidentally, and only as a "friend of the family." He omitted to mention her courtesy in offering him a seat in her carriage, and ignored all after-events as not pertaining to "business."

But his last thought at night, and his first one in the morning, was to find out all he could of Mrs. Sara Volney.

It was not a difficult task. Mrs. Volney was, or had been, a figure in society. Gregory Volney, now almost two years dead, had transferred himself and his hopes to the groves of Florida some years since. He was the only son of another Gregory Volney, who had figured conspicuously in the business world of New York, burning out life's taper at both ends, it was said—losing his young wife while their son was an infant, and dying, himself, one year before the young man attained his majority.

Young Volney had made a brisk beginning; too brisk, some said. But when he came into his fortune, which was a modest one, he began to consider the facts that consumption was in the family, that his own health had been already impaired, that he owned some orange-groves in Florida, and that he was tired of New York.

As the result of his reflections, it came about that he went to Florida, regained, in a measure, his health, began a new career, added to and then multiplied his fortune, went abroad and

took himself a wife, or took himself a wife and went abroad—which it was, was not quite clear—returned to the Sunny South, and lived out his days there.

Volney had one relative in New York, his cousin, Mrs. Talfourd; and he paid two or three long visits to the North, bringing his fair wife with him. Finally, on account of her ill-health, Mrs. Volney passed the larger part of two years in New York, under the roof of the Talfourds. And less than a year ago, the word reached her that her husband had died suddenly, from the effects of a tarantula bite. The blow to Mrs. Volney had been a heavy one, so read Cousin in a pile of last years' "Society Items." She went South, but finding it impossible to remain, sold her estate. Then she came back to New York, where she opened the long-closed and dismal home of her husband's people, had the fine old house, in part, refitted and made habitable, "that she might live out her last days" —another quotation from the Society columns—"where her husband had lived his first."

And here she had lived very quietly, going nowhere, and receiving only a very few dear friends—the Talfourds, father and son, a few artistic and literary people, and the usual complement of adoring lady friends. Mrs. Talfourd being an invalid, and Leah Paget being an intimate, Mrs. Volney's quiet coupé was often seen before the door of both Talfourd and Paget. A slight indisposition, and a desire to meet some Southern friends, had induced Mrs. Volney to make a brief visit to the White Sulphur Springs. And it was on her return from this visit that she had been greeted by the news of Leah's mysterious disappearance.

"It has saddened everything," she said, in her sweet, slow voice, to Mrs. Talfourd, on the occasion of her first call. "I

feel somehow as if I should never come out from under the shadow—never be a really glad and happy woman again. And Max—I have not yet seen him—how does he bear it?"

"Wofully," said Max' mother, shaking her head.

"Poor Cousin Max!" It had always been Cousin Max, and Cousin Sara. "Poor boy! Tell him to come and see me as soon as it would be any comfort for him to do so. Poor Max and poor Leah!"

Polly Cousin's first visit to Mrs. Volney was not his last. Her anxiety was so evident, and she seemed to him so pathetic in her loneliness and her devotion to her lost friend.

"I have done a very bold thing," she said, when Cousin had parted from her that evening. "But you see my position; I have felt so anxious and so helpless. If it would not trouble you too much, if you could see your way to it without betraying any trust, without any impropriety, I would be glad to have you come and see me now and then, just to tell me any little bit of news that you can. I do not ask to be let into your secrets. But couldn't you sometimes give me, as Leah's devoted friend, just a little glimpse of your hopes and opinions, if nothing more?" How wistful her face was! How lovely looked the swaying, black-robed figure, standing before him. "It would be such a friendly act," she added, and put her hand to him appealingly.

And then—he remembered it afterward; it was with surprise at his own daring and supple-mindedness in a situation so novel to him—he had taken her hand as easily as she had given it, all the chivalry within him aroused by her apparent need of just the service he could render, and had said, impetuously:

"If I can serve you, Madam, I have already promised for

myself. It is too much to hope that anything I might do for you would entitle me to your friendship."

And then—what charmingly daring things a very beautiful and innocent woman, or a very beautiful and wily woman, can do, and run no risk, and dazzle and charm the man she beseeches or besieges—and then she had let the little hand, which he was about to release, lie passive in his grasp, while she lifted her wistful eyes to his.

"Why?" And then, before he could stammer a first word: "Sometimes I think it is too much for me to hope to have a disinterested friend, such a friend as I am sure you could be; one who would advise me in need, who would be candid, and always tell me the plain truth. Ah, we lonely women are cruelly hampered!"

That was the beginning of a dream for Polly Cousin. Of course, he went again and again.

At first they talked of very little but Leah—and Mrs. Volney was not inquisitive. All that he honestly could, he told her, and that was all she asked to hear. But after a while they spoke in a desultory way of other things—of books and pictures, of theatres and of people. And Percy Cousin began to feel that this lovely, still, stately woman, with her simple, straightforward ways, and her low, slow, sweet utterances, was really his friend; nothing more; he never hoped for that;—just his honest, kindly, interested friend. From their first meeting he had never sought to deceive himself. There was no moment when he would not have died to serve her, and not one moment when he did not guard his secret jealously, in fear that she would read it some day in his eyes or voice, and shut him out forever from her gentle, stately presence.

Those were dreary days to Max Talfourd. At his home,

he went and came as usual. After his first difference with his father, he had been minded to take himself away altogether, to live at his club or some hotel. But the gentle influence of his mother prevailed, and he remained at home. By mutual consent, the name of Leah Paget was never mentioned in the presence of the elder Talfourd, either by wife or son. He found much comfort in his mother's tender sympathy and good counsel, and he met, now and then, in her boudoir, Mrs. Paget, who treated him with an open affection, that came to him, at times, cheeringly, almost as a message from his lost love.

In spite of the differences of the heads of the two houses, the two wives and mothers continued, as before, warm friends and *confidantes*,—even warmer, closer friends, because of the misfortune that had cast a shadow on both.

Sir Felix, too, proved a strong ally to his friend in these days, and the two were much together.

When two weeks had passed and nothing very hopeful had been accomplished, Max asked his friend to try again, in the hope that the famous London detective might have returned from abroad. And, by the advice of his mother and Sir Felix, he tried to go about a little, and so keep up some small interest in life.

Two or three times, in company with Sir Felix, he called upon Fabrice, the two always choosing the time when she would be least occupied with other callers. And, gradually, under the ardent impulsive sympathy of the bright little Comedienne, and the more moderate but sincere and motherly interest of Madam Congreve, he was led to talk of Leah, of the search and the successive steps, and of his hopes and fears.

Taking Sir Felix with him, he made his first call upon Mrs. Volney. Afterward, he went oftener, and nearly always with

his friend. These calls helped to feed his hope and keep alive his faith.

"It's one of the loveliest things in woman," he said, one day, to Sir Felix—"her faith in her own sex. If she's a good woman herself, she won't believe ill of a sister. Your little Fabrice, now—how stanch she is, and how she reasons! Why, man, if all the world spoke ill of that girl, I'd not believe it, just from the way she believes in Leah."

"And there's your cousin," Sir Felix had added.

"Sara? yes. But Sara knows Leah. I never knew Sara Volney to speak ill of any one—and it's my belief that she had cause to have said much that was ill of her husband in his day. I do not think that her married life was a bed of roses. But I never got so much as a word to that effect from her, although we've always been really good friends."

"It strikes me," said Sir Felix, "that I'd be almost afraid to be too friendly, just for friendship's sake, with a woman as beautiful and as fascinating as Mrs. Volney."

"Bless you, my boy, there's nothing of the flirt in Sara Volney!—nothing in the world," said Max.

CHAPTER XXVI.

HANOVER STREET, LONDON.

On one of the days when nothing good seemed happening, or ever about to happen, to our anxious friends in New York; when Leah Paget had been over two weeks missing, and La

Belle Fabrice a week before the adoring public,—two young men sat breakfasting together in a luxuriously comfortable suite of bachelor apartments in the fashionable heart of London.

The hour was somewhat of an early one for London, and the men were Lord Louis Barham, and his host, Francis Ferrars.

"Upon my word, Ferrars," said Lord Barham, as he glanced out from his seat near a big window, "you are not in bad quarters. Drawing-room floor in Hanover Street's about as good as anything in London, eh? In the season, and with such cooking and attendance! You shouldn't grumble."

"I don't grumble," responded his host, amiably. "Yes, I like my quarters, and my landlady. When I come back to London, after a run, I am very comfortable here. Have you quite finished?"

"Quite," said Lord Barham, resting a hand against the table and giving his chair a backward push—a boyish movement, which caused Ferrars to smile.

"Then, I'll send away these things," he said, "and we'll talk."

"I should say we had been talking," suggested Lord Barham.

"Well, we'll change the subject," said Ferrars, "to one of more interest. In the meantime, cigars, of course."

The cigars were produced, and while the servant removed the breakfast things, the two lost themselves and obliterated each other in shades of tobacco smoke.

Two young men more opposite in character could not well have been imagined; but, by one of the singular freaks by which nature loves to mystify poor mortals, they were, externally, much alike—alike in height and build, in general out-

line and feature, and in their purely English coloring,—ruddy blonde,—and in the hue of eyes and hair. Apart, a person knowing one and meeting the other, would say at once, "Strong resemblance to Lord Barham, really;" or, "Looks very much like my friend Ferrars."

Together, the resemblance was not so marked, for no two faces could have been more unlike in expression. And this unlikeness was carried out and made emphatic in their speech and manner.

In the face, the voice, the movements of Ferrars were embodied strength of character, force, a mighty will, body and muscles under perfect control. His face was habitually grave, though his smile, when it came, was singularly sweet and boyish. His eyes were very alert, unobtrusively observant. His manner was quiet; his movement direct. He had no superfluity of word and gesture.

Lord Louis Barham, on the other hand, was a "smiling man," a voluble talker, and overflowing with unnecessary activity. Not the rapid movements of the busy man, but the slow constant going of the pleasure-hunter.

Lord Louis was one of those fortunate unfortunates who have nothing to do but sustain a position in a very indulgent world of fashion, rendered more indulgent because of his ample income and ampler ancestry. He was amiable and indolent to a fault, generous in the same proportion, with few bad habits, and no pronounced views; fond of obliging his friends when he could do it without too much personal effort; and very fond of following a leader of his own selection, and of being agreeably entertained.

That this young nobleman was a warm friend and glowing admirer of Francis Ferrars, was a part of his wisdom, for Fer-

rars was not of the fashionable world. Society knew him not. Instead, he was a young man whose only "estate" lay in his large, well-shaped head, or had, in the beginning. But this estate he had cultivated to such advantage that it yielded him large profits; and there were few young men in London who, as a man among men, held a more enviable place.

The question "Who is Ferrars?" had ceased to be asked, for it was well known that his past was a sealed book. He was said to have noble blood in his veins—and looking at the man, it was not difficult to so believe. He was known to have lived, from early childhood, as a ward to an unknown guardian, and to have had always a moderate income. He had chosen the law as a profession, so it was said, but had suddenly abandoned it and entered the Secret Service. Here his success had been marvelous. He had proven himself one of the few great detectives, a master of a dangerous calling, who was born with a genius for the work, and who added to his birthright, cultivation and experience.

Already he had seen two years of service at Scotland Yards, and now he had been, for more than a year past, unconnected with any agency, after refusing positions of trust and emolument in a department wherein he had well served.

Ferrars had earned a reputation for being "odd," and one of his oddities was to live as he pleased, and to accept only such cases as he found sufficiently complicated and interesting. It was while operating such a case that Ferrars had begun and cemented a friendship with Lord Louis Barham and Sir Felix Wyntoun, which had proved warm and lasting.

"And now," said Ferrars, when they were finally alone, "about Sir Felix and his mystery."

"Yes." Lord Barham produced from his pocket a thin bundle of letters and telegrams, and placed them upon the table. "There you are," he said, slipping off the rubber band that held them, and beginning to tumble them over. "Here's the first telegram— when you were in Germany, and here's the next. There's the one asking for your address, and the others, sort of repeating themselves. Young fellah's been getting into business over there in 'Merica, should say."

"It looks like it."

"Ya'as. There's the explanatory letter; tells all about the missing young lady, and his friend, who is her *fiance*. Don't mention any names, though." He pushed the letter across the table to Ferrars. "You'd better read for yourself."

"It's probably much like my own," said Ferrars; but he took it up and read every word. When he had returned it to Lord Louis he pondered a moment. "It's plain that Sir Felix is deeply interested," he said, at last.

"Yes; clear enough. Didn't think he would get into the detective business quite so quick. Knew he always had a hankering after your mantle, though. Fancy it! He'd make just about as good a one—as—as I would." He laughed, and Ferrars joined him.

"His little plan, though," went on Lord Louis, "wasn't so bad. Wondah if he weally did invent that all by himself."

"I'll read you what he says in his letter to me on that point," said Ferrars. He produced a letter, the fellow to the one in Lord Barham's hand, and read aloud the part referred to: "'We have discussed this matter, my friend and I, and I am sure this is our only chance of success. The New York Police are certainly efficient, but this matter is out of their line. The missing young woman is not one of the sort they

are used to dealing with. The person and the motive, taking the ground that her absence is voluntary, is not of the common sort, yet they are applying to an uncommon case their common methods. On the other hand, the crime, if there is a crime, is not a thing formulated and carried out among criminals of the common type. Every station of low life is laid open to the average detective. What this case needs is a detective who can lay open some of the secret places of high life, so called ; one who has studied his aristocratic criminal as the average detective studies the criminal of the slums. For I believe there has been a crime, and that it is the crime of an aristocrat."

"Oh!" ejaculated Lord Barham. "'Merica is certainly sharpening the wits of that scion."

"Sir Felix is nothing if he is not frank," said Ferrars. "This is how he ends his explanation—"'Perhaps you may begin to feel alarmed at my suddenly-developed wisdom, and so I will confess that it is not all mine. It is the combined result of three heads, two of them belonging to the gentler sex. I know you think much of a woman's intuition, and the best that I have set forth here is the intuition of two clear-headed, thoughtful, and unprejudiced women."

He laid down the letter and looked across at Lord Barham.

"What do you think of it?" that young man asked, a broad smile wreathing his lips.

"It's a very daring suggestion, if you mean that. As to his theories, there may be something in them. A case that so baffles the New York Police must have something in it."

"I see how it is. You want to go, Ferrars."

"I mean to go," said Ferrars. I have nothing to hold me back. And besides, Sir Felix asks this as a personal favor,

a great favor. Even if the case were less interesting, I'd go for Sir Felix' sake."

"And you'll try—"

Ferrars made a sudden movement.

"Understand," he said, "I go regardless. This wild notion of his is only a suggestion."

"Aw, bothah!" ejaculated Lord Barham, throwing down his cigar and sitting bolt upright. "Look here, Ferrars, I'm perfectly willing to carry out this thing. I'm more than willing. Nothing but my abominable fear of the ocean has kept me from visiting 'Merica. I don't care a rap for 'Merica, understand, but a fellah don't want to be laughed at. You know I've wanted to get in a quiet month or two in Scotland." He flushed rosily, and Ferrars smiled. "I'm perfectly willing to leave my reputation in your hands. I don't s'pose you want my purse?"

"Hardly."

"Then call the thing settled. All I ask is a fair and square account when all's done. By Jove, you know, when I come to think of it, it's the rummest plant I've heard of for many a day." He got up in his enthusiasm and stood before Ferrars. "Yes, sir! I'm awfully glad that I'm in a position to help you, and no questions asked. Go ahead, my boy, and as quick as you please. I give you *carte blanche* and my blessing."

He held out his hand, still smiling broadly; but Ferrars took it in grave silence.

"It's very good of you," he said, presently. "But nothing will be decided upon until I am on the ground. I'll then communicate with you at once. All this may be unnecessary."

CHAPTER XXVII.

CONSPIRATORS.

The day that followed the first triumphal ones of her *debut*, were strange days, some of them, and not altogether pleasant days, for La Belle Fabrice.

There was no abatement of her triumph, on or off the stage. She was applauded, petted, sought after, besieged. And always, everywhere, where there were strange eyes to see her, a public to be gratified, a dinner, a reception, a group of callers,—on the avenues, at the ride or drive, La Belle Fabrice was the loveliest, the blithest, the most piquant creature possible. She was always moving in these days, and Sir Felix, the most devoted of cavaliers, was always at her disposal. He made no secret of his adoration. He had come to America solely for the sake of Fabrice, and he made no pretense for caring for anything in America.

To have Fabrice, society soon grew to understand, meant to have Sir Felix also. And society was well pleased.

Another person who congratulated himself upon this fact, was Manager Horton. His joy took for its basis the sordid commercial point of view. No amount of advertising could have given his little Star so great a "boom" in the smiles of the very elect, as did this open and vigorous siege of Sir Felix Wyntoun. It lifted her above her profession as nothing else could have done. It was the crowning feature of her social triumph, and that included all the rest.

As for Fabrice, she had abandoned herself, for the time, to the current. Sir Felix had acted so bravely upon his new resolution; he was so kind, so full of tact and watchfulness, so ready, so bright and winning, that she let herself delight in his society without regard for the future.

But there were moments when Fabrice was not so gay.

"It's against my rigid determination," said Madam Congreve to Sir Felix, one day when they found themselves *tête-à-tête*, "but I am not yet at ease about her. I mean, of course, Fabrice."

Sir Felix nodded.

"After she wrote that letter of which I told you, she seemed, for a few days, like her old self. But of late—" She stopped, and looked undecided.

"Of late?" repeated Sir Felix.

"I really don't know my own mind any more," Madam exclaimed. "I say that I will not talk Fabrice with you, and then I come straight to you with all my uneasiness about—I don't know what."

"But it is uneasiness." He got up and stood before her. "Madam, let us understand each other. Our friend is, we fear, in trouble, and we both want to aid her. Both are her friends. So long as you are not sure, and are still uneasy, you ought to tell me all that you think or fear. Let us drop this nonsense, and boldly conspire together to serve and help Fabrice, in any way, in all ways, whether she will or not. Harden your kind heart and be frank with me. The end justifies the means. And you can trust me."

"I should think so!" She arose with a gesture as of one who pushes an obstacle from her path. "What an excellent thing a little good sense and plain speaking is!" she exclaimed,

and put out her hand to him. "I'm glad that you possess the good sense; I believe this is just what I have been wanting. I love Fabrice—"

"So do I," ruefully.

"And I trust you. There, I'm going to reverse our positions. Sit down here, nearer my window—I don't like to leave too much to Janive's honesty."

"Is Janive an eavesdropper?"

"Janive is devoted to her mistress. I don't know what else she is."

And then she told him of Fabrice at home,—of her fitfulness, of her lapses from gay to grave; how eagerly she watched for letters, fluttering and restless until they came, excited when they were in her hands, growing pale, dull, and listless when she had glanced at them all, and that for which she seemed to look was not among them.

"There is some one she is longing to hear from," concluded dam. "Probably the person to whom she wrote after her faint that day."

Sir Felix sighed heavily. The role he had chosen for himself was a difficult one.

"It is whispered at the Club," he said, after a long silence, "that Hortense Novalis is about to make her *debut* in New York."

Madam started and looked vexed.

"That's the other thing that troubles me," she said. "Tell me all that you have heard."

"That is really all," he said, "except—yes, there were some absurd hints that there was a rivalry, jealousy, between her and—"

"And Fabrice?"

"Yes. I can't fancy how such whispers get about."

"I can. Do you really know so little of this Novalis?"

"You will please to remember that of late I have seen very few people except in company with yourself or M'lle Fabrice."

"Don't say M'lle, at least do not let her hear you apply the French to her. It's the most absurd thing, her appearing upon the bills as an English actress and under a French name. The title was none of her choice. She was La Belle before she knew it."

"Yes. I know how these things come about. But tell me, is she English?"

"You must ask her that question, Sir Felix. I was about to speak of Hortense Novalis. She wishes not only to appear upon the boards here, but she wants to appear with Fabrice."

"With Fabrice!" he cried; "impossible!"

"Well, I have Manager Horton's word for it. I don't know all, but I know that a steady pressure is being brought to bear upon Fabrice. I can tell you these things, but not the results thereof. Mr. Horton has held three stormy interviews with Fabrice alone. She has told me nothing, but I am positive that it was about Hortense Novalis. They are disagreeing."

"This is too bad!" sighed Sir Felix.

"Yes, but wait. Hortense Novalis has called twice to see Fabrice. The first time Fabrice refused to receive her."

"Ah!"

"But the second time she was admitted, and Fabrice spoke with her for, perhaps, ten minutes. She told me nothing of their interview, but she looked very serious and resolute all that day, as if she were holding herself against a siege."

"Poor girl! And she won't listen to us, won't let us help her?"

"No. There is another fact. Mr. Frederick Quinlan has ceased his calls upon Fabrice, altogether."

"What, voluntarily?" Sir Felix did not look seriously grieved at this information.

"I hardly think so," smiled Madam. "She has tabooed him, along with Hortense Novalis."

"I—I don't quite understand."

Madam glanced at him sharply.

"Do you mean to tell me that you don't know—that you haven't heard his name coupled with that of Hortense Novalis?"

"If I have," he said, returning her look in kind, "I have not given it a second thought. I have supposed Mr. Quinlan to be an ardent admirer of Fabrice, and a little too much in earnest."

Madam laughed. "I don't pretend to understand it," she said. "Your supposition was undoubtedly true."

"Was?"

Madam laughed again. "I can't discuss so delicate a point."

"You must remember," he said, then, "that my time has been, as you may say, divided. Nearly all my time that you could not give an account of, I have passed with my friend Talfourd."

"Yes, yes! And what of that strange case? is there any news?"

"Nothing very satisfactory.

"How strange! And the police really at work?'

"They are indeed working faithfully. It's a most uncommon case."

"Do you know," said Madam, gravely, "that I am sometimes glad to have this case of Leah Paget's discussed among us. Fabrice is deeply interested in it. Every particular that you bring here, or that she gets out of Mr. Talfourd, seems to interest her so; to take her out of herself, as you might say. And she talks it all over with me when you are gone. Did she tell you that we have had a call from Talfourd *pere?*"

"No. Has Mr. Talfourd really called, then? I know he admires her acting. May I ask—"

"About his call? It was three days ago, I think. He stayed a very long time. He began by talking of herself and her art, of course—but he ended by talking of his son and Leah Paget."

"Could you guess at his object, if he had one?"

"I think he had an object. I think—"

Madam checked herself suddenly. She had heard the door beyond the *portiere* flung open, and in another instant Fabrice appeared between the parted curtains, her face flushed, her eyes gleaming with excitement—a letter in her hand.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

OVERBURDENED.

As Fabrice came hastily forward to greet Sir Felix, the letter fell from her nervous fingers, directly at the feet of Madam Congreve.

The lady picked it up and gave it back with a careless, un-

observant air. But when, in a moment, Fabrice made her excuses and left them for a time, she turned to Sir Felix, with a perplexed face.

"Something has happened," she said. "She seems unusually excited, don't you think?"

"I thought she seemed unusually elated."

Madam considered a moment. "Perhaps you are right. Yes, I think you are. But that letter—I did not see the name upon it, or rather, I did not read it. But I know what it is."

"The name?"

"No; the letter. It's the one she wrote that day, using the envelope of the hotel; don't you remember? It's the same letter. I saw enough to be sure of that."

"The same letter!" repeated the young Englishman, bewildered. "I—I don't understand."

"It's her letter—the one she wrote and posted—returned to her."

When Fabrice rejoined them, there was a new look on her face,—a look of animation,—a look, Sir Felix thought, of renewed hope. She was eager and restless, and, presently, she broke in upon some long sentence, with an apologetic little gesture.

"Pardon me, Sir Felix, do you know the name and address of any good, trustworthy lawyer, here?"

Sir Felix could not quite suppress his surprise at the question, but he answered promptly:

"I met, yesterday, in Talfourd's library, a legal gentleman, who had dropped in upon some business; an elderly, and, I thought, a very kindly man. He is the Talfourds' family adviser. I talked with him a little, and he gave me his card."

"You have it with you?"

"I haven't it with me, but I can give you his name. I took note of him because I fancied I should like to ask of him, some day, a little information concerning the laws of this big town, and the country as well. Mr. Talfourd, senior, recommended him to me as a man worth knowing."

"And his name?" again asked Fabrice.

"Yes; pardon me. It's a Mr. Clarkson. His rooms are on Greenwich Avenue—sorry I can't recall the number—near the Jefferson Market Court."

"That can be easily found." Fabrice was upon her feet. "Sir Felix, I want to see this lawyer, just for a brief consultation. May I trouble you—"

As she faltered, and finally stopped, Sir Felix arose also.

"To go with you?" he asked, eagerly. "May I?"

"Will you introduce me to him? I would be so grateful. Can you go with me now, at once?"

"I am at your service, now and always," he said, with eager gallantry. "Shall I call a carriage? How soon will you be ready?"

Madam Congreve had not been long alone when another visitor was announced. This time it was Manager Horton.

"Fabrice has just gone out with Sir Felix," she explained. And then, as he continued to stare hard at her, she fell into his mood. "Something has happened. What is it?"

He changed his seat, taking one nearer her own.

"How much influence have you over Fabrice?" he began, abruptly.

"Very little, I am beginning to think."

'Umph! Do you know her reasons for refusing to have anything to do with Hortense Novalis?"

"I can't help you to Fabrice's reasons," she said, in a tone which he understood. "Are you going to tell me what has occurred?"

"That's what I came for. For a beginning, Janet Marshall has broken down."

"Poor girl; I must go to see her."

"Well, don't go just yet," he said, testily. "I have just had a long call from Van Voort."

"Who is Van Voort?"

"Van Voort, of the Grand; Van Voort, the veteran."

"Surely! Yes, the Impressario."

"Well," said he, gloomily, "he is going to take up the Novalis."

"He!" She started. "That means opposition to Fabrice. It means—Quinlan."

"I don't know what it means, and don't care. The fact is enough for me. I'm convinced he's in earnest. And that means a big loss, to me."

Then he plunged into a highly-flavored and very energetic statement of the case.

"Now, don't you see," he said, in conclusion, "that if Fabrice will consent to give Hortense the rival part in the 'Sweethearts,' everything will be settled. Janet's place will be filled, and Fabrice and Hortense together will make an immense team. If she refuses, they will open the other house, and we will have strong rivalry. There isn't an actress in the city, or anywhere else, that can fill Janet's place, except Hortense, without letting the part down. There's no one strong enough to take the part without weakening it. And that means to kill the play. Hortense looks the part."

"I doubt if she plays it as well as poor Janet."

"So do I. But she'll draw, if she doesn't play it half as well. She—she's been very cleverly advertised."

"I should think so! Quite too cleverly," said Madam, with marked disgust.

"Oh, don't let us have any of that. Will you talk with Fabrice?"

"I'll tell her what you have said. But you'd much better talk with her yourself. Doesn't it strike you that it's a little strange that this woman, who can command her own manager, her own theatre, and her own audience, should be so bent upon playing a secondary part in Fabrice's play?"

"I'll tell you what Van Voort hinted to me. We're very good friends, Van Voort and I, and he doesn't conceal the fact that he's been offered big inducements. He says that Novalis prefers to play with Fabrice, and his idea is that she hopes by so doing to get the run of society, as Fabrice has done. I've talked with Hortense, however, and I say frankly that there's a mystery behind it all. She says she doesn't know Fabrice, and yet she hates her."

"Well," said Madam, with a sigh, "I don't understand all this, but it's my belief Fabrice won't hear of it."

"If she won't," said her Manager, "she'll make me the loser by fifty thousand dollars."

True to her promise, Madam put the case to Fabrice, as it had been put to her. And, true to her predictions, Fabrice shook her head.

"I'll give up my contract at any moment," she said, wearily. "I'd be glad to do it. But play upon the same boards with Hortense Novalis? I will not!"

According to her arrangement with Frederick Quinlan, Hortense Novalis had appeared in his company that night, in

a proscenium box, and looked on while Fabrice sung and laughed, smiled and pirouetted, and charmed her audience, as she could so well.

And if Fabrice had showed herself equal to the occasion, by seeming quite unconscious of the dashing brunette, Hortense had shown herself really an able actress by her conduct throughout the evening. Possibly her manner was expected to have its effect upon Fabrice, as well as upon her audience, for Hortense was all smiling admiration, applauding at the right moment, with great enthusiasm, and finally leaning over the cushioned rail and flinging at Fabrice's feet a splendid bouquet, which had been conspicuous in her hands throughout the evening.

And here Fabrice had her opportunity. Bowing before the audience, her arms filled with flowers, the little Comedienne had started back a pace as the bouquet struck the stage so near her feet, and seemed to check an involuntary glance upward. Then, with a beaming smile, she had freed one hand, by transferring its burden of bloom to the opposite arm, stooped, caught up the bouquet, pressed it to her cheek with a dainty gesture, and then, lifting her face to the balcony boxes, swept it with a bright glance, as if she were looking for the donor there. Then she bowed low once more, and without a single glance in the direction of the box where sat Hortense and her escort, tripped from the stage.

"Tell me how I could have done otherwise?" said Fabrice, in her dressing-room, to Madam Congreve. "It was a challenge. Thrown as it was, I had to see it. If I had ignored it, the slight would have been patent to all the house. The whole thing was made as conspicuous as possible. If I had not taken it up, the thing would have been exploited in the newspapers

tomorrow. As it was, nobody is the wiser, except the lady and her escort, and our two or three friends."

"I can easily see what is coming, my dear," said Madam, regretfully. "It is going to be said that you are jealous of Hortense Novalis."

Fabrice looked annoyed.

"I suppose so," she said, gloomily. "Conny, I'd give half I possess never to set my foot upon this stage again. I've a mind to fall sick. Janet has been my understudy, and I think she might rally if she were given a leading part."

"Don't talk nonsense, child."

"Then stop talking about Hortense Novalis," the girl cried. "Between you, you are making my life a burden!"

Early the next morning, a scavenger found in the alley just underneath La Belle Fabrice's dressing-room window, a splendid bouquet of hot-house roses.

The first appearance of Hortense Novalis in the proscenium box was not her last. She came the next night, and the next, and always she was smiling and ready with her applause. Sometimes Frederick Quinlan was beside her, and sometimes she came alone, or with only an attendant, who sat in the shadow.

Upon the last night of her appearance, she was accompanied by a woman,—a small elderly woman, with very white hair, arranged in elaborate puffs, and crowned with a fanciful combination of ribbon and lace; with a gorgeous befringed wrap about her shoulders; with her dark face well powdered, and her beady black eyes half concealed behind gold-rimmed eyeglasses.

At sight of this woman, Fabrice, in the midst of a passionate love-song, started, and then, controlling herself by an effort,

waited for a chance to pass near the box. Yes, she was not mistaken. The woman, who was evidently in the capacity of *chaperone* to Hortense Novalis, was easily recognized.

"My dear," said Madam Congreve, as they were rolling homeward in their carriage that night, "did you observe the woman in the box with the Novalis?"

"I did," said Fabrice.

"And did you recognize her?"

"Did you?" parried the girl.

"I recognized her; yes. I recognized in that bewigged and befringed old woman, your soiled and shabby blackmailer of not long since."

Fabrice was silent.

"I can't fancy what all this means, my dear," Madam went on, kindly. "But it makes me very anxious. If there is anything that connects you with that woman Novalis, you will need help sooner or later."

It had been a long and harrassing week for Fabrice. She was weary and sore at heart, and the kind words of her friend were as the last straws to her already almost unbearable burden. She threw out her arms in a gesture of utter weakness and abandonment of grief.

"I may need help," she said, in a stifled voice. "Oh, I do need help; I need it sorely. I have needed it long, I may need it yet more; but if I do, if I come to worse straits,"—it seemed to Madam that she was speaking through tightly shut teeth—"so too will Hortense Novalis."

CHAPTER XXIX.

SURRENDER.

The constant drip, drip, of water wears out a stone, and La Belle Fabrice was only a woman, and a woman fast growing weak through her own despair, during the two weeks that followed the scene last narrated. Yet she went and came, in the sight of the world and her public, as usual. But those who loved her most saw the change growing in her.

Alone with Madam Congreve, she was quiet and reserved, but she avoided *tête-à-têtes*. She seemed, also, to dislike being quite alone.

With Sir Felix she was her best self. She never avoided him now. She talked with him freely; she let him take her wherever he would.

Madam Congreve noted that she no longer watched for her letters, or took interest in them when they came. And Sir Felix observed that after her first call upon Lawyer Clarkson, she did not speak of him or visit him again.

One day, as they were riding slowly in the Park, he ventured upon a remonstrance.

"Will you let me say something about yourself?" he asked, gently, looking down at her quiet, wearied face, from which the smile had altogether faded. "Only about yourself, mind."

"What is it?" she asked, rousing herself.

"You are wearing yourself out trying to oppose your manager and his wishes in regard to Mademoiselle Novalis. Why do you do it?"

"What!" she looked up at him quickly. "Would you advise me to—" She stopped suddenly, flushing painfully, and turned away her face.

"Will you let me advise you?" he asked, eagerly. "Will you listen to me?"

"Go on," she said, her face still turned away.

"You will pardon me, but I have heard much of this thing; more, perhaps, than you think. I have heard of it from your manager, from Madam, from Quinlan, and at the clubs. I don't know this woman, but they say she has really been at actress. If I were you, I would take a purely business view of this matter. A man does not allow a personal prejudice to harm his business prospects. Why should you? Your position, both as an *artiste* and as a lady, is secured. This woman can really do no more harm than can any of the others of your company, and you don't fear them."

"I am not afraid of her," said the girl, quickly.

"Certainly not; but you know how often we are misunderstood. Could you not bring yourself to let this woman strut her little hour upon your stage? Candidly, I do not see why you may not meet this woman, as an *artiste*, and ignore her, when the play is played out, as a woman."

"I don't think that is what she wants," said Fabrice.

"You need not care what she wants. You are under engagement to Manager Horton; why not extricate yourself as easily as you can? It won't be for long."

"No," said Fabrice, drearily, "it won't be for long. Oh, it's a very hard position in which to be placed. If I refuse, they will say that I am jealous, or afraid of my artistic laurels. If I consent—" She stopped abruptly and shook her head. "It's useless," she said; "I cannot consent."

Later, she told Madam Congreve of this conversation.

"Ah," said Madam, drawing a long breath, "what a fine fellow he is!"

"Yes," Fabrice answered, drearily, "he is all that." Then flinging her hand out passionately, "Just as if I did not know that he's flying in the face of all his prejudices; as if I couldn't see that he advises me in this way because he's anxious to see things made smooth for me at any price."

"I think you're wrong there, my dear. I don't think Sir Felix would speak an untruth, or do a wrong, even for your sake. I think he wanted to make you understand that you could do this thing without altering your position in his regard, without contamination."

The girl laughed a strange, weird laugh, in sheer derision of self.

"I think he's very sorry for you, dear," added Madam, gently.

Suddenly, Fabrice flung herself into the nearest chair and began to sob.

"Oh," she cried, "now you are all going to begin pitying me. I won't have it! I hate it!

"Fabrice!"

"I do!" Then, after a moment of sobbing, she sat erect and lifted a little, clenched fist.

"Oh! how I hate that creature Hortense!"

"Poor child!"

"I do!" springing up suddenly. "If you don't stop, I shall do something awful."

"You're getting morbid, my dear; that's my opinion. After all, this is not a life and death matter."

"Isn't it?" turning upon her fiercely. "How do you know that?"

As the day wore on, Fabrice continued to be besieged by Manager Horton and others. She had ceased to argue with them ; she answered only with a curt negative. And now Madam fancied that she saw another change.

" She seems now to be always looking for some one, to be expecting a caller, who never comes. When a card is presented, she takes it up eagerly, and then the look of blank disappointment that overspreads her face is sad to see."

Sir Felix sighed. " It's wonderful how she keeps up in public," he said. " There's no change visible there."

" Oh," sighed Madam, " that's a part of our trade."

Still the days slipped by, until the fourth week of Fabrice's engagement was approaching its end. And the fifth week was to open with the new comedy, " Two Sweethearts." All had been quiet, unnaturally quiet, for days ; and on Saturday morning, Fabrice said, suddenly, to her friend, " I am going to see Janet Marshall." She went ; and when she returned, Madam asked :

" How did you find Janet ?"

Fabrice turned upon her with more spirit in her face than Madam had seen for a long time.

" Janet has been bought," she said, energetically. " She says she is too ill to play, but she is not. If I should take it into my head to jump off a bridge, or elope, Janet would come to the Horton rescue, and, with the aid of M'lle Novalis, could pull him through."

" Still morbid, my dear," said Madam.

Shortly after luncheon, Manager Horton appeared. He looked pale and anxious ; his air of command and bluster had totally left him. He was subdued and melancholy.

Once more he laid the case before Fabrice. He had just had a visit from Van Voort, who had held things in check as

"Oh! How I hate that creature, Hortense!" Page 217.

long as he could, to oblige him. It was too late to parley further; he must have answer before seven o'clock. If Hortense did not appear on Monday next, in "Two Sweethearts," she would appear just eight days later, in her own English comedy company, and in her own house. Everything was in train. Money was free as water.

"If this happens," the Manager said, "I shall be a heavy loser; you know that."

"I'll be a sharer in your losses," said Fabrice. "I can afford it."

"In Heaven's name," he burst out, "what do you expect to gain by this obstinacy?"

"I have told you," she retorted, "that I will not enter into a rivalry with that woman, and that's what she wishes."

"Oh, indeed! Do you expect to cancel with me, then?"

"Certainly not."

"I'd like to know how much better off you'd be with your 'rivalry.' It'll be that to the hilt if she opens at another house. If you play together, the thing won't be so marked, and may be made to appear even amiable. If you play in two houses, it will be simply war. It may be fun for you. You have heard about the boy and the frog, I suppose?"

Fabrice got up and stood before him.

"I am getting very tired of this," she said, wearily. "I want to go out now. At six o'clock I will give you my answer. But I want to tell you this: I am not deceived; Janet Marshall can appear if she likes."

Fabrice took her maid with her, and went away in a carriage. In an hour she was back. It was almost five o'clock.

"Tell Mr. Horton, when he comes, Conny," she said, "that I yield the point. But I won't see him tonight."

CHAPTER XXX.

UNDER SURVEILLANCE.

The Sunday evening's issue of the "*Call*" contained three paragraphs of interest to our story, and of various degrees of interest to many readers.

Perhaps that which most attracted attention from the ardent theatre-goer in search of a new sensation, was the announcement, brief but conspicuously placed, of the appearance upon the same stage, and in roles equally strong, rival roles in fact,—of La Belle Fabrice, "the accomplished little English Comedienne, who had already made her conquest, and of M'lle Hortense Novalis, an actress of Continental fame, and a woman who was admitted to be one of the most superb and dashing brunettes that had ever been seen upon the American stage."

Upon the same page was another paragraph :—

It is now more than four weeks since we first chronicled the disappearance of Miss Leah Paget, so lately an ornament to our best society, and the mystery which surrounds her fate only deepens as time goes on. In spite of all that has been done, all that human skill, it would seem, could do ; in the face of the best efforts of our police and detective forces ; notwithstanding that a small fortune has already been spent in prosecuting this search,—no clue has yet been obtained. The case is strangely baffling. The position of the parties most interested, makes it seem doubly strange that here, in the heart of a great city, and in broad daylight almost, a young lady should disappear from her own threshold, as it were, more effectually than if the earth had opened to swallow her up. Whatever may have been the theories, suspicions or beliefs in the beginning, and they were of all shades and kinds, there

is now, in the minds of those who are best qualified to judge, no doubt but that Leah Paget has been foully dealt with ; that behind this mystery lies a monstrous wrong. The search for a clue to this mystery is not yet abandoned. All that wealth and skill can do will still be done. But the trail is dark, and the end, we fear, is doubt.

This paragraph, like the first, was one of momentary interest, at least, to the belles who had known Leah Paget, and to all upper tendom. It, or the fact it set forth, was a thing to wring the hearts of Leah Paget's friends, for it was sadly true.

Upon another page of the "*Call*" was this paragraph, also of considerable interest to society:

We learn, just as we go to press, that Lord Louis Barham, Earl of Harwold, a young English nobleman of great wealth, has arrived by the steamer *Scythia*, to join his friend, Sir Felix Wyntoun, who is already well known and liked in society. It is said that the two young noblemen, after a season in New York, intend making an extended tour of the States.

The steamer *Scythia* had arrived in New York on Saturday night, and about the hour when Hortense Novalis learned that she had conquered, and was to appear with La Belle Fabrice.

Max Talfourd was aroused from a troubled morning dream to read a note from Sir Felix Wyntoun.

"My dear fellow," so ran the note, "you will find it worth your while to come to me at once. Don't stop for breakfast. A person whom you will be glad to see, awaits you here.—Wyntoun."

In just half an hour Max Talfourd alighted from his coupé at the door of his friend's hotel.

Sir Felix greeted him with a look so radiant, and a hand clasped so reassuringly, that Max suddenly found his heart beat-

ing hard against his waistcoat. Until this morning he had not been conscious that he had been pinning so much faith upon his friend's praises and prophecies, nor hoping so much from an unseen stranger, although, for more than a week, both had been anxiously waiting the arrival of the man who arose as Max entered, and came promptly forward when Sir Felix said :

"Of course, you guessed whom you were to meet, Talfourd. Mr. Ferrars, this is my friend, the Max Talfourd of whom we have been speaking."

The two young men, so different, yet so alike in manliness of bearing and directness of gaze, shook hands without speaking, while each scanned the other's face.

"I am going to tell you this much," said Sir Felix to Max, as the three seated themselves about the waiting-table : "I have been snubbed. I am going to give you warning ; don't give him a chance at yourself, Talfourd."

Again the eyes of Max met those of Ferrars, full of grave inquiry.

"For reasons which I need not explain now," began Ferrars, with a nod toward Sir Felix, but addressing Max, "I hold myself so much the friend of this roving young man here, that I am so foolish as to come sailing the seas at his beck and call. And for no better personal reason than that he declares he wants me tremendously. Now that I am here, he coolly dedicates me to your service, Mr. Talfourd. Seriously, Sir Felix has explained, partly by correspondence, the nature of your trouble—not the particulars, you understand. I prefer not to have them just yet. But—I am a man of straightforward methods, Mr. Talfourd—and I begin by saying this: Unless you are willing to take all things for granted, and let me manage this affair entirely in my own way, I cannot promise to aid you."

"Am I to understand this," began Max, eagerly, "that, upon your own terms, you will aid us?"

Ferrars nodded.

"Then," said Max, his whole aspect brightening, "I can sleep tonight hopefully. I am only too glad to put this business into your hands, and trust all to you."

Ferrars scanned his face keenly.

"Do you say so much," he asked, "solely upon the authority of this fellow?" putting a hand affectionately upon the shoulder of Sir Felix.

"Sir Felix Wyntoun's bare word would have been sufficient for me in any emergency," Max answered, gravely. "But in this case, which is more than life and death to me, and which involves others besides myself, a life far more precious than my own, I have informed myself in all possible ways. I could not do otherwise."

Ferrars half arose, and, leaning across the table, again proffered his hand to Max.

"I like that," he said. "I hope I may see my way clear to help you."

"I like it, too," cried Sir Felix, heartily. "But breakfast will help us all, perhaps, to see our way clearer."

He arose and rang the bell

When breakfast was over, and the three had settled themselves about the table, Sir Felix smoking a solitary cigar, Francis Ferrars said:

"Now, Mr. Talfourd, I am ready to listen."

"To what?" asked Max, quietly.

"To your story of the disappearance."

Max turned a questioning face upon Sir Felix.

"I have heard it once from our friend," said Ferrars, un-

derstandingly. "But I have learned from experience that no two people, be they the best of friends, and seemingly one in opinion, look at events from just the same point of view. Tell me the story, please, from the beginning, and in your own way, just as minutely as if I were hearing it for the first time."

Somewhat surprised, and yet well pleased by the straightforward and self-reliant manner of the English detective, Max began his story, and, while he told it with every intention of being as minute as narrator could be, he soon found that his own idea of detail, and the idea of Ferrars, differed widely. The Englishman interrupted him with embarrassing frequency, often leading him back from some given point to ground, which, it seemed to Max, had been already exhausted, and asking questions that struck him as being very pertinent, almost impertinent, puzzling, embarrassing, and irrelevant.

"Thank you," said Ferrars, when all was done. "I begin to feel enlightened. Should I enter into this business, Mr. Talfourd, I shall probably look to you for much of my information and help."

"Should you!" exclaimed Max. "I thought that was settled."

"I think myself that it is," said Ferrars. "But before we go further, I must see your Chief of Police. I have no intention of joining forces, understand, but if your Chief is the man he should be, I shall not think of going into this case without his knowledge. Mr. Talfourd, how do you stand with the Chief of Police?"

"Very well, I think," replied Max. "Captain Connors has been more than courteous to me. I'm afraid that I've bored him a little, too. Since my first raid upon him, I've

visited his office pretty often, and he has been more than kind, always affording me any information that he could."

"That's satisfactory. Can you manage an interview for me, do you think, today, if possible. I don't want him to know whom he is to meet."

"I'll make the trial at once," said Max.

When he was gone, glad of an opportunity to do even this much, Sir Felix turned to his friend.

"I'm awfully obliged to you for coming, Ferrars, and for going into this thing so readily. I'm deeply interested myself. How do you like him ?"

"Talfourd ?" queried the detective, who had helped himself to a cigar and was now lighting it. "Fine specimen of American of the right sort, I should fancy."

When Max returned, it was to announce that he would take Ferrars to see the Chief of Police that afternoon.

"I told him that I wanted to present a friend, an Englishman, who had taken an interest in this case," said Max, "and he asked me at once if it was Sir Felix Wyntoun. He said, that he understood Sir Felix was my right-hand counsellor."

"Ah !" ejaculated Ferrars.

"I replied that there was another, and he said, at once, 'Bring them both.'"

A faint smile hovered about the mouth of Ferrars, though he made no comment ; but Sir Felix turned upon them an astonished face.

"What do you make out of that ?" he queried, addressing the detective.

"Merely this : You two have evidently been under surveillance."

CHAPTER XXXI.

A FIASCO.

"How shall I present you?" asked Max Talfourd, as they were about to enter the office of Captain Connors.

"Simply as Ferrars," replied the detective. "Leave the rest to me. I think you had better not dismiss the carriage."

"That means," said Sir Felix, "that you and I, Talfourd, are soon to be sent to Coventry."

"Possibly," assented Ferrars.

"Captain Connors," said Max, when the three were in the presence of the Chief, "allow me to present Sir Felix Wyntoun and Mr. Ferrars, of London."

The Captain greeted them cordially, and when they were seated, turned an inquiring gaze upon the English detective.

"Ferrars," he said, slowly—"Ferrars of London, you say? Any relation to the great detective of that name?"

"My name is Francis Ferrars," replied that young man, and he took from his pocket a card, which he proffered to the Chief.

Captain Connors glanced at it and then again at Ferrars.

"I might have guessed at once," he said, rising with alacrity. "It is the great Ferrars. I've had him described to me more than once, Mr. Talfourd. You couldn't have brought me a more welcome visitor." And then he looked from Max to Sir Felix, and seemed at a loss how to proceed.

"Having brought me, Captain," said Ferrars, coolly, "would you mind if I turn them out? I didn't come to you today

simply to pay my respects. I want a private interview. If you're afraid they'll get into mischief, you might send one of your sergeants to look after them."

Captain flushed a little and looked hard at the speaker; and the young men, seeming not at all disconcerted, arose.

"As you please," the Captain said, at last. "You seem to understand one another, and I'm at your disposal, Mr. Ferrars."

"We're quite ready to be turned out, having accomplished our mission," said Max, turning to go.

"And, by the way," broke in Ferrars, "I'll find my way back to you, gentlemen; don't go out of your way for me."

When they were alone, Captain Connors hastened to hospitably set forth some choice wine and good cigars. Over these they chatted for a time, upon topics of more or less mutual interest, and then Ferrars, in his direct fashion, said:

"I'm glad to see, Captain, that you're a straightforward man, like myself. You don't waste words. Now, I'm going to tell you why I have sought this interview today. Sir Felix Wyntoun has a claim upon my friendship and affection, to which, I hope, I shall always respond readily and heartily. It was a letter from him that brought me to New York, and upon arriving here I find that he wishes to enlist me in the case of Miss Paget."

"Ah!" breathed Captain Connors, and he leaned forward with his eyes fixed upon the speaker.

"I've heard a little about the case," went on Ferrars, composedly, "and I've almost made up my mind—"

"Almost?" interrupted the Captain, and then he added, "I wish you had said altogether. Why, man, I've worn myself out over this confounded case! And I've about worn

out some of my men. I don't pretend to have any of those dashing detectives that we read of—the kind, you know, who smell out a criminal, and only have to stand around and wait for him to come along. But I do claim to have some clever, capable, clear-headed fellows on my staff, and they've worked faithfully, too, but—" A significant gesture completed the sentence, and as Ferrars remained silent, he added, "It's an extraordinary case!"

"Then you really are making no headway?" asked Ferrars.

"None whatever, or none to any purpose but to further exasperate us."

"You can't even conjecture whether she is dead or alive?"

"Not even that. But I'm certain of one thing, though: Alive or dead, Leah Paget never left this city. Alive or dead, she is in it now."

Ferrars started. "Why, man, in the right hands, that's a great deal."

"In the right hands—yes," said Connors, with a grimace. "But the right hands haven't shown up yet. Mr. Ferrars, are you going to put in yours?"

"I'll tell you what I will do, Captain Connors," said Ferrars, gravely, as if weighing every word. "If I can work in my own way, without hindrance and in perfect secrecy,—of course, I make an exception of yourself, otherwise I should not have come to you,—I will try my hand at the case.'

"Then you will succeed!" exclaimed Connors, heartily, standing before Ferrars and burrowing in his trowsers-pockets, as if to hold himself down. "Suppose, right here, you let me tell you what has been done upon this case."

"I shall be a very willing listener."

"When you have heard what we have done, and how little

we have profited by our exertions, you will know what kind of a case you're about to tackle."

Connors assured himself that the door was secured against intruders, and unlocked a desk from which he took a ledger-like book, two or three note-books, and a bundle of papers. These he placed upon a small table, which he pushed forward to where Ferrars sat near a large window, and finally he drew up an easy-chair—companion to the one occupied by Ferrars.

"Now we can begin comfortably," he said.

It was a long story to which Ferrars listened, sitting moveless, with his eyes fixed upon the face of the narrator, except when he bent forward to scan some page turned by Connors, in the big book, or put out his hand to take and examine some paper. But, unlike his manner of listening to the same story from Sir Felix and Max Talfourd, he never once interrupted the Chief to question or comment. Indeed, it was not necessary, for Captain Connors was minute as to detail, and he now and then refreshed his memory by reading from his notes upon the case.

When it was done, Ferrars arose and walked once or twice the length of the room. Then he halted before the Chief.

"Captain Connors," he said, gravely, "I have never heard of more thorough, intelligent, and far-reaching search. And yet, you tell me that you have accomplished nothing!"

The Chief shook his head.

"I'll tell you what you have done, Captain Connors; you have narrowed down the circle until the way is now open to the next who takes up the case, clear and plain. Gracious Heavens, man, can't you see how much you have accomplished?"

Still the Chief shook his head.

"You have convinced yourselves that, if the young lady was abducted, it was not by any member of the criminal class known as professional, not by any of the lower class of blackmailers; that she has not been seized and held for ransom."

"If that had been the case, some of our traps would have caught the fish."

"Exactly. You are equally sure that she is not secreted in any thieves' den, or in any asylum; and that if she had been murdered, either for purposes of robbery or revenge, you must have found some clue to the crime. In short, you have exhausted the possibilities among the criminal class. Now, where does this lead you?"

"It leads me," said Captain Connors, sturdily, "where I am not best fitted to go, neither I nor my men. It leads me to believe that in searching for Leah Paget, we are working against money and brains and wonderful cunning, and not against a common criminal."

Ferrars nodded. "And do you really wish to drop this search now?"

"Yes, if you will take it up."

Ferrars helped himself to a cigar and proceeded to light it. "I have to thank you for a very clear demonstration of the facts in this case, as you have them," he said, when the cigar was fairly lighted.

"I'd thank you," said the Chief, "if you would give expression to your own opinion, as an off-set to my facts. What do you think of this thing?"

"I think, with yourself and your man, Nickerson," said Ferrars, "if it is a crime, it is a most uncommon one. It is the crime of an aristocrat."

At eleven o'clock on the following morning, Ferrars was again closeted with Chief of Police Connors.

They had been together for more than two hours, and they seemed to have arrived at a perfect mutual understanding.

"It has not became known, then, that you are in New York?" Captain Connors said, when they had disposed of the actual business that brought them together. "I have noticed that your name did not appear upon the list of arrivals."

"I travel very modestly," said Ferrars, with a smile. "No I am not supposed to be in America nor out of London."

A sharp, impatient rap sounded on the office-door.

"One moment," said the Captain, and he went at once to the door, opened it, and then stepped out, shutting it quickly behind him.

It was Polly Cousin who had applied for admittance, and the Chief saw at a glance that he brought news of importance. He was thinner than when he first enlisted in the search for Leah Paget, and paler. He had about him an air of haste and anxiety, even though his movements were slower and his speech less brusque than usual.

"Is't you, Cousin?" said the Chief. "I can't let you in just now—in ten minutes, say. What is it?"

Cousin came close to him, but when he spoke it was as if he was making a commonplace and uninteresting announcement.

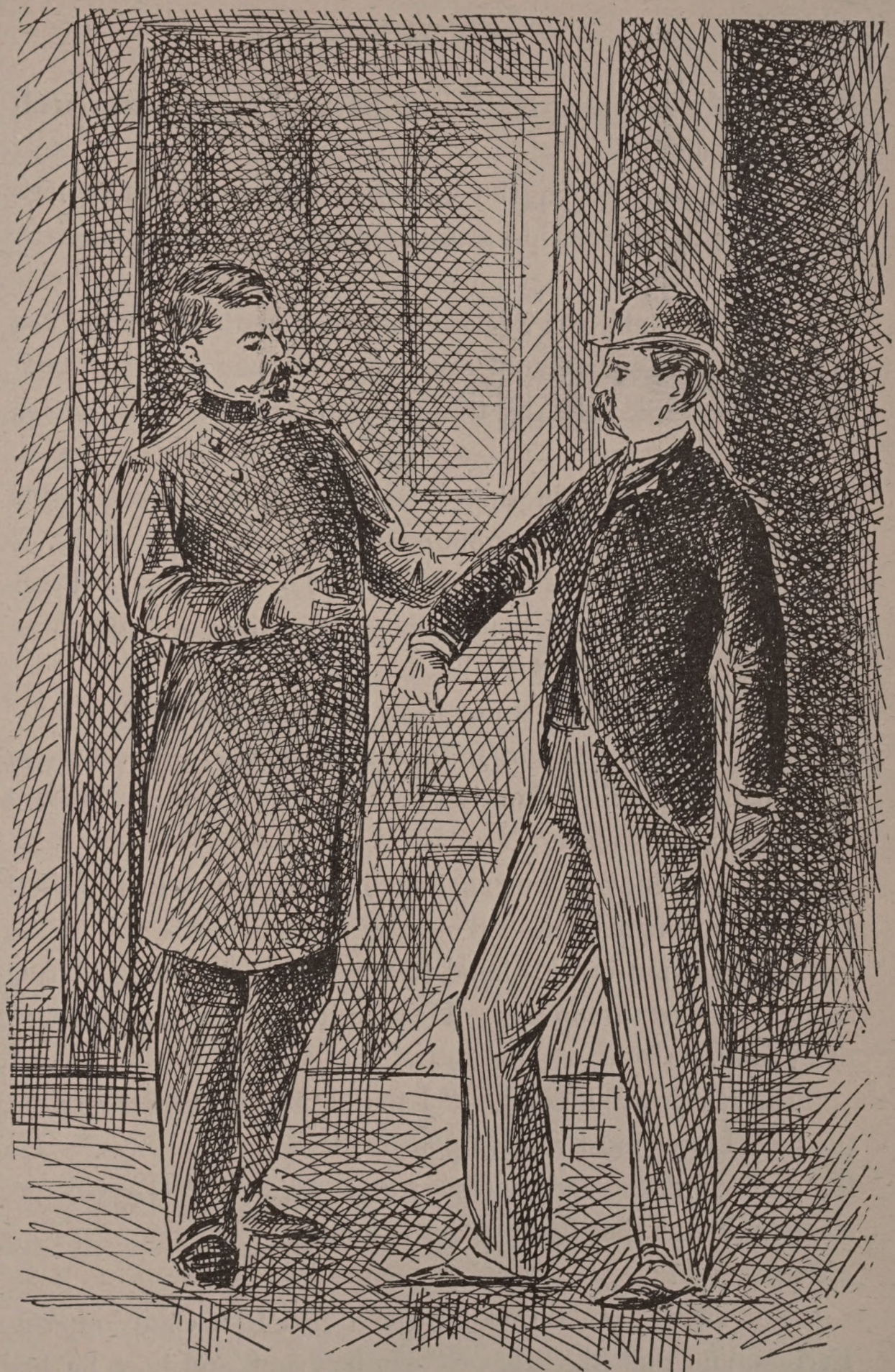
"Leah Paget has come back."

"What!"

"Paget's daughter has come back."

The Chief looked quickly about him, and then caught the young man by the shoulders.

"Come in," he said, and was about to fling open the office-door. But Cousin drew back.



"BOY, WHAT AILS YOU?" CRIED THE CHIEF, IN ALARM. Page 234.

"Not if there's some one there," he said. "I've told you all I know about it."

"Look here," began the Chief, and then stopped short. The pallor was increasing in Cousin's face; he was shivering as if with an ague.

"Boy, what ails you?" cried the Chief, in alarm. "Are you ill? Are you out of your senses?" He put forth his hand once again to take him by the arm, but again Cousin evaded the friendly touch.

"I've just been told that Miss Paget returned home this morning early. It came from one of the servants, I think. I don't know the particulars—you'll hear, of course—I—I believe I'm ill—I—" His teeth were chattering, and his voice was husky. "I'll go out a bit."

He turned, and hurried out from the great building.

For a moment Chief of Police Connors stood where Cousin had left him, looking blankly down the long corridor. Then he re-entered his office.

"One moment," he said again to Ferrars, and seated himself at his desk, where he dashed off half a dozen words, folded the message, and put out his hand to touch the bell. Then a new thought seemed to stop him. He withdrew his hand and turned to Ferrars.

"I'm at a loss," he said. "I found outside the door one of the men I have most relied upon in this Paget business." He flung down the written message and got up. "By George, sir, he tells me that Leah Paget is found!"

"Is found?"

"Yes, sir." He threw himself down in a chair opposite Ferrars, and told him what Cousin had said, and how he had said it. "I have got a note of inquiry ready to send," he added. "Would you do it?"

"I can't advise you," said Ferrars, gravely. "I wish I might have seen your informant."

"Cousin? You can see him easily enough. I wonder if he's going to break up. Never saw him look like that before. Cool, level-headed fellow. Overworked, I'm afraid. Well, if this isn't a *fiasco*—"

Again a knock at the door broke in upon his speech. This time it was a letter. The Chief glanced at the superscription, uttered a sharp ejaculation, and opened it hastily.

Once and again he ran his eye over the two or three lines it contained. Then he tossed it to Ferrars, while a frown darkened his face. "Read that," was all he said.

Ferrars caught up the letter and read:

CAPTAIN CONNORS.

Sir:—This is to inform you that Miss Leah Paget is now at home. You will stop all proceedings at once. I will do myself the honor to see you soon. Until then,

I am yours, etc.

A. K. PAGET.

CHAPTER XXXII.

BLIGHTED HOPES.

On Monday morning, while Francis Ferrars was closeted with the Chief of Police, Manager Horton was in high spirits. All had gone well, even if it was at the eleventh hour. That night was to witness a triumph, a double triumph.

A new comedy—and such a charming comedy,—such gorgeous and varied scenery, such original, such picturesque, such

funny and such pathetic situations! And then, such Stars!—La Belle Fabrice, already crowned and acknowledged queen; Hortense Novalis, with her beauty and foreign successes to recommend her! What a triumph for Manager and Stars!

There was to be a dress-rehearsal that morning, and behind the scenes all was bustle and haste. The Manager's spirits seemed infectious. There was much laughter and exchanging of jests and congratulations.

"What I wonder," said a little Chambermaid to the big second Old Woman, "is, how the Novalis is to get her study. It's not twenty-four hours notice, Massey says."

Massey was the leader of the orchestra, and intimate with the Manager.

"Massey might have told you, for he certainly knew that Horton had given the Novalis Janet's part on the chance of her playing it," the Old Woman said. "Isn't it about time they were here?"

Ten minutes later, the two were again, for a moment, alone, at one of the wings. The girl had just come up from the dressing-rooms.

"Why don't we begin, Lotty?"

The girl shook her head.

'I shouldn't wonder if there was a hitch somewnere," she whispered. "Horton's losing his temper. They don't materialize."

"What, neither?"

"Neither. Not even their maids. Not even Congreve."

It was quite true. The time for the first act was at hand. The people were gathering at the wings, anxious to see, for the rivals, Fabrice and Hortense, were to appear together in the very first scene.

And still the rivals were not in their places ; they were not even in their dressing-rooms.

No longer able to curb his impatience, and filled now with anxiety, Manager Horton dispatched two messengers—one to Fabrice, one to Hortense.

But, almost before they were out of the building, the Call Boy approached the Manager, and whispered something in his ear,—something which caused him to hasten below with a very anxious look upon his face.

He found Madam Congreve alone in Fabrice's dressing-room, her face fairly haggard. She started forward and clutched his arm.

"Have you seen Fabrice?" she whispered.

"Good Heavens!" He turned abruptly, closed the door and locked it. "Now," he said, turning a dark look upon Madam, "what does this mean?"

"I wish I knew," said Madam. "I'm afraid to think what it means. Fabrice is missing."

"Missing?" The Manager gritted his teeth in impotent fury. "Missing! Yes. I might have expected something like this."

"I wish I had," sighed Madam.

"You—oh, yes! Don't think that I'm duped, Madam Congreve—"

Madam Congreve threw up a hand, and the look that accompanied the gesture checked his speech.

"Do not assume that tone with me, Mr. Horton. If harm has befallen Fabrice, I shall always hold you as in part the cause of it. Fabrice has been in trouble for weeks. I have seen that, but could not guess the cause. She has been struggling against it and doing her best to fulfill her engagement

with you, and in the teeth of this you have made her life a burden, with your constant urging of this impostor French actress upon her. Don't talk to me as if I were to blame."

Madam was a woman, and having had her fling at him, she caught her breath to smother a sob, and threw herself into a dressing-chair.

"Madam Congreve," he ejaculated, calmed, in a measure, by her tirade, "will you begin at the beginning and tell me what has happened?"

"What has happened? I have said that Fabrice is gone. Her maid awoke me this morning pale and frightened. Fabrice's room was empty, her bed had not been slept in. Everything was in order, just as it was last night. Her writing-desk was open, but she has left no word, not a line. Nothing is missing from her wardrobe, except a dark, plain street costume, which she probably wore away. Evidently, she has been gone since last night!"

Madam spoke rapidly, wringing her hands as she talked. Her distress and anxiety were only too evident.

"What have you done?" gasped the Manager, dropping into the nearest chair.

"Nothing. I have not even alarmed the house. I thought it best to come straight to you."

"Right." He arose and unlocked the door. As it swung noiselessly open, the stage manager came within sight from a room lower down. The Manager beckoned him to approach.

"Has M'lle Novalis arrived?"

"Not yet."

"Then put them off in some way until we hear from her. When she comes, call me." He turned back into the room,

and closed and locked the door. "Have you any idea—" he began, but Madam moved off the question.

"Don't speak to me," she groaned. "I want to think."

Baffled, and full of dire foreboding, the Manager resumed his seat and tried to wait in quiet, if not in patience. It was better to wait there than among those clamoring people, he thought, but it was tedious.

Nearly half an hour had ticked itself slowly away, and then there came a thump upon his door. It was the stage manager again, and with him the messenger sent out to fetch Hortense Novalis.

Both men were pale and evidently excited, and behind them, further on and up the stairway, they could distinctly hear a babel of sharp exclamations and feminine shrieks.

"Well," demanded the Manager, "what now?"

"She—she," stammered the messenger, "she—Hortense is dead! She has killed herself!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

DEATH'S VICTIMS.

It was while the Chief of Police and the detective were still looking at each other, the letter of Abner Paget between them on the table, and the wonder not yet out of their faces, that the message came:

A woman murdered at the Dresden Flats, Lexington Avenue. Come at once.

The Chief read it, and was instantly his grave official self.

"That's a message I can understand," he said, and read it aloud to Ferrars. "The Dresden Flats—they're that superb new block lately built, and too fine and expensive for ordinary tenants. Will you go with me?"

"Yes," said Ferrars, rising; "only don't make me too conspicuous."

"I won't do that," responded the Chief, grimly. "They won't be especially afraid of me, but if it's a murder, I wouldn't want the assassins to know that Ferrars, the English detective, was on the premises. Oh, you've been pretty well introduced over here. Detectives and criminals who are a success, can't hide their light under a bushel."

"The criminals," suggested Ferrars, drily, "succeed in doing it sometimes, I have found."

"You have found!" echoed the Chief. "Well!"

The great entrance to the Dresden Flats was, ordinarily, open to all and at all hours. Usually, it was presided over by a janitor, or by two janitors, who officiated in turn. Through this splendid and spacious vestibule one passed to a succession of courts, upon which opened numerous apartments, each having its own hall and vestibule, through which the visitor passed before reaching the reception-room and the *salon* proper. Thus, after the publicity of the grand vestibule and court were done with, each apartment was as isolated as a separate private dwelling.

Today the Chief and Ferrars found the vestibule guarded by a brace of policemen, and one of these answered, with a grin, that no time had been lost in putting the place under quarantine.

"You were quite right," said the Chief.

"We didn't do it," rejoined the officer. "We weren't given time. It was the young man."

"The young man?"

"The one who found the body. It's the French actress, Hortense—" He stopped, evidently struggling with the strange name.

The court above was nearly full of people. Some of them had succeeded in getting in from the street, but most of them were occupants of the great building. It was by no means an ordinary crowd. There were men in perfect business-suits, men in smoking-coats and caps, men in dressing-gowns and slippers. Two or three reporters had already scented their prey; and grouped together in the background were women in all manner of dainty *deshabille*—hastily-caught-up wraps, head-coverings, and concealing-draperies.

One or two superfluous policemen walked to and fro with an air of believing themselves doing duty. And, before a closed door—a door bearing the name of Hortense Novalis upon a card in the center panel, stood three men, each with an appearance of waiting and being on guard.

One was a tall elderly man, with a soldierly bearing; the second, a serious-faced policeman, who seemed to know exactly what he was about; the third, pallid and mute, was Frederick Quinlan.

Seeing his Chief, the policeman came forward and said, in a low tone:

"I'm glad that you've come, Captain. It's a nasty piece of business. Nothing has been done. I was second on the premises, and I closed the rooms at once."

"Come," said the Chief, and then, as they approached the door, he recognized the tall man.

"Ah, Grove, is it you?" Then he nodded to Quinlan. "Was it you who discovered the body?" he asked.

Quinlan bent his head.

"Let us go in," said the Chief. "You will come, Grove, and Mr. Quinlan, of course. Starrs," to the policeman, "you will stand guard here and see that no one enters."

When they had crossed the threshold of the vestibule, the Chief halted and looked about him.

It was a small room and square, probably ten feet by ten. The walls were hung with tapestries, and it was lighted only by the stained-glass panels in the upper half of the door, and by an arched transom above it. The floors were of tessellated marble, with two or three rugs at one side. In the center, directly beneath the chandelier, was a bronze affair, representing the knotted stump of a tree, from one side of which branches shot up in queer curves. An umbrella in the hollow of the stump, and a hat and scarf depending from one of the curved branches, indicated its use. On either side were two low, broad-cushioned couches, each fitting in its entire side from wall to wall. Upon the left, as they stood facing the *portiere*, which shut in the reception-room proper, the floor was uncovered, and the rugs which corresponded with those upon the floor at the right, were flung in a careless manner, one upon another, on the low divan at that side.

When the eye of the Chief had taken in all this, he strode through the dimly-lighted place, and drew aside the silken curtains opposite the door of entrance.

"It's not here," said the man he had addressed as Grove. And he passed under the *portiere* and stood beside the Chief. "That," pointing to a closely-drawn curtain in an archway opposite them, "is the *salon*. Here," turning to the left and

indicating by a gesture a smaller arch, also curtained, "is the boudoir. The body is there."

The Chief crossed the small and dainty reception-room, where all was in its usual order, and drew aside the concealing drapery.

"Good Heavens!" he cried, recoiling, "what a scene!"

It was the room, where, not long since, its mistress had received Manager Horton. But now, how different! Here, and in the dressing-room beyond, what confusion!—Chairs overturned, tables, with their costly weight of bric-a-brac, broken, and lying about the floor, some of them dabbled with blood; curtains torn down and trailing upon the carpet; the contents of desks and boxes and drawers strewn all about, with here and there splashes of blood upon them; blood-stains upon the walls, and pools of blood soaked into the mossy carpets.

Near the divan, with its soft cushions and rich coloring, lay a long, slender Spanish stiletto, and beyond, just over the threshold of the dressing-room, lay a short, broad-bladed Japanese knife, both blood-stained, and hideously suggestive.

And the mistress of all this wrecked splendor, lay among the disordered cushions of the divan, half on and half off, her hands clutching the soft fabric of a splendid robe that lay upon it torn and bloody. Her body rested upon the cushions as if it had fallen there in the last struggle, her limbs dragging upon the floor, her arms thrown out before her, her face turned side-wise and toward the window, through which a sunbeam came slanting, making horribly distinct the deadly gashes in the fair throat.

She was dressed in a long and lustrous gown of creamy satin, heavy with lace, and garnished with crimson and yellow roses. Her splendid shoulders and arms were bare and gleam-

ing with jewels. Her face was untouched either by scar or blood-stain, and the glare of the wide open eyes, and the traces of agony in the dead face, were rendered more horrible by contrast with the flowers and lace and gleaming jewels.

When, moving carefully around the divan, the Chief had noted this much, he turned to Quinlan, who, with Ferrars and the stranger addressed as Grove, had remained in the doorway.

"Will you," he began—

"I was the first to enter," broke in Quinlan, hoarsely, "but I did nothing more than assure myself that she was dead. Then I rushed out to give the alarm, going myself for an officer and for Dr. Grove. We went through the rooms, then, but nothing has been touched."

"Draw the curtains," said the Chief to Ferrars. As he led the way back to the reception-room, he said, "Let us sit here, and you will tell us what you know of this, Mr. Quinlan."

As the four men grouped themselves together near the center of the small room, Francis Ferrars stood facing the arch which led to the anteroom or entrance.

The *portiere* was drawn aside as they had left it in passing through, and when Quinlan, who stood with his back toward it, shifted his position slightly so that he might lean upon the high back of a chair as he talked, Ferrars had a clear view of that side of the anteroom where the rugs lay heaped upon the low divan. The light from the inner room, now that the hangings were drawn away, brought out more clearly the outlines of the heaped-up rugs. At the moment when Quinlan began to speak, Ferrars suddenly and without a word started forward, strode to the divan, and, laying his hand upon the topmost rug, lifted it a little, and then let it fall back to its place.

"Come here," he said, sharply—"all of you."

"GOOD HEAVENS!" HE CRIED, RECOILING, "WHAT A SCENE!"
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In a moment all three were beside him, and then he flung aside the topmost rug, and the next one, and the next.

Instinctively, the three men recoiled, and Frederick Quinlan staggered, and clutched the arm of Dr. Grove for support.

Lying before them, upon the low divan, was the woman Virginie. Her attitude was that of a sleeper, but a glance assured them that it was the sleep of death!

CHAPTER XXXIV.

A LETTER AND A FACE.

The dead woman lay with her face to the wall. One hand hung loosely at her side, the other was lightly resting upon her breast, the fingers intertwined with a knot of ribbon that decorated her gown. The attitude was most natural—was that of perfect repose, and yet—

There was a smothered exclamation from the lips of Frederick Quinlan, and he pressed forward and bent for a moment low over the inanimate form. When he turned away it was to face Ferrars, and for an instant the eyes of the two met and held each other. Then they moved back, and Dr. Grove knelt beside the body, touched the cold hand, and peered into the pallid face.

"Useless," he said, and turned away. "She has been dead for hours, like the other."

When they returned to the inner room, the Chief drew Ferrars aside.

"This is going to be a tough case," he said, in a low tone. "And, since the Paget affair is at an end, may I count on you?"

Ferrars considered for a moment, and then he answered:

"Wait. I'll stay with you through the investigation, or until we see what it's coming to. May I make a suggestion?"

"A dozen, if you like."

"These rooms had better be thoroughly overlooked—without the aid of that young man there."

"I agree with you," said the Chief. "Will you assist? I do not quite see my way. I—"

"Captain Connors,"—it was the voice of Quinlan speaking at his elbow—"may I say a word to you?"

The Chief nodded.

Quinlan was still very pale, but he had regained his self-possession.

"I perfectly realize my position," he said, making his words quite audible to all in the room. "I have been the friend of this dead girl, almost her only friend, certainly her nearest in this city. I was the last to see her alive, except, of course, the assassin—"

"Take care, sir," broke in the Chief; "you are not required to tell us—"

Quinlan interrupted him by a gesture.

"Pardon me, I know what I am saying, as you will understand when I explain myself. I was the one to find this—this horror,—the first on the scene. I suppose you will want to detain me. I must be in your eyes an object of suspicion, at least. If you will deputize Dr. Grove, here, to take me in charge, I will remain wherever you may choose to put me, until you have completed your investigation. I suppose that

is the first thing, and I suppose you count time as valuable."

The Chief and Ferrars exchanged glances. The latter nodded almost imperceptibly.

"Perhaps that will be best," said the Chief, and then he turned his eyes upon Dr. Grove.

The latter nodded, and seated himself in the nearest chair. Quinlan placed himself in another close at hand, but further from the anteroom than was that occupied by the jailor pro tem.

Without another word, Captain Connors lifted the *portiere* that separated them from the boudoir, and in a moment he was standing, once more, with Ferrars beside him, upon the scene of the death-struggle, and in the presence of death. Scarcely a word was spoken as they traversed the two rooms, noting the blood-stains all about, and the disorder, which seemed to have had its beginning in the inner room, and to have culminated there before the blood-drenched cushions.

As he stepped slowly and cautiously about, Ferrars bent suddenly and put his hand upon something gleaming white, that was half concealed by a torn down drapery, near the dressing-room door. It was a statuette of clearest marble, the exquisite counterpart of Power's Greek Slave, and across its whiteness, marring the pure outlines of the delicate body which it almost girdled, was the print of a slender hand outlined in blood.

"Ah," whispered Ferrars, "that is something. Look at those finger marks and then at the hand yonder."

Captain Connors knelt above the little statuette and scanned it carefully. Then, while Ferrars passed on into the dressing-room, he went back to the couch, and knelt again beside the body of Hortense Novalis.

In the dressing-room the disorder was not so marked, nor so ghastly with signs of blood. The bed had not been occupied, but it bore the imprint of a human form, as if some one had thrown himself hastily down upon it for a moment ; and Ferrars was quick to notice that about the head the signs of disarrangement were more marked. He stepped to the side of the bed and looked down at it, shifted his position and looked again.

Thus far he had been careful not to move, nor even touch unnecessarily, any of the numerous articles in the room. But now he put out his hand promptly, and lifted one of the pillows. Just as he had anticipated, a crumpled and torn letter lay directly underneath.

An instant he regarded it without touching, and then again he put out his hand. This time it was the lace bed-covering that he lifted carefully, and again he was rewarded. Beneath the cover was a small photograph, its blank side uppermost.

Without a moment's hesitation he turned the card, revealing thus a man's pictured face. Self-possessed and thoroughly schooled though he was, he started, and almost cried aloud his amazement and horror, for the pictured face was that of the man to whom he had promised his help and his confidence. It was the face of Max Talfourd !

Ferrars snatched up the picture and thrust it into his breast-pocket, glancing hastily over his shoulder. Captain Connors, with his back squarely toward him, was still kneeling beside the body of the dead actress. With a quick deft movement, Ferrars replaced the lace bed-cover and caught up the crumpled letter.

Again he glanced toward the Chief, who was apparently making a methodical measurement of the fingers of the dead hand.

Then, with swift fingers, the detective straightened out the torn and crumpled sheet. In the stillnes of the moment its faint rustle sounded noisy. He gave it one glance—a glance that took in one word at the bottom of the page, a name, and then, with another swift movement, the letter was thrust out of sight, as the picture had been.

Francis Ferrars always kept his wits about him, and now, after a moment of thought, standing there beside the bed, he replaced the pillow and went back to the boudoir, where Captain Connors, with a grave face, was just rising from his task.

"Captain," said Ferrars, in a low whisper, "a little delay cannot harm the dead. Is there a man among those fellows outside whom we can trust to deliver a delicate message?"

The Chief shook his head.

"Then," said Ferrars, "I must go myself."

The Chief only looked his inquiry.

Ferrars laid a hand upon his arm. "Captain," he said, "some one must go at once to the house of Mr. Paget. He must have a warning."

Captain Connors was not so rapid in his methods as was the Englishman, but he had not been Chief of Police to no purpose.

"Good Heavens!" he exclaimed, after one mute moment. "Is that affair going to mix itself with this?"

"Not if I can help it," said Ferrars, grimly. "But some one must go."

"Very well," replied the Chief. "Then, it had better be—" He hesitated a moment. "Have you seen Abner Paget?"

"No."

"Then it had better be you."

Ferrars glanced at his watch and then back to the face of the Chief. "I'll explain later," he said. "And I warn you, Captain, it will take me longer to do this thing than it would one of your men."

"Longer ?" The Chief's eyes met his and a smile crossed his face. "I see," he said. "But go, if you must. I'll keep things moving here."

When Ferrars lifted the curtain to cross to the outer room, Frederick Quinlan sprang up, on seeing who it was. And when the English detective dropped the hanging, and briskly crossed the reception-room, Quinlan moved after him.

"One moment, sir," he said, eagerly.

Ferrars halted and faced about.

"You are going out ?" asked Quinlan.

Ferrars nodded.

"I want to make an appointment with you." Quinlan lowered his voice, and as Ferrars continued silent, he drew still nearer. "I must see you as soon as possible," he continued, in a sharp whisper. "If money will buy them, I want your services."

Still no word from Ferrars, only a look of inquiry.

"Do not fancy," went on Quinlan, in the same sibilant whisper, "that I am going to submit tamely to what I clearly foresee. I realize my position and I want your help. Oh, I know who you are !"

Francis Ferrars continued to eye him keenly for a moment, and then he said, as he put out his hand to draw aside the second *portiere :*

"Be very careful how you use your knowledge !"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A SEALED BOOK.

Ferrars passed quickly through the throng in the outer court and out upon the street. Several cabs were now standing before the great building, and he stepped into one of these and gave the driver his order in a low tone.

It was not the address of Abner Paget that he gave, but instead, the name of a quiet hotel in the very heart of business New York; and he added, "Get me there in five minutes, if possible."

As they rattled over the pavement, his thoughts were busy. There were fine lines between his eyes, and his lips were compressed. Once he put his hand to the pocket that contained the picture of Max Talfourd and the crumpled letter. Then, as if recalling himself, he dropped his hand and smiled grimly.

In truth, the English detective was in a strange state of mind; in any one else, such a mental condition might be more fitly described as a "confused state." But Francis Ferrars was never confused, as a witness to his every movement on that day would have testified with wonder and admiration.

"Genius," says somebody, "knows its own time." And Francis Ferrars, in this emergency, knew that he must not wait nor falter now. Not the Chief of Police, not all the combined force of the entire city, would turn or sway him. He had come to New York to serve a friend of his friend, and

Fate had shown him a mystery which threatened, perhaps, the object of his good intentions.

On the other hand, he was bound to Captain Connors by every tie of courtesy. He had promised, and almost proffered, his help. Well, he would not fail Captain Connors. But Captain Connors was not the only man who trusted him.

He did not look like a man puzzled or at a loss, as he dismissed the cab at the door of his hotel. He was as direct of movement as of speech.

In his room he wrote three notes. One to Sir Felix Wyntoun, one to Max Talfourd, and one, the last and, perhaps, the longest, to Abner Paget. He made, too, some other preparations, few and simple, but sufficient. The man who went out was not the man who came in. The man, who, a few minutes later, was ringing at the door of the Pagets, was not at all the man who had so lately left the scene of what was to be known and talked of for many days as the "Dresden Flats murder."

He posted the first two letters, but the third he still held in his hand as he was shown into the morning-room of the Pagets, and there awaited the master of the house.

When Abner Paget came, Ferrars lost no time in putting into his hand the envelope he had not chosen to give to the servant who opened the door for him.

"From the Chief of Police," was all he said.

Paget frowned as he took the letter. He had just signified to Chief Connors his intentions to wait upon him in good time. Why must these officers of the law be so importunate? He could not bring himself to open the letter tamely, without a remonstrance.

"Is Captain Connors in such desperate haste?" he began, looking sternly into the face of the messenger, and then checked

himself in sheer surprise, as he found that he—he, Abner Paget—was being openly inspected by this cool personage,—inspected with a keen impersonal gaze that was a new and embarrassing experience to the man so scanned.

"You'd better read the note," said Ferrars, coolly.

The tone seemed to leave him with nothing else to do, and he opened the sheet and read:

"ABNER PAGET, etc., etc.—

"Sir:—If the fact of your daughter's return has not already been made known, you will do well to keep it back, for a day and a night at least, if no longer. A thing has occurred, which, if mentioned in connection with your daughter's return, even as a coincidence, will be very unpleasant at the best. At the worst, it might become more unpleasant than anything that has gone before. If the news has not got beyond your own household, and your servants are to be trusted, keep it shut within your doors. I will see you as soon as possible."

This was the note, and there was no signature.

Abner Paget had read it and frowned darkly. Was he still to be dictated to by these odious servants of the public? He made a stride toward the messenger.

"Are you an officer?" he asked, brusquely.

"I am a detective," was the reply.

"Do you know what this letter means?"

"It means all that it says," said Ferrars, taking a step toward the door. "Has it come too late?"

The old man hesitated, and the struggle between pride and paternal solicitude was very evident to the man before him, who felt a throb of pity, and then a gust of anger.

"For your daughter's sake," began Ferrars, "I hope it is not too late. As for—" He stopped, and turned quickly, at a sound just behind him. Then the hand, uplifted to place his

hat upon his head, fell at his side, and he bowed low as a pale-faced woman, with anxious eyes crossed the threshold and stopped before them.

She wore a long dark morning-robe; her hair was silvered here and there among the soft brown; her attitude was that of a feeble body upheld by a stronger will. Ferrars could see that her hands and lips were trembling.

"What is it?" she asked, looking from her husband to the stranger before her. "What is it? About my daughter?"

Still Abner Paget remained mute and frowning. The lady stood for a moment as if waiting, then she made a step toward him, holding herself very erect.

"Mr. Paget," she said, with dignity, "will you tell me what this—"

"Madam," broke in Ferrars, "allow me. I am a detective. I have brought a message to Mr. Paget." As he spoke he drew a chair before her.

She bowed her thanks and placed a hand upon the chair to steady herself.

"Is it, your message, about my daughter?" she asked, with her eyes searching his face.

"Yes, Madam."

A flush mounted to her temples and a new light came into her eyes.

"One moment," she said, and turning, took the letter from her husband's hand. Then she seated herself in the chair Ferrars had proffered her, and without glancing at her lord, began the perusal of the note. Before she had reached the last words, the color had faded from her face, but her eyes retained their look of resolute and offended dignity as she lifted them to the face of Ferrars.

"Do you know what this note means?" she asked.

"Yes, Madam."

"And you will tell me?"

"Later you will understand. I have not the time now." He looked at her fixedly a moment, and added: "If you will see that this advice is carried out, I think there will be no trouble."

"I will see to that," she said. "I think I can comprehend."

"That is well. Until you hear again from Captain Connors, let it rest so." He made a gesture of farewell to the lady, and, without a glance at Abner Paget, hastened out and away.

For a long moment there was silence in the Paget morning-room. Then Abner Paget took his stand directly in front of the chair in which his wife still sat, with the note between her fingers.

"If I heard aright," he began, slowly, and in his sternest tones, "you said to that singular young man that you understood the meaning of that note. May I beg to be enlightened, Madam?"

Then the wife, from whose lips he had heard nothing that was not gently dignified, courteously calm, even in moments when their opinions differed, arose and stood erect before him.

"Perhaps I did not choose my words well," she said. "I meant that I understood that such a necessity might exist. I could see some reason for such precaution."

"You could see some reason for precaution—you? Madam!"

"Stop!" She moved quite away from the chair now, and broke sternly in upon his speech. "Stop," she said again.

"Abner Paget, I don't know how far your stubborn will, your wicked pride, may have gone toward helping her to such a decision, but the tyranny you began long ago has borne its first fruit in a way you little expected. Leah Paget is your child and she has some of your obstinacy. Heaven only knows how this will end. Almost against my better judgment I have promised to stand by her. But I don't know, I dare not think, what it means—"

"What it means!" he cried. "What do *you* mean?"

She caught her breath hard, and clutched at the arm he put out in a gesture meant to be commanding.

"Hush!" she said, "let us not talk about meanings, for fear they may make our troubles worse. All I can say is this: Leah Paget, your daughter and mine, has just assured me—me, her mother—that upon the subject of her strange absence, a month's absence, she will not open her lips to you, to me, to any one. The past four weeks, she says, must be a blank, a sealed book, whose pages she will never unclose!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

BEFORE THE INQUEST.

Upon his return to the house of Mystery, Ferrars encountered a new and unpleasant complication. Chief Connors himself was waiting his coming and he drew him at once aside.

"Come with me," he whispered. "One of the tenants on this floor has kindly put his study at my disposal. We can

talk safely there. He's a bachelor, and has turned out his own servant and given me the key."

Ferrars followed him to the bachelor's study, and heaved a sigh of relief as the door closed and was locked behind them.

"Now," said the Chief, turning toward him, "before you say a word, look at this." He took from his pocket a crumpled envelope and held it before the eyes of Ferrars, who read in a bold manly hand the name and address of Leah Paget.

"I found it in the fire-place," the Captain explained, "in the drawing-room."

"The drawing-room?" echoed Ferrars, blankly.

"Yes. I explored it after you left; evidently, it had not been invaded by the fiend. But, noticing that there seemed to have been a fire in the grate quite lately, I investigated. I found this, poked down beneath the ashes. What do you make of it?"

"I'll tell you," said Ferrars, "a little later just what I think. I have given my warning. And now, what else have you lighted upon?"

"More than enough. The plot thickens. Manager Horton came raging in, immediately after you left. The dead girl was to have opened at his Theatre tonight."

"Oh!"

"Yes, and there's worse to follow. It came out, almost before either of us realized the importance of it, that La Belle Fabrice, the actress who has been taking us all by storm, is also missing, since last night."

Ferrars, who had seated himself, sprang to his feet.

"Worse than that," went on the Chief—"there was enmity, a secret, between the two."

"Between what two?"

"The dead girl, Hortense, and La Belle Fabrice."

Ferrars stood silent a full minute, then he quietly resumed his seat.

"About the inquest," he said, "is that arranged for?"

"Not quite. I wanted to see you first."

"Yes?" inquiringly.

"Will you take this case, Ferrars?"

The English detective looked at him squarely, and for a long moment, without opening his lips.

"Oh, I know it's going to be a tough one," said the Chief, "and full of complications. Of course, if you take it, you may count on me, but only for assistance. I wash my hands of the brain work. Manage it in your own way. I'll furnish you men if you like, but I want you to work the case."

"If I should do this," said Ferrars, slowly, "it would be only upon one condition."

"Name it."

"My connection with it and my personality, must be known only to you," continued Ferrars.

"Well," said the Chief, "I don't object to that. I won't object to anything that secures you for this business."

"I'll tell you what I will do," said Ferrars, "after the inquest." He got up again and stood before the Chief. "By the bye," he said, "this young man, Quinlan, knows me."

"What's that?"

Ferrars repeated his statement and also Quinlan's words to him as he was leaving the reception-room.

"I don't know that you need to be astonished," said the Chief. "Quinlan's been a great traveller, and you're pretty well known. You've been pointed out to him, no doubt, sometime when he's been in London. Quinlan's able to pay."

"So I understand," indifferently. "Shall we go back now? By the bye, I don't want to figure at the inquest; I'm not needed. If I am to conduct this case, I shall want that envelope, with Miss Paget's name, suppressed."

"Eh! Oh, you mean at the inquest?"

"Yes."

The Chief took out the envelope and handed it to Ferrars. "Take it," he said, "and produce it at your own time."

Ferrars took the envelope, put it carefully away, and then stood for a moment seeming to reflect. Finally he said:

"I may as well pass, at the inquest, as a reporter. I'll keep as near you as seems best. But, if afterwards I do not see you alone, expect me tonight, at your office. If I come, I shall want to go over some of those reports again, and some of your notes in the case."

"Do you mean the Paget case?"

"I mean that. I shall want all you can furnish—all, mind—concerning three young men."

"You-er—what young men?"

"Quinlan, Max Talfourd, and your friend, the reporter."

"What! Polly Cousin?"

"Yes, if that's his name. Polly Cousin especially interests me."

As they emerged from the apartments of the kindly bachelor, Ferrars saw, in the throng about the street entrance, the pale face of Sir Felix Wyntoun. The young lord was struggling to make his way within, and he did not appear to have seen Ferrars.

"Go on," Ferrars whispered to the Captain, "and wait for me at the door of the vestibule."

He moved away as he ceased speaking, and had soon made

a path for himself to the side of Sir Felix, who did not see him until he felt a pressure upon his arm. It was the hand of his friend, and it was accompanied by a warning whisper :

" Hush ! don't speak ; come this way with me." He drew back until they stood against the wall, where they were not so likely to be overheard, or become objects of interest. " You must not remain here," Ferrars said then. " I sent you a letter half an hour ago. Go home at once, read it, and obey its instructions. What sent you here ?"

" A note from Madam Congreve called me to her rooms," said the young nobleman, " and she told me. I came to see how near the truth—how bad the worst really is."

" I can tell you the worst, and the best," said Ferrars. " But you must not remain here. Hortense Novalis has been killed—chopped to death with a dagger ; and her maid has been sent out of the world more gently—smothered or chloroformed, or both. That's the worst. Captain Connors has asked me to take the case ; and, if, after the inquest, I think I can assist justice and serve my friends by so doing, I shall take it. And now, my dear fellow, if you don't want your name to be blazoned in the newspapers as one of the interested spectators who rushed to the scene of the tragedy, etc., etc., you can't get away any too soon."

Sir Felix sighed heavily, and Ferrars noted with pain—for he was tenderly attached to the young fellow—how pale and stricken he looked.

" Courage, my dear fellow," he whispered, reassuringly ; " don't be too anxious. I'll manage to see you at the earliest possible moment, and you will not be kept in suspense an instant longer than is needful. Go back to the lady, your friend. It's possible that she may be called as a witness, and

the maid as well. Perhaps a word of caution would be advisable. I hope they won't get you up here, but you have been so much with the young lady—"

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated the young lord, "have they already accused her; have—"

"Hush! They have accused no one. Don't you see that this won't do? Come now, get back to your friends. And if you chance to meet Talfourd—"

"He's with Madam Congreve now," broke in Sir Felix.

"Then tell him that a letter awaits him at his room down town; and that I'll see him, too, at the earliest possible moment. Now there's an opening in the crowd, and a cab over the way. Go, and be patient, until we meet again."

"God bless you, Frank!" exclaimed the anxious young fellow, and he pressed his friend's arm between both his hands as he turned away.

"Come," said the Chief, as Ferrars regained his side once more, "there's much to be done yet. What shall we do with Quinlan? I've got some good men here now, and—"

"Let him go his way, then," broke in Ferrars, "and put him under close surveillance."

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE INQUEST.

Frederick Quinlan, and a companion, alighted from his own coupé, directly in front of the stately entrance to the Dresden Flats, now thronged by an eager and excited crowd of mor-

bidly curious people, and hurried into the anteroom, where the body of the French woman, Virginie, had been.

Owing to the exigencies of the case, the body had been removed, and it now lay near that of the murdered mistress, in the still blood-marked and disordered boudoir. The Coronor, his jury, and all others essential to the ghastly rite about to be performed, were assembled in the reception-room proper, and in the drawing-room beyond.

Entering with his usual self-possessed air, Quinlan took the place assigned him, and at once began a survey of the rooms in search of the English detective. Twice he scanned the faces of those about him, but nowhere could he see that of Ferrars, and presently his companion, seated close beside him, touched his elbow.

"Are you looking for some one?" he whispered.

"Yes," answered Quinlan, in the same tone, but he did not explain.

"I think," ventured the other, "it would be well to display as little anxiety as possible. You may not be aware of it, but your face is showing concern."

"Thank you," said Quinlan; "I'm truly indebted for the hint."

Frederick Quinlan's companion was known to some there as a friend to the young aristocrat, a society man of some distinction. He was also known, to a few, as a keen and successful lawyer—one who, in spite of his youthful appearance and worldly air, was already on his way to renown in his profession. Captain Connors, who observed his presence with a little surprise, felt sure that he was not there merely as Quinlan's friend, and in this he was right.

The Chief of Police had worked rapidly, and Quinlan's

first glance, while it had not revealed Ferrars, had taken note, with some surprise, of Manager Horton, Mr. Traverse, and one or two other members of the Fabrice Troupe, whose presence, it seemed to him, was not and could not be necessary.

A little aloof from the Chief and the Coronor's staff, was Polly Cousin. He held in his hand a note-book and pencil, and had placed himself among a group of reporters, as if to define beyond a doubt the capacity in which he was there.

In spite of judicious culling and constant watchfulness, the rooms were filled, and the presence of so many "idle spectators," as he named them to himself, was annoying to Quinlan. He mentioned this fact to the Chief, who approached him to ask a question and was a little surprised at his manner and his reply.

"In a business of this kind," said the Chief, "it isn't always easy for us to know who is, and who is not, important or necessary to the case. It isn't exactly a kettle-drum, Mr. Quinlan."

Quinlan bit his lip, and seeing a smile flit across the face of the man by his side, settled back in his place, and gave his whole attention to the effort he was obliged to make to seem interested but not anxious.

The body of Hortense Novalis had been lifted and turned upon the couch, and her limbs, that had rested upon the rug before it, had been composed and laid upon the cushions, with the long drapery of the train flowing over the couch, and down upon the carpet at its foot, in massive richness. The position of the head and arms had been changed but little, and the jewels gleamed and sparkled, making the marble whiteness of the splendid arms and shoulders more statuesque, and the crimson dashes of blood, here and there, more ghastly by contrast.

One of the Turkish lounges had been brought in from the

anteroom, and upon this, in the very attitude in which she had lain when Francis Ferrars drew away the concealing rugs, reposed the body of the maid, Virginie.

The room, with all its wealth of color and fabric, with its pictures, and gilding, and glowing drapery, had ceased to be a place of beauty and repose. Its wild disorder, its torn and broken and blood-stained richness, the daggers upon the floor, the blood-marked statuette, the broken vases and bric-a-brac, —all combined to make a picture the more hideous because of its very mockery of wealth.

But ghastly as were the surroundings in themselves, they were but the framing of a still more woful picture.

The two women were lying near each other. One, dressed in all the trappings of wealth and pride, but with blood-stains marring the loveliness of throat and rounded arm, with gaping wounds against the satin and jewels and lace, and with a nameless horror looking out from the great dark eyes. The other, wearing the garb of servitude,—the simple dark garment, the trim apron, and *bonne's* cap, and seemingly asleep and at peace with all things. It was a picture so horrible as to baffle the artist's brush; a picture never to be painted; a story never to be told; a sermon voicelessly preached there and never otherwhere, in its fullest meaning.

The Coroner was a man of intelligence and tact. He was naturally well known to the Chief of Police, and the two, after some moments together in the boudoir, where they spoke in half whispers, came out and took their places. The Chief then directed that the *portiere* be drawn fully open, and he placed one officer at the threshold and another within the rooms, with instructions to note carefully all movements of such as should come forward to view the dead.

It was a strange investigation, and as a result of the short conversation between the Coroner and the Chief of Police, it was not conducted altogether in the ordinary manner.

A little to his surprise, Frederick Quinlan was called as the first witness, and, being duly sworn, was interrogated thus:

"I am told, Mr. Quinlan, that you were the first to discover the bodies of these two murdered women."

"I was, apparently."

"Apparently?"

"I said 'apparently,' for the reason that the door by which I entered was not locked. Other persons might have come and gone, I suppose, as I might have done, had I chosen, without alarming the house. Let me correct myself; I did not discover the body of the servant."

"I see. Will you state how you found the body of the young woman?"

"I had an appointment with M'lle Novalis," began Quinlan, in his usual calm manner. "She was to appear tonight in a new play in which I had taken some interest. And this morning I was to have gone with the lady to a dress-rehearsal. A matter of business detained me so that I was, perhaps, fifteen minutes late; and, knowing the importance of time on such an occasion, I drove here in considerable haste. As no one responded when I rang, I fancied that the lady had already gone, and to assure myself in the quickest way, I turned the door-handle. To my surprise the door opened, and I stood for a moment upon the threshold. The anteroom was, as you see it now, dimly lighted, and I was surprised at the total silence. My next thought was that the lady had given me up, and had set out in so much haste as to have forgotten to lock her door. After a moment's hesitation I crossed the anteroom, and, put-

ting my head between the curtains there,"—here he indicated, by a gesture, the hangings that divided the anteroom from the one in which they then were,—" called my own name, as if announcing myself. As I spoke, I saw that the room was empty."

" This room, do you mean ?"

" Yes. I stepped in then, and, through the curtains there,"—indicating the arched entrance to the boudoir,—" I caught a glimpse of something white trailing upon the floor. The curtains were nearly but not quite closed. I was acquainted with the appearance of that room, and the gleam of white startled me a little. I spoke again, and then crossed the room and looked in."

He paused a moment and then went on, speaking a little faster, as if eager to get it over.

" It needed only a look and a touch to assure myself that she was dead, but my first impulse was to call for medical aid. I obeyed it by going at once across the street to Dr. Grove, whom I knew slightly, and, as soon as I had secured him, I found a policeman, and then informed the janitor, whom I met as I came in."

" Is Dr. Grove here ?" As the Coroner spoke he was fitting on a pair of eye-glasses, and when this was done he looked up and nodded to Quinlan his dismissal.

" For the present, sir," he said.

Dr. Grove was there and he at once came forward.

His testimony corroborated all that Quinlan had said. He had hastened across the street, at the summons, and had followed Mr. Quinlan straight through the outer rooms and into the presence of death. He had found the body lying half on, half off, the low divan. One might fancy that the murdered

woman, in her death-struggle perhaps, had been lying upon the divan, thrown and held there, possibly, and had expired while trying to step from the cushions to the floor. There were pitiful indications that she might have been struggling toward a kneeling position. On the other hand, she might have fallen to the floor, and then struggled to raise herself upon the divan, or to her knees. From the position of the limbs and the curve of the body, together with the way in which the left arm was flung forward, and the grasp of the right hand upon the cushions, he inclined to the belief that the dying victim had breathed her last in a frantic effort to lift herself upon her knees.

Dr. Grove was a grave man, with a peculiarly fine and sympathetic voice. He spoke like one who realized the pathos of the situation he described; and the good Coronor drew off his glasses, and was seen to pass his handkerchief across his eyes, after which he polished his glasses vigorously, and carefully replaced them, while the Doctor went on:

"The victim was dead when he arrived, of course. She had been dead for several hours. There were half a dozen wounds in her throat and breast. Three were deep knife or dagger thrusts, two in the throat and a third in the right breast, any one of which, alone, would have been fatal. Besides these there were two or three lesser wounds in neck and breast, and two ugly gashes in the flesh of the right arm, as if they had been received while striving to ward off a blow.

"The woman-servant? No, he had not seen her until later; not until after the arrival of the Chief of Police and the young man who came with him." He described the manner in which the "young man" had drawn their attention to the body of Virginie. Supposing the woman to have been sleeping when the murderer approached, the weight of the rugs alone would have

been sufficient to have caused death by suffocation. But there had been chloroform used also. The odor was quite perceptible when the rugs were withdrawn. Probably the rugs had been used as an after-thought, either to conceal the body for a time, or to make assurance of death doubly sure.

"How long had the woman been dead? Quite as long as had her mistress. Ten hours or more. He had scarcely glanced at the outer rooms as he came hurrying in with Mr. Quinlan, but thought they were in about the same order as now. The boudoir, where the body lay, was in great confusion. No; after looking about that room, he could not say that anything had been changed or removed."

"Did you notice," asked the Coroner, "when you first came in, those weapons upon the floor?"

"Yes, I noticed them both. One, the one that lay almost at the head of the couch, was directly in my way as I bent over the body. It was almost the first thing that I saw distinctly. I did not take it up then; I changed my position in order to avoid disturbing it."

"Did you examine it later?"

"I did. When I had looked at the wounds, I took up the dagger, being careful to note its exact position before doing so. It was undoubtedly the knife which did the deadly work. The blood of the victim was upon it, covering it, almost. I replaced the knife, leaving it exactly as I had found it."

"There is another dagger. Did you look at that?"

"I did, but did not take it up. That knife has not drawn blood. It is blood-stained, but only at the hilt and near it."

"You observed closely. What was your idea concerning this second weapon?"

"I think the murdered woman must have seized upon it for

self-defense ; that, as she fled before the assassin, she strove to ward off the attack, with her arm upraised and the dagger in her hand. I think that the gashes upon her arm were thus made, and that the blood spurting from those wounds stained the hilt of the dagger. As she fell, under the last blow, she let the dagger fall. The position of the weapon confirms this theory. And that is not all : the blood upon the hilt is, also, the blood of the victim."

There was a moment of stillness. The Coroner was examining some slips of paper in his hand. Dr. Grove stood silent and self-possessed in his place. The rooms were very quiet ; every word falling from the lips of this witness had been listened to with almost breathless attention.

"Dr. Grove," began the Coroner again, "did you know these two women or either of them ?"

"I did not know them."

"Had you seen them—either one ?"

"I have seen both, frequently."

"How and where ?"

"From the windows of my house, and upon the street, as they came and went."

"And is that all ?"

"No. I was called once, to attend upon the lady professionally."

"Ah ; how long since ?"

"A month ago, I should think."

"What was the nature of the lady's illness ?"

"It was a nervous attack."

"Could you not give it a more definite name ?"

The Doctor smiled slightly. "It was an attack of genuine hysteria."

"Upon that occasion, who was in attendance here?"

"The maid, who lies there, and a woman whom I scarcely noticed, except as she once or twice got in my way,—a small, elderly woman. I have an impression that she was very dark, almost swarthy, and with black eyes or hair, perhaps both."

"Was there no one else?"

"Only the messenger who came after me, and led the way back."

"A messenger? And who was the messenger?"

"The messenger was a young man," replied the Doctor, slowly.

"Doctor, that sounds like an evasion. Did you know this messenger?"

"I did." This admission was made with evident reluctance.

"Name him."

"The messenger, sir, was your previous witness, Mr. Frederick Quinlan."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

DOCUMENTARY EVIDENCE.

Dr. Grove's answer produced a sensation. Many faces turned to stare at young Quinlan, who did not bear the scrutiny very well. He flushed hotly and a frown darkened his face. The flush alone might have meant either embarrassment or wrath; the frown was unmistakable.

Again the Coroner found matter for consideration in the

slips of paper in his hand. Then, to the surprise of all, he said :

"That will do for the present, Dr. Grove," and beckoned to the Chief of Police. When they had conferred together for a moment, the Coroner turned to the jury. "Captain Connors, gentlemen," he said, "will tell us what he knows of this affair, in the absence of the young man, his assistant, who came with him here this morning."

Captain Connors nodded affably toward the jurymen, as if he rather enjoyed the novelty of being his own witness, and then related how he had been summoned to the scene of the murder, and how he had brought with him an assistant, but who, his presence not being considered necessary as a witness, had been detailed upon other duty. He described the appearance of the rooms as he had noted them in passing through each, and told how the body lay, thus corroborating the testimony of Dr. Grove and Frederick Quinlan. He told, also, how his assistant, happening to glance toward the anteroom after the curtains had been drawn apart, letting in a stronger light, had noted the peculiar outline of the piled-up rugs, and so discovered the body of the second victim.

"In the hopes of finding something like a clue to the identity of the dead," went on Captain Connors, "I made a rigid search, in person, through the cabinets, drawers, boxes, dressing-case, and desk. But evidently some one had been before me. Everything was in confusion, and some one had burned a lot of papers upon the drawing-room hearth. I found an empty purse upon the floor of the dressing-room, and two or three jewel boxes had been rifled of their contents. But other cases near at hand, and some of them opened, were left untouched; and none of the gems, probably the most valuable

in the collection, were taken from the body, as may easily be seen. I don't think it would be wise to argue robbery as the motive, unless it appears that the murderer or murderers were alarmed and fled before they had finished collecting the spoils."

"The stopping to cover up that body in the anteroom does not look like precipitate flight," ventured one of the jurymen.

"That," broke in another, "might have been done before the search for booty was made."

The Chief turned again to the Coroner.

"I was about to say," he continued, "that it seemed as if we were doomed to disappointment. At every turn the murderer was ahead of us. I found, in the course of my search, a few notes of no importance, and throwing no light upon the subject of this person's identity. They were all addressed to M'lle Hortense Novalis, where they were addressed at all, and signed mostly with a given name or an initial. Some of them were dated Paris, and some London, and they were kept, evidently, merely as *souvenirs*. There is a bank-book, which showed a neat account at a certain bank here in New York, and other documents proving Hortense Novalis to have been possessed of some securities and stocks in London, together with the address of her London bankers and men of business, and two or three business letters. These last were in the desk that stands in the dressing-room. They were in a shallow drawer quite by themselves. As I pulled open the drawer with considerable force, it came out in my hand, and, in a small compartment behind it, I saw a paper, folded and flattened so as to fit perfectly into the shallow space. It proved to be a sealed paper, with a few words written across the back."

He took a paper from his pocket and held it up to the

sight of the jurymen. "Here it is," he said, "and it reads thus"—he turned it over in his hand and read: "'This is the last Will and Testament of Hortense Novalis.'"

Again there was a stir of surprise and sensation in the room, and a pair of eyes that had been furtively watching Frederick Quinlan's face, saw him flush again, and again frown deeply.

"Mr. Coroner," resumed the Chief of Police, holding out the paper, "I will place this into your hands as documentary evidence."

But the Coroner shook his head. "Keep it," he said, "until we have questioned some other witnesses." And then, as the Chief returned the paper to his pocket, he asked, "Is that all you found, Captain?"

"That was the end of my search," replied the Chief. "If there was ever anything of value to us, it was burned upon the hearth there, probably last night."

When Captain Connors had retired, other witnesses were called.

The lessee of the Dresden Flats testified that the apartments of M'lle Novalis had been secured by an agent, who wanted them, he said, for a lady who was then abroad, but who wished to reside for a time in the American Metropolis. The agent had not haggled at the price, and had secured the apartments, among the most desirable in the building, by paying liberally in advance. It had been almost a month, as nearly as he, the lessee, could remember, before he was informed that the apartments were being sumptuously furnished, and that the lady and her maid were daily expected. Afterward, he had inquired concerning them, and had expressed a little surprise that there were no more servants. He had been informed that

the lady's meals were served from a French restaurant near at hand, and all other services, except those of her maid, were performed by servants that came and went at need. Beyond this, he could say of his murdered tenant and her maid, nothing at all.

The attaches of the house had little or nothing to add to this. The apartments, being upon the first floor, and opening conveniently near the main stairway, the occupants had patronized the elevator so little that they were scarcely known to the boy who guided it up and down, or to the dwellers in the upper regions, who came and went by that route.

The custodian of the great main entrance could tell a little more. He saw the lady coming and going oftener, of course. She never spoke to him, but sometimes smiled or nodded as she passed. Now and then, when her door opened for a moment, he heard her clear voice or light laughter. He fancied that she was a "merry" lady, and quite free and friendly with her maid.

"Did she receive many visitors?"

"No, indeed; very few, in fact."

"Can you tell who these visitors were?" asked the Coroner.

The man fixed his gaze upon Frederick Quinlan.

"At first, he"—here he pointed to Quinlan—"was almost the only man. He came pretty often."

Again the general gaze was bent upon Quinlan. But the Coroner was not yet ready to make that young man the center of interest.

"Mr. Quinlan was a friend, that is understood," he said. "Are there others who were visitors more or less?"

The man glanced about him and finally singled out Manager Horton, and pointed at him an indicating finger

"Lately," he said, "I have seen him come here, two or three times, or maybe more."

"Yes. Are there any others?—think, now."

"One evening," said the man, slowly, "there was a young lady—a very pretty young lady, and beautifully dressed. I remember her especially, because she came in kind of hesitating, and looked around a bit after she got to the first landin'. I was just coming down, when she stopped me and asked me if Miss Novalis was on this floor. I pointed out the right door, and she thanked me. I remember saying to myself that she must have been expected, because the door was opened so prompt by the lady's maid. And I remember thinking, too, that she was the first lady visitor that I had seen at that door."

Again the Coroner was consulting a strip of paper.

"Go on," he said, looking up, as the man ceased speaking; "can you describe the lady?"

"She was very pretty, with a kind of light springing step, and I think she had brown eyes, that looked somehow bright and full of life. She was small, and carried herself sort of proud."

There was a movement near the Coroner which caused that official to look up, and he saw that Captain Connors was making his way toward Manager Horton, who was looking eagerly toward a group of reporters.

"How long did the lady remain?" asked the Coroner.

"The lady hadn't been very long in the room, sir, when a young man came. He looked around, too, almost as if he was expecting to see some one in the court or vestibule, and then he asked if these was the rooms of M'lle Novalis. There wasn't no card on the door at that time; I remember that very well, because the maid asked me to tack one on the next day."

"Yes. Go on."

"Well, the young man rung the bell, and was let in, and then, before I'd hardly turned around, along came another one."

"Another young man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Can you describe him?"

'I don't need to," said the man, with a grin. "It was that young man again," pointing toward Quinlan.

"Ah! and did he ring, too?"

"Yes, he rang. And then, in a minute, the door flew open, and the young lady and the other young man came out together."

"Well," ejaculated the Coroner, "go on."

"The young man that was with the young lady pulled the door shut after him quick like, and he looked pretty serious. They all three stood and sort of stared at each other, just a minute like, and then they all seemed to recognize each other at once, and bowed, and the lady put out her hand to that young gent over there, and they all three stood close together and talked for a minute, very low and earnest, seeming. Then the young fellows bowed sort of stiff like to each other, and the young man over there—"

Here the Coroner broke in:

"That young man is Mr. Frederick Quinlan, and as he seems to be coming in for such a goodly share of notice, it will be best to speak of him by his name. Eh, Mr. Quinlan?"

"Thank you," said Quinlan, "it will be an improvement, if the gentleman will oblige me."

"All right, sir," said the willing witness. "Well, Mr. Quinlan then touched his hat to the lady, and the lady and her young man went down stairs quite fast. Before they wer

half way down, the door flew open again, and the lady herself—Miss Novalis, you know—was standing there. I heard her say something that sounded kind of sharp, though I couldn't understand what it was, and then Mr. Quinlan said 'Hush,' and stepped inside and shut the door himself."

Captain Connors had returned to his place, stopping to speak a word to Cousin on his way, after a few whispered words with Manager Horton, and he now spoke a word in the ear of the Coroner.

"Did you know the young man that went away with the lady?" asked the Coroner, when Captain Connors had drawn back to his place.

"No, sir. But I'm sure that I've seen him about town somewheres."

"Will you describe him?"

"Well, he was a good-sized young fellow, and right good-looking; taller and broader than Mr. Quinlan there, and darker complected. He had handsome dark eyes and a short dark mustache. He carried his head kind o' uppish, and walked like a soldier."

"That will do for him," said the Coroner. "Would you know him if you should see him again?"

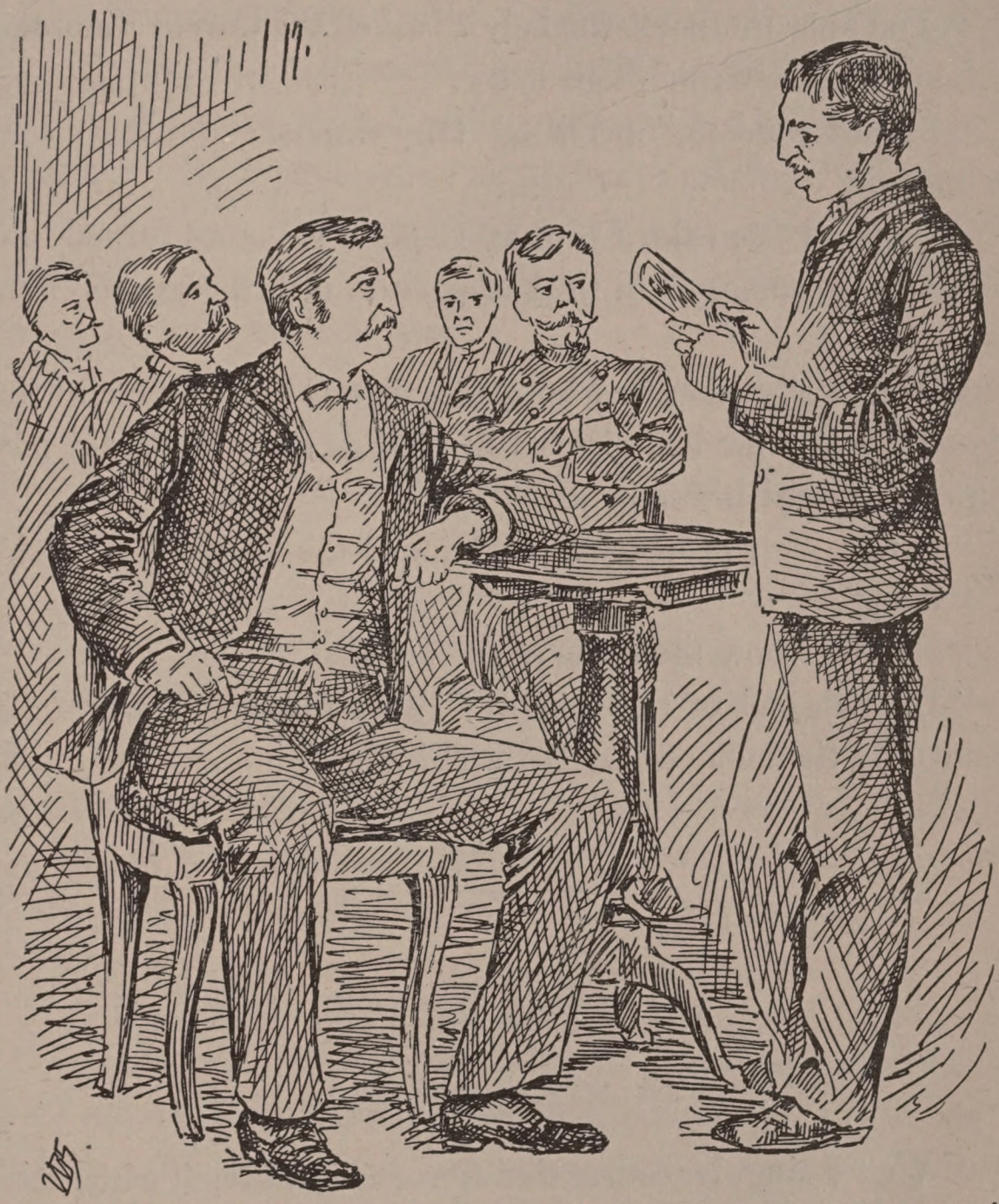
"Yes, sir," said the man, promptly.

"And would you know the young lady?"

"Yes, I'm sure I'd know her."

At a sign by the Chief, something was passed from the hand of Polly Cousin, over the heads of two or three jurors, and into the hands of the Coroner.

It was a cabinet photograph, and, after looking at it through his spectacles for a long moment, the Coroner put it into the hand of the witness without a word.



"THAT'S HER!" CRIED THE MAN. "I'D KNOW HER ANYWHERES."
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"That's her!" cried the man, after the first look. "That's the young lady. I'd know her anywheres."

"You are sure that is the lady?" asked the Coroner, sternly. "Look carefully; don't be hasty."

"I don't need to," persisted the witness. "That's her. I know it."

At a word from the Coroner, Captain Connors turned and beckoned to some one in the background near the group of reporters.

It was Polly Cousin who came forward in answer to the signal. When he had reached the side of the witness, the picture was placed in his hand.

"Is that your property?" questioned the Coroner.

"It is."

"Do you know the name of the original?"

"The original of that picture," said Cousin, slowly, "is known by the name of La Belle Fabrice!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

A THREATENING CLOUD.

"What a singular course that Coroner is taking," whispered the companion of Frederick Quinlan, as the Coroner, having dismissed Cousin after one or two questions of little importance, called Manager Horton to the stand.

"Perhaps you have observed," replied Quinlan, drily, "that the Chief of Police stands just behind 'that Coroner,' in more senses than one."

"Mr. Horton," said the Coroner, "will you tell us what you know of the deceased?"

The Manager wore a rueful countenance, and his aggrieved state of mind was now and then manifest in his manner.

"I have known M'lle Novalis, personally, but a short time," he said. "By reputation, as an actress of ability, I first heard of her something like a year and a half ago, or possibly a little longer. She had been creating a *furore* in London, and the papers said much of her."

"Have you any of those papers, or do you recall anything printed in them at that time, relative to the personal history of the deceased — anything that might be of use to this investigation?"

"I do not. She was always spoken of as M'lle Hortense Novalis. There was, of course, much laudation of her beauty, her dress, and jewels, and equipages. I think, too, I have read, or heard, something to the effect that the lady possessed a private fortune, independent of her professional income."

"Mr. Horton, you made the acquaintance of M'lle Novalis of late, then, and in this city?"

"Yes, sir."

"Will you relate the circumstances?"

"It could not have been more than a month ago, that I received a note from Hortense Novalis, asking me to call upon her here. At that time I was very much occupied. It was my opening week. Besides, I did not feel sure that this letter was not an imposture."

"May I ask why?"

"Having read so much of the lady and her successes abroad, I took occasion, when last in London, to talk with persons who had seen her upon the stage and in the green room. I had got

it into my head that she was a Frenchwoman, but I was assured that she was not ; that, in fact, she spoke the language very ill and as little as possible."

As he paused here, the Coroner spoke somewhat impatiently.

"I believe you were speaking of a note from the lady, sir—"

"Precisely," said the Manager. "I was about to say that having been assured that M'lle Novalis was not a Frenchwoman, I was surprised to receive a note from her, written, and very correctly, in French."

"Ah, in French ?"

"Yes. I may as well add, having vouched for its correctness, that my knowledge of French is limited. I was obliged to have the note translated. The fact that the lady could speak, and presumably write English, and that this note had been addressed to me in a foreign language, impressed me unpleasantly, and I dictated a note expressing my regret at not being able to call upon her at the time she had appointed, and a hope that I might have that honor on another occasion. My note, like her own, was written in French."

Again he paused. Manager Horton, when not goaded by his temper, was a deliberate man.

"Go on, sir," said the Coroner, crisply.

"A few days later, or it may have been a week, I received a second note. This one was written in English, and had a business ring. She wished to consult me upon a professional matter, the note said, and would I call upon her at my own convenience ? She hoped it would be soon. About that time, one of the ladies of my company was ailing, and I was beginning to fear a failure on her part. I may have had this in mind when I decided to call upon M'lle Novalis. The

person who was ill, Miss Janet Marshall, occupied the place among the ladies of the company next my Star."

"And your 'Star,' was she not—"

"La Belle Fabrice was my leading lady. In fact, the play was hers, and a second play, owned by herself, was in preparation. In this play—'Two Sweethearts' it is called—there was a splendid chance for two 'leading ladies' to distinguish themselves. It occurred to me, upon seeing that Miss Marshall was likely to be ill, that this sudden anxiety of the lady, the deceased, might open the way to supply the place of Miss Marshall, at need."

"What was the result of your call?"

"I found that M'lle Novalis had heard of the new play, and the rival title roles. She very frankly informed me that she wanted to play in 'Two Sweethearts,' with La Belle Fabrice."

"One moment, sir. Did she say especially that she wanted to play with La Belle Fabrice?"

The Manager's face expressed his reluctance and he hesitated a moment over his answer. "She did," he said, finally.

"Now, Mr. Horton," said the Coroner, as if he was beginning to feel ground under his feet, "you will please give us, briefly as you can, the history of your negotiations with the two actresses, M'lle Novalis and La Belle Fabrice."

Wavering and desultory as the course of the Coronor had seemed, it was evident to those that were most capable of drawing correct inferences, that he knew very well what he was about.

The friend and legal adviser of Frederick Quinlan, from sitting carelessly in his place, looking superciliously bored, brought himself to a more erect attitude, and the expression of his face settled down to a look of attentive interest.

It was evident to Polly Cousin, who, from being or seeming a trifle impatient and quite absent-minded, settled down to listen, and take notes with grave attention.

It was also evident to a commonplace-looking man, in a shabby grey business-suit, which displayed indications of his calling in the shape of ink-stains, that looked as if a careless penman had absent-mindedly wiped his pen upon the most convenient portions of his coat and trowsers. He was a stoop-shouldered fellow, sallow-skinned, except where his nose bloomed dully red, and with a scraggy beard and lank locks that touched his greasy coat collar; hair and beard both being faintly streaked with grey. His place was a little back of Cousin, who, nevertheless, had taken note of him, and classified him, according to his custom.

"An underpaid newspaper hack," Cousin's rating made him. "Drinks, probably. Has a cringing way, as if he was aware of his inferiority. I detest that sort of a man; it isn't a man, it's a failure."

The "failure" was very quiet and unobtrusive, and the red-rimmed and evidently weak eyes, were doing him good service. He was, apparently, the most stolid and unimpressed of those present while Manager Horton continued his narrative; but no one in that room listened so keenly, nor to better purpose, than did the red-nosed man, whom Polly Cousin had dubbed a failure.

Having gotten fairly into the business of his narrative, Manager Horton went on volubly, in spite of the Coroner's suggestion of brevity.

An occasional question, sharply put, showed that the Coroner was now upon his mettle. There was no more wavering, and though no one could see or anticipate the end, all felt sure that, to the Coroner, there was land ahead.

"Mr. Horton," said the Coroner, when he had reflected a moment after the Manager's story was told, "in arguing by turns with these two ladies, whose wishes did not harmonize, you must have had some glimpses of character, must have formed some opinion. When La Belle Fabrice refused to listen to your proposition, did she name a reason of any sort? You have simply said that the lady refused."

"That is simply all that she did," replied the Manager.

"Giving no reason, whatever?"

"From the first to the last of my talks with La Belle Fabrice," said Mr. Horton, "she simply said, 'I will not.'"

"You forget, sir, you have said that at last she consented."

"At the last, Mr. Coroner. On the day before yesterday, about six o' clock, I called upon Fabrice to get her final answer. I did not see her. Madam Congreve, the lady who brought me the news of her absence this morning, was waiting for me in Fabrice's sitting-room. It was Madam who told me that La Belle Fabrice had consented."

"Did you see her again? I mean Fabrice."

"Yes. I saw her for a few moments yesterday."

"How did she appear?"

"Rather silent and apathetic."

"But intending to appear with the deceased?"

"Yes. We talked over some arrangements for the setting of the first scene."

"Was M'lle Novalis' name mentioned?"

"Yes, necessarily. M'lle was on with Fabrice in that first act."

"How did she speak of M'lle Novalis?"

"Composedly, as if she were an utter stranger."

"In all your arguments with her, did La Belle Fabrice man-

ifest, at any time, by word or manner, a dislike of M'lle Novalis ?"

"I never heard her express personal dislike. She spoke of her rather as a stranger, of whom, perhaps, she had heard ill-report. It was always that she did not wish to appear with her upon the stage."

"Did it occur to you that it might be merely a matter of professional jealousy ?"

"Yes. That thought occurred to me."

"Do you think this was the case ?"

For a moment the Manager was silent; then he answered, with seeming reluctance, "No."

"And yet that would seem a natural conclusion. You had a reason for discarding that theory, had you not ?"

"Yes. My reason was simply my knowledge of Fabrice, and my experience as her Manager. I have never dealt with a more reasonable and fair-minded person. I never knew her to manifest jealousy. Besides, when I told her that M'lle Novalis, if she did not play with her, would play against her at a rival house, she was not in the least concerned. Her one wish seemed to be not to be brought in contact with M'lle Novalis."

"Mr. Horton," said the Coroner, gravely, "do you believe that these two actresses were strangers to each other ?"

Again the Manager hesitated. "Is my mere opinion admissible ?" he began. "I thought—"

"Your position, sir," interrupted the Coroner, "was one that would give even your opinion importance. You were able to draw an intelligent inference."

Now Manager Horton had an opinion and a reason for it, but he saw the rapidly increasing gravity of the situation, and

knew in an instant where his sympathies would range themselves, should the worst come. His hesitation, this time, was very brief.

"At this stage of the investigation, sir," he said, firmly, "I decline to express an opinion."

To the surprise of many the Coroner did not press for an answer. Instead, he shot out another question.

"Since their residence in this city, had the two ladies met?"

"I think not."

"Have you any knowledge of the domestic relations of the lady who is called Fabrice? Has she friends or relatives?"

"I do not know."

"You surely knew her by some other name than that by which she is known professionally?"

"I certainly do not."

"Did you never hear her speak of her family, of parents, or relations?"

"Never."

"Has she acquaintances and friends here?"

"She has made many friends in this city."

"Have you any idea, hint, or suspicion of her present whereabouts?"

"None."

The Coroner turned in his place and exchanged a word with the nearest juror. Then he ran his eye over one of the strips of paper in his hand, and, after a moment, he turned again toward the witness.

"Will you name the person or persons who are the most intimate with La Belle Fabrice, in your company?"

"Madam Congreve is her companion and most intimate friend. Probably her maid comes next."

"Thank you, Mr. Horton. For the present, that will do. You will oblige me by writing down the names of all the people of your company, and where they may be found."

Manager Horton went back to his place, and for some moments the Coroner busied himself with writing upon slips of paper, and whispering with various of the jurymen, each of whom seemed to have something on his mind.

During the last moment that Horton was before the Coroner the shabby man, whose manner and appearance had incurred the disapproval of Polly Cousin, began to work his way toward the window, muttering something about "more air and light," and when the Coroner turned his face toward the Chief of Police, after his conference with the gentlemen of the jury, the shabby man was no longer visible.

No one missed him, not even Polly Cousin, for the Coroner had just recalled Mr. Quinlan to the witness-stand.

CHAPTER XL.

THE WEB CLOSING IN.

Frederick Quinlan came forward for the second time, and took his place before the Coroner. He was more at ease than at first, and his answers came with greater readiness.

"Mr. Quinlan, did you know La Belle Fabrice?"

"I had that honor, but only in a limited degree."

"How long have you been acquainted?"

"Only since her sojourn here."

"Where did you first meet her?"

"At her hotel. I was introduced by a friend, who had seen her in London and who wished to know her better."

"Since your first meeting, have you often seen La Belle Fabrice?"

"I have called upon her less than half a dozen times. I have met her oftener in society."

"Did you ever meet her here?"

"I believe a previous witness has told you that. Upon one occasion I did."

"Will you give us your version of that meeting?"

"I was about to call upon M'lle Novalis, when I met the two, Mr. Talfourd and La Belle Fabrice, at the entrance. We exchanged civilities, and I said the usual thing about regretting that my coming had not been earlier, etc. The lady murmured something about a short call, and a mistake, and the gentleman said something about seeing me at another time."

"And was that all?"

"No. As they moved away M'lle Novalis opened the door and I went in, asking, jestingly, if she had quarrelled with her guests. She said in answer, 'They were not my guests; their call was a mistake.' I said, 'How is that? Did they mistake you for somebody else?' And she replied, 'Yes; they thought I was somebody else.'"

The Coroner pondered and made a note.

"You are acquainted, of course, with the young man Mr. Talfourd?"

"Max Talfourd? Yes, I know him very well."

"Did he ever speak to you of this encounter?"

"Yes. He called upon me that very evening, for that purpose."

"And what did he say?"

"He said nothing by way of explanation. His errand was simply to ask of me, in the name of La Belle Fabrice, a favor. It was in the form of a promise—which I have broken, here before you, and very reluctantly, notwithstanding the occasion. Mr. Talfourd asked me, in the name of La Belle Fabrice, not to mention to any one the fact of having met her at the door of M'lle Novalis."

"Was the deceased acquainted with La Belle Fabrice?"

"By no means. On the contrary, I once asked her if she knew Fabrice, and she denied such knowledge."

"I am told that she was most anxious to appear in public with La Belle Fabrice. Do you know her reason for such a choice?"

"I fancied that it was a woman's whim. M'lle Novalis was a beautiful woman and a fine actress. She had achieved abroad just such a triumph as La Belle Fabrice afterward achieved, both there and here. I can see how a woman might wish to show her power in that way beside her rival, instead of against her. Now, that I have begun, I may as well add that never in all my conversation with her, did M'lle Novalis express any reason for her wish to appear with La Belle Fabrice, except that she did wish it."

"Mr. Quinlan, you have been a frequent visitor here, I believe?"

Quinlan nodded.

"You should know something about her other visitors."

"I know very little. I have introduced two or three of my friends. But the lady had no acquaintances in the city, previous to her coming here. So she has told me, and I had no reason to doubt her word. Of late, since this theatrical matter has been on the tapis, Manager Horton has called · I suppose

he can tell you how often. And Mr. Van Voort has paid several visits, with and without me."

"Mr. Van Voort?"

"Mr. Van Voort is an Impressario, like Manager Horton. He was to have been M'lle's manager in case she appeared independently."

"Can you think of no others who have visited here, or called on any pretext?"

Quinlan seemed to consider a moment.

"There is a woman," he said, finally—"an elderly and rather shabby personage, whom I have met once or twice coming away from here. Once I found her here when I called."

"Did you learn who she was?"

"No. I mentioned her to M'lle Novalis, and she laughed and said, 'Yes, the beggars have found me out.'" He hesitated a moment and then went on. "Perhaps I ought to speak of a woman who accompanied M'lle Novalis to the Theatre one evening. I was not there and did not see her. She was described to me as a small and elderly person, with white hair, elaborately dressed, and wearing gold-rimmed eye-glasses. I did not learn who she was.

Again there was a halt and consultation.

"Mr. Quinlan," resumed the Coroner, after a few words with the Chief of Police, "when did you last see the deceased, alive?"

"Last night. I came here at ten o'clock, I think. It must have been eleven, or half-past, when I went away."

"Did you see anything out of the ordinary in the manner of the deceased?"

"Nothing. She was in exuberant spirits. She had been overlooking the gowns she was to have worn in the new play.

She drew back the curtains of the room there"—pointing to the boudoir. "She was especially pleased with a dinner-dress, which, she told me, had just come home. And she said that she meant to turn me out, and try on every one of her gowns for the play." His voice took on a lower tone: "If Dr. Grove is not mistaken, she must have put on that white dress first, and—it is the dress in which she now lies."

"Where was she, when you left her, at last?" This question was asked after a long moment of silence, and the Coroner's tone unconsciously fell below its ordinary key.

The witness turned toward the boudoir, pale but composed, and with head erect, and quick firm step, walked to the entrance.

"I left here," he said. "The curtains were closed, except for the space where she stood, holding them back with one hand. The boudoir was lighted, and so were the rooms beyond. As I reached the archway there,"—indicating the division between the anteroom and the one in which the Coroner sat,—"those curtains were drawn. As I lifted one, I turned and looked back. She was still standing there, smiling, and holding back the curtains."

"And that is how you saw her last?"

"Yes." He made a movement to return to his place near the Coroner.

"Remain there a moment, if you please. Do you see those two weapons upon the floor? The one at or near the couch; the other—"

"I see them," said Quinlan, quickly.

"Have you seen them before?"

"Yes. That one"—pointing to the long stiletto-like weapon, near the head of the divan,—"that one lay usually upon a

carved bric-a-brac case, in the drawing-room. The other was used sometimes as a paper cutter. I have seen her use it so."

"You have said, I believe, that these rooms were all lighted. Was the anteroom also lighted?"

"Yes, but dimly."

"You have not spoken of the maid. When you came in, where was she?"

"She admitted me."

"And when you went away?"

"When I stepped into the anteroom, she lay where she was found this morning, asleep and breathing heavily."

"Did you awaken her?"

"No. I wish I had. Instead, I let myself out as quietly as possible."

"When you went out, did you set the spring lock, which I see upon the outer door, so that no one could gain admittance without ringing?"

This time the blood flew into Quinlan's face. He put his hand to his head quickly, like a man suddenly stunned by a sharp report.

"The night lock?" he stammered. "I am afraid—I did not."

The Coroner arose and stood straight before him.

"Ah—yes. Now, look: You go out at this late hour, and the door is left open. What is there to prevent some one, any one, who sees this, from entering, chloroforming the sleeping servant, passing on through this room and straight to the drawing-room. In the drawing-room lies that dagger, easily seen in the light. In the drawing-room, let us say, is the lady, alone, absorbed in her new toilets. How easy it is, then, for the murderer to steal upon her with this slender weapon, to

creep behind her, and strike the first blow. Then, perhaps she seizes the other weapon, which lies at hand, and the rest—it's simply a question of the strongest. Mr. Quinlan, do you realize the situation?"

Quinlan bowed gravely, his self-possession had returned.

"I do," he said.

"Now, in the morning, you come. You were the first, and you found the door open."

"I found it unlocked."

"Yes. Quite right. Unlocked, but not open. Were the lights burning?"

Again Quinlan started. Evidently, these were things that he had not thought of before.

"No," he said; "there were no lights burning."

At this point some one handed a note to the Chief of Police. He opened it hastily and read:

"There will necessarily be a postponement. Make it as long as possible.

F.

"P. S. I take the case."

The Chief read this, and then stowed it away in an inner pocket with much satisfaction. Almost at the same moment, the Coroner had turned and was saying to him,

"We must have another hearing. There are important witnesses to be called. And we must make an effort to find this actress, La Belle Fabrice."

CHAPTER XLI.

WHAT MICHAEL DISCOVERED.

When the Coroner had announced a postponement of the investigation until noon of the following day, and ordered the closing of the room in which lay the two murdered women, he waited with the Chief of Police until the people were out of the apartment, clamoring and blocking the way in the court without.

He had given brief instruction to the jury, and in answer to a question from one distinguished member, he had defined his position and intentions.

"I did not press Mr. Quinlan more closely," he said, "because I saw clearly that by so doing, at this stage in the investigation, I should only create prejudices against him; unnecessary prejudice. I believe there will be proven against him a pretty clear case of circumstantial evidence. I might have pressed him into a recital of all he knows of this dead woman. But it has been shown here today, that there is another person, against whom there is also a thread of circumstantial evidence. Until we have found La Belle Fabrice, and until the mystery of her unaccountable antipathy against the deceased, and her sudden disappearance on the night of the murder, have been cleared up, I shall not handle young Quinlan as if he were already an accused man. As yet, there has been nothing to indicate a rupture between himself and the murdered woman."

From the confusion and clamor of the outer court, a policeman made his way to the side of the Chief of Police. He had been left as guard at the outer threshold with special orders, and one glance at his face sufficed to show that he had something in the way of information to impart.

Captain Connors advanced to meet him, and the two moved toward the window furthest from the place where the Coroner, Dr. Grove, and two or three others were standing.

"Well, Michael," said the Chief, "what is it?"

"It's this, sir, and I don't know how much it may be worth. A little while ago a woman drove up in a carriage. I happened to be looking out as the thing stopped right before me. I saw a woman's face at the window, and I saw, plain enough, an astonished kind of look come into it at the sight of the crowd in the vestibule. The driver jumped down and opened the door, but the woman didn't offer to get out. She only sort of sat back in the carriage, and said something to the driver. He turned round and came toward me, and wanted to know what was going on. Of course, I told him that there had been a murder; and then, as he went back to tell the lady, I just ran down the steps, and up to the carriage-door with him. The driver told her just as I came up. I heard him say, 'There's been a murder in the building.' 'My,' says the lady, 'a murder?' She spoke in a kind of mincing, affected way, like some one trying to put on airs; and as I came up she leaned out. 'Policeman,' she says, 'will you escort me through that horrid crowd? I want to call on a friend up stairs.' Of course I would, and she got out and told the driver to wait. When she struck the pavement, she shook herself and looked herself over, like an old bird ruffling itself. She was short, and had lots of white frizzly hair, and big gold-rimmed eye-

glasses. She was dressed and ruffled to kill, and she took hold of my arm, when we came up the steps, as if she was a girl of sixteen, and two timid for any use. I couldn't help grinning to myself—" He stopped and grinned afresh at the remembrance.

"Go on, Michael; get to the point," said the Chief, mildly.

"Well, sir, we came up stairs and into the court, and I'm blessed if she didn't make straight for these rooms."

"Eh!" The Chief was now wide awake.

"Yes, sir. When I saw what she was about, I says, 'I guess you can't call there today, Ma'am.' She hadn't noticed the officer at the door till then. 'This is the place where has been murder,' I says. If she hadn't had hold of my arm I might not have noticed so plain that she give a big start, almost a jump, when I spoke. But she just clutched at my arm tighter than ever, and I could feel her a-shaking all over. She braced herself up in a minit, and she began to peer at the card on the door through her glasses. 'My,' she says, 'is it here—who—who is it?' I said that it was the French actress, Miss Novalis, and her maid—both of them. And then she almost screamed out, 'I—I—have made a mistake,' she says. 'My friends must be on the upper floor. I—I don't know these people.' She turned round then and let go of my arm. Her face was ghostly pale through her powder and paint. 'I'll go up in the elevator,' she says. 'I'm much obliged to you.' I went to the elevator with her, and I gave the boy a wink and went back to speak to the officer at the door. Just then a man came out from here, and he stopped, as I was saying to the officer that I'd guessed I'd just look after that woman a bit. He stopped, the man, I mean, with his back to us, but I kind of spotted him—he was trying to hear what we said."

"How did he look?"

"He? Oh, shabby and middle-aged; kind of an inferior, cringing-acting chap."

"Go on," said the Chief.

"Just as I expected, when the elevator came down, I saw that the woman was in it. I goes straight down stairs, and got to the ground floor just as she was crossing the vestibule toward her carriage. She was hurrying her best, all but running, and she didn't see me, she was so bent on getting into her carriage. As she was stepping in, and while her back was turned, I just ran down the steps and swung myself onto the box. The driver looked a little surprised, but I motioned him to keep mum, and he did. I was afraid she might lead me a chase, but she only rode as far as 42d Street, and, turning there, stopped at the V——Hotel. I slid down from the box, on the off side, before she got out, and she didn't see me. But as I dodged around behind the carriage, I happened to look right inside of a cab just passing, and that shabby man who I had seen come out of these rooms, was in it. I guess he didn't see me, for a little further on he stopped and got out. I wanted to get back here according to orders, so I gave the tip to No. 94, who was on his beat near the place. But I kept an eye upon the shabby fellow, and before I started back here I saw him go into the office of the hotel, as bold as you please."

"Is that all?" asked the Chief.

Again the face of the man broadened into a sly smile.

"Not quite. I thought I was getting back here lively, but I hadn't been here more than a minit, when I happened to turn round, and there was my shabby man, looking as if he had never been anywhere else."

"Umph!" ejaculated the Chief. "And what became of him?"

"He's just gone. That chap ain't so dull as he looks. He ain't a 'special;' I know every one of them. But he's fly, if he is on a wrong scent just now. About two minutes ago I saw him set off *shadowing Polly Cousin!*"

"Shadowing Cousin!" Across the face of the Chief came a new light,—the light of recognition,—and his thoughts went naturally to the note now nestling in his vest-pocket. "I guess he will turn out all right, Michael."

It was as Michael had said. The man with the shabby clothes and the slouching gait, with the red nose, dull eyes, unkempt beard and hair, had set out at the close of the first sitting of the Coroner's inquest, at the heels of Polly Cousin.

As the reader has no doubt guessed, the shabby man was Francis Ferrars, and his reasons for taking, at this time of complications and cross-purposes, an interest in the movements of Polly Cousin, were briefly these:

Ferrars had listened with keenest interest to the history of the "Paget Case," and had arrived at one prompt conclusion: Somewhere, in the working out of this mystery,—for the sudden and unexplained return of Leah Paget had not made it a less mystery in his eyes,—there was a weak place. Not in the working out of any theory or clue; he was convinced of that. All that had been proposed and undertaken, had been thoroughly done. If there had been an error it was not of neglect, but of intent. He could see but one explanation for such a failure, under such circumstances. Somehow, somewhere, by some one, a clue had been dropped, covered up, and then guarded. And it had been done, all of it, by a cool head, a skilled hand.

In the Chief's narrative there had been, naturally, much of Polly Cousin, and much of him also in the notes and reports.

At the time of hearing the story of the search, Ferrars had not seen Cousin, but at the inquest, accident had revealed him. He had heard a reporter beside him address a pale, preoccupied young man as Polly, and then as Cousin, and the pale young man had answered to the name.

During their drive from the office of the Chief to the scene of the murder, Captain Connors had remarked once and again upon the look and manner of Cousin, and wondered at the cause. Ferrars, upon seeing him in the presence of the Coroner, had noted the same look and preoccupation, and something more. He had read, in the tense lines about the mouth, and in the self-forgetful eyes, strong mental perturbation, personal anxiety, that could not have been called forth by the scene about him, provided he were, as he declared himself to be, a stranger to Hortense Novalis. He had seen, too, in his look, in his tone, in his words, when he came forward to identify the photograph of La Belle Fabrice, that he was no friend of the absent and already more than half-suspected actress.

The day was nearly spent, and there was yet much to be done. But before he left the scene of the inquest, the English detective had decided that his first attention should be given to "Mr. Cousin, Professional Reporter and Amateur Detective."

CHAPTER XLII.

AN OPEN-HANDED GAME.

The task of following Cousin, to such a man as Ferrars, was far from difficult. The preoccupied reporter took a cab, never dreaming of being shadowed. Ferrars, in another cab, followed, and found time for some much-needed thinking.

The earliest evening issues of the newspapers were out; and industrious newsboys were already crying shrilly:

"'Ere's your pa-pers. All about the—big mur—der in the Dresden Flats. Full perticklers," etc.

Cousin's first thought, before having taken his place among his brother reporters at the inquest, was to supply the "*Call*" with a characteristic version of the facts, all that was then known, through the convenient telephone. And Ferrars was not surprised to note that his game was not going direct to the office of that vivacious newspaper.

It did surprise him a trifle, however, to note that Cousin emerged from his cab at the door of the "Monitor"—a morning paper of wide circulation. It confirmed him, as well, in his belief that in watching Cousin he was not throwing away valuable time.

After leaving the "Monitor," the two cabs made a swift round of calls. At the end of an hour and a half, Cousin's cab made a short halt before a cafe, where he hastily refreshed himself.

During the hour and a half, Cousin had made brief calls

upon half a dozen newspapers, and now while he ate and drank hurriedly, standing up beside a high counter in the cafe, Ferrars—himself possessing a goodly and fast-increasing appetite—made this memorandum in a tiny book with an attached pencil :

"Mem. To find out Cousin's business at the newspaper offices."

It was growing late, and darkness was falling, when Cousin came out from the cafe and again set out, still followed by the patient detective.

When Cousin stopped again it was at the door of a quiet house in a quiet street, where he occupied a modest pair of rooms, in which he slept and worked and rested, eating, in true Bohemian fashion, at such restaurants as suited the humor or convenience of the moment.

Here he dismissed his cab, and here, too, after a few minutes of waiting inside the vehicle, Ferrars dismissed his. But he did not leave the locality, nor lose sight of the street door behind which Cousin had vanished. He believed that the reporter would soon sally forth again, and, darkness having fallen, he grew bolder, and hovered very near the dwelling, determined not to be baffled by dark house-fronts and dimly-lighted streets.

At the end of fifteen minutes his patience was rewarded. Cousin re-appeared and set out on foot, at a rapid pace, up town. After some moments he stopped, and hailed a passing horse-car. Ferrars, after following it briskly for more than a block, boarded it also, remaining upon the platform at the rear, where he could see Cousin seated inside directly under the rays of the dim illuminator. Cousin had made some changes for the better in his toilet, but the preoccupied look was still upon his

face, and his pallor, it seemed to Ferrars, had increased. From time to time he consulted his watch, as if impatient of the slow-moving car. When he finally arose and rang the bell, the keen-eyed detective took note of his look of relief, and the nervous haste of his movements.

Upon leaving the car, Cousin walked swiftly onward for a block, and then began to slacken his pace. They were now upon a street built up on either side with tall stately blocks and dwellings,—an aristocratic street, smoothly paved, broad, and well lighted.

For two more blocks Cousin kept on, slowly now, and with evident hesitation as he neared the flight of white stone steps leading up to a door a little back from the street, and approached through a low iron gateway. From the stained glass on either side and above the doorway, a soft light was visible; and from windows at one side, a broad band of light glowed across the narrow lawn and out upon the pavement. Just outside of this band of light the detective stopped, while Cousin rang the bell and waited at the top of the broad flight of steps for admittance.

Instantly, almost as if a guest was expected, the soft glow of the hall-lamps increased, and then the door swung open, and a woman-servant appeared and disappeared, as Cousin stepped within and the door closed.

Then, by sort of instinct, the detective moved a few paces forward, and stood at the very edge of the band of light. Suddenly a shadow crossed it, and in the next moment he was in a position to see, through half-drawn curtains, a woman appear—a woman tall and slender and stately, with trailing garments of black, and with a fair face, crowned by a glory of golden hair. How clearly she stood out against the glowing background! It was really but a half dozen steps from pave-

ment to window, and but half a dozen more from the window to the place where the fair woman stood. To the watcher outside it seemed even nearer. It seemed so near, that instinctively he shrank back, lest he, too, should be seen.

Again there was a shadow across the line of light, and then —yes, it was Polly Cousin who had entered. The lady stood still in her place beneath the curtains, but her two hands went out in a gesture of welcome, and were taken by Cousin and held, while he bent toward her and seemed to be speaking rapidly.

For a moment they stood thus; then the hands of the lady seemed to withdraw themselves from his grasp, and she came down the room, walking, it seemed, straight forward in the line of light and toward the window. She put up her hand and took hold of the curtain. For an instant she stood there moveless, not looking out, but, apparently, thinking; and the watcher outside had time to see that her face was very lovely, and very grave. Then the curtain closed, and Ferrars was standing alone without, with nothing to do but retrace his steps as best he could.

As he was about to do this, a coupé came rapidly around the nearest corner, and, before he had taken half a dozen steps, it had stopped at the gate through which Cousin had so lately passed.

Naturally, the detective, standing in the shadow, turned and waited to observe who was the latest arrival.

Like one accustomed to the way, the occupant of the coupé stepped quickly out, and, without a word to the driver, went briskly in through the gate. The lamps of the vehicle were aglow, but, so quick were the movements of the man who alighted, Ferrars could only see that he was tall, well made and well

dressed. The face was turned away, but there was something about the half-seen and swiftly-receding figure that struck him as oddly familiar.

As the newcomer ascended the steps, the watcher drew a step nearer. This time the door did not open so promptly. But when it did, Ferrars recognized at once, in the young man standing under the full light of the hall-chandelier, the one who had occupied, for the past forty-eight hours, so large a place in his thoughts, Max Talfourd!

It was with a start of surprise and some self-congratulation, that Ferrars drew a step still nearer—so near in fact, that he run some little risk of being seen, and near enough to hear the words spoken by the maid, whose voice, not loud but high-keyed and clear, was more distinct than the mellow tones of Talfourd.

"She had not been well all day." This much he heard but without catching the name. "Not at all well, but she would see; and would he come in?"

Talfourd shook his head and remained in the doorway, while the maid-servant vanished.

There was something odd in all this, thought Ferrars, —something like respectful familiarity in the maid's address, and surely some unconventional familiarity in the attitude of Talfourd, as he leaned against the carved door-posts. Evidently he was not sure of an entrance, and Ferrars, noting this, thought fast.

Here before him was a man who was, unconsciously perhaps, being encompassed by a web, the meshes of which might close to crush and ruin the victim. But for him, Ferrars, the picture and the letter, reposing now in his pocket, might be in the hands of the Coroner, and the name of Max Talfourd be

bandied about, with that of Frederick Quinlan, as a possible murderer. To save this man, the friend of his friend, he had crossed the ocean. And now, here was Fate bringing them together in unexpected places! What had Max Talfourd, his client, and the lover of Leah Paget, to do with Hortense Novalis? and Polly Cousin? or with the lady, who, evidently, by her reception of him, was Cousin's friend?

The detective's thoughts flew fast, and, by the time the maid was back with her answer, his mind was made up.

It was a negative answer, and Ferrars only caught the last few words—something about the hope of being better; able to see him tomorrow. Then Max turned and came down the steps, less hurriedly than he had ascended them.

Before he had lifted his foot from the last of the flight, Ferrars was at the gate. When Max came up he put out his hand, and said, in a tone too low for the driver to hear:

"Mr. Talfourd, one moment, please. This is a lucky accident. I have a message of importance from Mr. Ferrars."

Max stepped back a pace, and seemed trying to scan his face through the darkness. Then he called to the driver, "John, turn your horse around." It was a clever thought, and Ferrars smiled his admiration. "Who are you?" added Max, as the driver gathered up his reins to obey.

"Softly," murmured the other. "Don't disown me because of my toggery. I'm Ferrars, and I want you to take me in and go with me straight to the rooms of Sir Felix Wyntoun."

As the carriage turned about, and the rays of the moving lamps fell upon the face he turned toward them, for the benefit of Max, that young man started and drew back. But a look straight into his eyes, from orbs that were now neither dim nor weak, in spite of their circling rims of red, reassured

him, and he said, after a brief hesitation, and for the benefit of the coachman :

"Why, to be sure ! Glad to have met you. Get in with me, by all means."

"Thank you," said Ferrars, in double meaning ; I'm glad of the opportunity."

As they seated themselves and were driven rapidly townward, Ferrars said to himself,

"The die is cast. Now it must be, between us two, an open-handed game. Be he guilty or innocent, I am committed to this man, to play this game out, to solve the problem, so far as he is concerned, with cards on the table."

For a few moments they rode on in silence ; then Ferrars spoke. "Do you know the hour ?"

Max started as if from a reverie.

"No," he said ; and then—"We can easily tell." He produced a match, struck it, and held it for Ferrars to consult his watch, while by its light he scrutinized the make-up of the detective with a curious look of interest and amusement.

"It's early yet," said Ferrars ; "only half-past eight. I have not broken my fast since luncheon time, and a hasty luncheon at that. Can you take me some place where I can eat, and talk with you as well ? The more modest and inconspicuous, the better. I want to get out of this disguise, too, as soon as possible. I've an engagement for half-past nine. Like yourself, I mean to call upon a lady."

While he talked, Ferrars was wondering, "Does he know that Leah Paget is found ?"

"I know the very place," said Max, cordially. "I shouldn't mind joining you. But you will have to identify yourself. I don't more than half believe in you yet."

"Oh, I'll vouch for myself," said Ferrars, lightly, "and explanations will be in order. Do you know, if you hadn't dropped down upon me, come to the rescue as it were, I should have been lost."

"No, really?" said Max. "I suppose I must not ask you how you ever got up there?"

"I'm willing to be catechized over our chops or steak," replied Ferrars; "and to catechize."

"I'll do my share of confessing," replied Max, lightly.

Their faces were dimly visible to each other through the darkness, but, as Max spoke, the detective noted the fine mellow tone, and said to himself, "The fellow has a rare voice; a shade more of softness and sweetness would make it too fine." Ferrars had "ideas" about voices.

"I wrote you a note," he said, after a moment of silence. "Am I to suppose that you did not receive it?"

"I have not seen it," replied Max. "Where did you send it —to the club?"

"No. It was written in great haste, and I used the address that came first, as I had written them in my note-book,—your home address."

"Then I dare say my father has received it; our names are the same, and unless—" He broke off abruptly to ask, "Was it anything special?"

"Well, it was rather urgent. Have we far to go?"

"No," replied Max, "we are just arriving." He leaned forward to give an order to the driver, and in a moment they whirled around a corner, and the coupé came to a sudden stop.

"Here we are," said Max, springing out. "We'll have a private room, and—" to the driver, "John, you will wait."

CHAPTER XLIII.

"NOT ACCOUNTED FOR."

Ferrars said little, when they were seated together in a tiny room, until something between luncheon and a hasty dinner, which came up promptly, was set before them, and they had dismissed the waiter.

Max had been very busy scanning the disguise of the detective, and he openly expressed his surprise and admiration.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Ferrars, carelessly. "It's an art, like many other things. Master the details, and you'd be surprised at the simplicity of it all. We mustn't waste words now, Mr. Talfourd, and I want to ask some questions. I wish you would take for granted their well-meaning and their pertinence, even when you don't quite comprehend."

"I'm too much at your mercy, Mr. Ferrars, not to do that, and too anxious for your help, besides."

"Then, I'll take you at your word. Of course, you have heard of the double murder?"

"Yes, of course. I don't think I would have gone wild over M'lle Novalis or her acting, but it's a shocking thing. Did you ever see her?"

"I saw her today"—with his eyes upon the other's face.

"Oh! Then, of course, you've been at the inquest?" Max began to look honestly puzzled.

"Did you know Hortense Novalis?" asked the detective, ignoring the implied question.

"Yes and no. I met her once, under rather peculiar circumstances."

"Are you willing to state them?"

"I can't," answered Max, simply; "it's the affair of another."

"Oh! and you're under a promise?"

Max looked his surprise. "Really!" he began, "I don't see—"

Ferrars stopped him with a gesture. "One moment," he said. "I have been at the inquest—I've taken the case."

"Pardon me. Do you mean that you have pledged yourself to find the murderer of Hortense Novalis and her maid?"

Ferrars nodded.

Max Talfourd's face plainly spoke his displeasure.

"And what, then," he began, hotly, "am I to expect? Mr. Ferrars, do you count the finding and saving of such a girl as Leah Paget, if she is yet alive, or the clearing-up of the mystery and avenging her, if she is dead, a less important, a less fine deed, than finding the murderer of such a woman as Hortense Novalis? We have a city police especially trained for that work."

"So I have been told," replied Ferrars, drily. "What if I should say that the road which leads to the solution of one of these mysteries will probably end in the other?"

"I should say," said Max, with a stern face, "that it were utterly impossible."

"Then you would say a very unwise thing, and might, some day, be constrained to take it back. I don't think you need hesitate about telling all you know of Hortense Novalis; one-half has already been told, before the Coroner's jury, by the janitor."

"The janitor?" repeated Max, as if doubting the evidences of his ears. "What can the janitor, any janitor, know about a matter—" He stopped short, and sat staring at Ferrars.

"All the janitor knows is that, on a certain day, a lady—a very pretty young lady—called upon Hortense Novalis; that, very soon after, you called also, and that, very soon again, you came away together, yourself and the pretty young lady. That, as you were about to leave, Mr. Frederick Quinlan came, and you exchanged greetings, hastily and somewhat cavalierly. Mr. Quinlan has also testified, and no doubt has given the gentlemen of the jury the benefit of his rushlight. I did not stay to hear Mr. Quinlan's last testimony, knowing that I would have a verbatim report of the same, and of all the other proceedings. Shall I tell you about the inquest?" Max bowed his head. He was bursting with displeasure. "I'll have to make it brief," said Ferrars. "But I'll try to have it clear."

And brief and clear it was. All was told concerning the finding of the bodies, the survey of the rooms, and the inquest up to the time when Ferrars withdrew,—all but the finding of the letter signed Max, and the photograph under the pillow, and the envelope found in the ashes of the grate.

When all was told, Max Talfourd sat looking squarely into the face of the narrator—an image of amazement, and of nothing else. When he spoke it was the turn of Ferrars to be surprised.

"By Jove!" he ejaculated, "this will be a terrible blow to Sir Felix." Evidently, for the moment, Max had forgotten his own troubles in those of his friend.

"Yes," admitted the detective.

"Does he know?" asked Max.

"In part—not so much, however, as I have told you." He waited a moment for the next word from Max, but that young man sat silently before him, evidently lost in serious thought. "I think you must see, now, why it would be well for you to tell me everything you can concerning that visit to Hortense Novalis; your part in it and hers."

"By 'her' you mean, do you not, La Belle Fabrice?"

"Yes."

Max Talfourd leaned across the table and looked earnestly into the face of Ferrars.

"Mr. Ferrars," he said, "I can't do it; not until I am sure that I shall not be doing her an injury by speaking out. For my own part in that affair, I care little. It was my first, last, and only visit to that place,—the only one time that I ever exchanged a word with Hortense Novalis. But I won't break a promise until the reason for keeping it is removed. I'm sorry that I can't help you, but I must see Sir Felix and Fred Quinlan, before I open my lips upon that subject."

Ferrars got up and stood before him.

"I have told the story with some reservations," he said, slowly, while he watched the face of Max for any sign of alarm or surprise. "The part that I have held in reserve concerns you closely."

Max started. "Ah, yes!" he said, "something about—about—about—"

"About the possibility of finding one solution for the two cases. Mr. Talfourd, I have not had this matter of Miss Paget's disappearance long under advisement, but I have noted one coincidence. You see, I have already gone over the reports and the notes in the case with Captain Connors. Has it occurred to you that Miss Leah Paget disappeared upon the

night that you made this mysterious first and last call, in company with La Belle Fabrice, upon Hortense Novalis?"

Max was staring at him dully; he was now in that condition when he would accept any surprise, and reply to any question, quite stolidly. He was like a man half dazed and struggling with his memory.

"No," he said.

"And are you aware," went on the detective, mercilessly, "that, during the search for the missing young lady, you have been constantly under surveillance by the police, both you and young Quinlan?"

"No," uttered Max again.

"Then, of course you are not aware that upon the records of the case, you stand as *unaccounted for* on that night? I think I can quote the record. It reads thus: 'Up to the present date, the whereabouts of Maxwell Talfourd and Frederick Quinlan, on the night of the disappearance, and between the hours of seven o'clock and midnight, have not been accounted for.'"

For a long moment Max sat staring straight before him, the dazed look still on his face. But at last his brow cleared and his eyes lighted up. He arose and stood before Ferrars, grave and self-possessed.

"I've been blind and a fool!" he said. "Mr. Ferrars, pardon me, and do not throw me over yet. I must see Sir Felix and Fred Quinlan. I cannot say more now."

"When you have seen them, Mr. Talfourd, and are ready to talk freely with me, I will show you the link which connects yourself, and perhaps Miss Paget, with this case of most foul murder. As I have said, I have taken the case; otherwise, I could not do what I am doing now out of regard for you. I

am disposed to be your friend, and I shall spare you all I can of unpleasant notoriety. But you must be frank with me, perfectly frank."

"When I am able to open my lips, I shall be as frank as you please," replied Max. "But you are speaking now, Mr. Ferrars, in riddles."

"So it seems. May I ask a question or two upon another topic?"

"You may."

"Do you know Cousin, the reporter?"

"I know him, yes. A nodding acquaintance, nothing more."

"Is he a society man?"

"Cousin? I should think not; at least, I have never heard of him or met him anywhere."

"Is he, in any sense, a 'ladies' man?'"

"I know Mr. Cousin as an able reporter; pushing, not too well bred but clever; and also as an amateur detective of some ability. Nothing more."

"Thanks, for so much. Now bear with me. I want to ask you the name of the lady whom you called on tonight."

Max looked his astonishment but answered promptly.

"The name of the lady is Mrs. Sara Volney. She is the widow of Gregory Volney, a cousin of my mother's."

"Is Mrs. Volney an elderly person?"

"By no means. Mrs. Volney is young and very beautiful."

"Thank you, Mr. Talfourd. When do you expect to see Mr. Quinlan?"

"Immediately. I am pretty sure to find him at home tonight."

"I should think so. Can you contrive to get a note into his hands, in such a way that he will not suspect that it comes from you?"

"Easily. I can give it to a messenger on the way."

"Mr. Quinlan must not know that we have met, you understand?"

"Certainly not."

"And when shall I see you again?"

"The sooner the better—after I have seen Quinlan and Sir Felix."

"Then I will communicate with you as soon at I am at leisure. By the way, have you had any word from the Pagets today?"

"No," said Max. And Ferrars knew that Mrs. Paget was keeping her word to him.

CHAPTER XLIV.

A BOOTLESS QUEST.

It was half-past nine when the English detective appeared in the rooms of Sir Felix Wyntoun. In the interval, he had dropped his shabby garb, with its accompanying artistic facial touches, and was the original, quiet, fine-mannered Ferrars. Besides accomplishing this transformation, he had written a letter of excuses and explanations, to the Chief of Police.

He found Sir Felix, wobegone and anxious, restlessly pac-

ing the floor, an unlighted cigar gripped nervously between his teeth.

"Oh, here you are at last!" was his greeting. "I thought something had happened to you. By Jove, I'm awfully cut up, Ferrars!"

"That won't do, my dear fellow. You must not show the white feather. Come, have you prepared the way? I've a carriage at the door."

Sir Felix caught up his hat. "Yes, I've prepared the way," he said, "an hour ago or more. They'll be only too glad to talk with you. Madam Congreve is in mortal terror of a summons to appear before the Coroner."

In his note to Sir Felix, posted in the forenoon while on his way to the home of Abner Paget, Ferrars had instructed his friend to call upon Madam Congreve, and prepare her for an interview. Sir Felix was only to name him as a friend who might be able to serve them, and who was to be trusted, and to make an appointment for the evening, leaving the result to Ferrars and to circumstances. This note Sir Felix did not read until after his visits, first to Madam Congreve and then to the scene of the double murder, whence Ferrars had met him, and sent him away with a word of caution for future use. From the house on Lexington Avenue he had gone back to Madam Congreve, and so the letter and the appointment had both been delayed. Sir Felix, coming home to dine, there found his letter, reading it and then dining in feverish haste, to rush back, for the third time that day, to Madam Congreve, in whom he had found both friend and consoler.

He told Ferrars these things as they drove onward, and added, "Manager Horton has been there. He told us about the inquest. Madam Congreve almost quarrelled with him.

She blames him for urging Fabrice beyond endurance. I think the Manager himself is conscience-stricken.'

"Has Madam expressed an opinion?" asked Ferrars.

"About what?"

"The probable reason for the disappearance of her friend?"

"Madam is as much in the dark as I am."

Ferrars smiled. There was an impatient ring in the voice of his friend, a token, to him, of nervousness and anxiety ill-concealed.

"It won't do to lose your hold upon yourself, old man," he said, kindly. "Remember your position here among strangers, and that a yet more trying ordeal may come. You and young Talfourd seem somehow to be changing places. By the bye, he is likely to drop in on you soon, perhaps before we get back."

"I provided for that," said Sir Felix, "knowing that he is likely to drop down upon me at any time."

"Have you seen him today?"

"No; if he comes he will wait."

"Sir Felix," said Ferrars, suddenly, "have you made the acquaintance of Talfourd's family?"

"Yes."

"Tell me something about them."

"There's not much to tell. Max Talfourd is an only son. His mother is a lady, and something of an invalid; a sweet gentlewoman whom I admire immensely. The father, too, I like much. He's a strong man; clear-headed, capable, genial. I wish that he and his son would pull together better. They've differed a little about the young lady, Miss Paget. I'd advise you to know Talfourd, senior."

"I mean to know him," said Ferrars. "Is that all? No relatives?"

"That's all of the family. Relatives—let me see. There's Mrs. Volney. She's a connection by marriage, I believe. Lives in town, in a fine establishment of her own."

"A widow?"

"Yes, and a very handsome woman. I've quite an admiration for Mrs. Volney."

"Indeed; and do you know her well?"

"I do not think it would be easy to know Mrs. Volney well. Talfourd introduced me and we have been there a little together. By Jove," he ejaculated, in that peculiarly boyish fashion, very common to him when he was conversing with a friend and familiar, "but Max Talfourd's a lucky fellow and a cool one. He doesn't half appreciate his fair cousin."

"Meaning Mrs. Volney?"

"Yes."

"Is she his cousin?"

"I believe she's the widow of a cousin of his mother's. She's a very reserved woman, and dignified, in a certain gentle way that's very charming. I've fancied once or twice that she was fond of Max."

"Quite natural," said Ferrars, carelessly. "Young Talfourd is a most admirable fellow. I like him myself."

"I'm glad to hear you say it. He will not disappoint you. He's as true as steel."

Ferrars made no further comment upon Max Talfourd, but in a moment he asked carelessly, as if the question was of little importance:

"Do you know that young fellow, Cousin—Polly Cousin they call him. A reporter, or something, isn't he?"

"I haven't the honor of his acquaintance," said Sir Felix. And then, with a short laugh, he added, "I've seem him, how-

ever. There's a funny little incident connected with that fellow. I will ask Madam to tell it to you some day."

"Can't you tell it?"

"I don't feel in the mood. It's about an attempt the fellow made to interview La Belle Fabrice. I suppose she is indebted to that for the only unfavorable line I ever saw in print concerning her ability as an actress. Cousin is a privileged *feullitonist* for the '*Evening Call.*'"

"Do you mean," said Ferrars, quickly, "that, because of any disappointment or cavalier treatment at the hands of your friend, this fellow has taken a stand against her?" His tone was that of one who has a reason for the question he asks, and Sir Felix recognized its earnestness.

"How you catch at trifles, old man! Wait until you hear the story, and then judge for yourself. We're arriving, don't you see?"

The carriage was indeed drawing up to the pavement, and the two young men sprang out and hurried in, in time to enter the elevator on its upward trip.

At the door of entrance to the apartments of Fabrice and Madam, a servant was standing. He had a bunch of keys in his hand, and looked inquiringly at Sir Felix, with whose comings and goings he had become familiar, and bowed respectfully as the young man paused before the door.

"You're too late,s ir," he said.

"Too late!" Sir Felix frowned slightly. "I believe we are expected." The man was standing directly before the door. "Be so good as to stand aside, or open the door and announce us."

"The door is locked, sir," said the man. "They've gone. I've just been locking up, according to orders. They've been gone half an hour, anyway."

"Gone!—they!" began Sir Felix, excitedly.

But Ferrars touched him lightly upon the shoulder. "Be careful," he whispered. "Let me make these inquiries. Calm yourself." Then he turned to the servant. "Did Madam Congreve leave no message?"

"None that I know of, sir. I guess they didn't have any too much time."

"Did you see them set out?"

"Yes, sir. I carried Madam's satchel and the maid's shawl-strap down to the carriage, and she told me to lock the rooms, just as they were, until she came back. I think she was going to say something more, but the gentleman broke in and said they were losing time."

"The gentleman—yes. Did you know the gentleman?"

"No, sir. I never saw him but once before, and that was last night, when he came to see Miss Fabrice."

"Eh!" broke out Sir Felix; "when he came to see whom?"

Again the hand of Ferrars', this time quick and firm in its grip upon his arm, silently checked him.

"I'm afraid we've got our appointments mixed," Ferrars said, lightly. "I suppose the lady didn't say when she was coming back?"

"No, sir. I've told you all that was said. They was all in a hurry."

"Yes; thank you." At this point a piece of silver was adroitly slipped into the servant's hand. Ferrars took his friend's arm as if about to turn away. Then he faced about suddenly. "By the bye, what kind of a person was it that came for Madam Congreve? Can you describe him?"

"Why, not more than to say that he was an oldish man, with grey hair and a smooth face. Quite tall he was, and very thin. I remember that he wore his hat on the back of his head, and it looked too big for him."

"Thank you." Ferrars felt his companion start at the mention of the tilted hat, and strain toward the elevator, like a restive hound in leash. "Did you see him come and go last night?"

"I saw him come. I happened to be in the way of the reception-room, the little one down stairs; he didn't come up last night. He gave me a card and told me to hand it to Miss Fabrice and to no one else. If she wasn't there I was to fetch it back."

"Yes. Of course. I was sure it was all right," gripping hard on the arm that was silently pulling at him. "The lady was in," he asked?

"Yes. I went to the door of her private room. It opens into the hall, there." He indicated the door with a stubby and work-worn finger. "I give her the card and she jest shut her door softly like, and ran right down stairs to the reception-room."

"How long did the gentleman stay?"

"I don't know, sir. I went on about my work. I didn't see either of them again that night. And tonight I only saw the tall gentleman, as they went away, all three, in the carriage."

"Come," broke in Sir Felix, "we are wasting time!" The sudden removal of Ferrars' hand from his arm caused him to turn, and brought him in a measure back to his senses. But not until the servant had noticed his excitement.

"Maybe, I've been talking too much," the man began, deprecatingly. "I know there's been a kind of mystery going on. But I thought it was all right—this gentleman," meaning Sir Felix, "being such a friend here."

"It *is* all right; perfectly right," said Ferrars, briskly.

"But let me caution you not to talk about these things to strangers. The ladies, when they return, might not like it, you know."

By this time Sir Felix was sufficiently alive to press a second generous tip into the willing hand of the servant, and they re-entered the elevator, and thence into the waiting carriage. And now Sir Felix took the bit in his teeth.

"Driver," he said, "take us to the Jefferson Market Court as quickly as you can." Then throwing himself back in the carriage, "Do not countermand me, Frank. That fellow has described a person I know. In fact, I introduced him to Fabrice, at her request. He's a lawyer. He may tell us what all this means."

For a few moments both were silent; then Ferrars spoke, slowly and with a note of sternness in his tone.

"When we have paid this call of yours, I'm going to trouble you to sit down, collect your scattered wits, and do some sober thinking. One of the worst things that we professional truth-seekers have to contend with, is the habit most people have of forgetting and ignoring trifles. I want you to pass in mental review all that has transpired under your eye, all that has been said in your hearing, concerning La Belle Fabrice, connected with her, or said by her. All, mind. I believe if I could sift the minds of you three fellows, Talfourd, Quinlan, and yourself, I would find enough material to bring this chaos into something like order, and have a firm foundation to begin upon, if nothing more."

"If there's anything in my addled brain," said Sir Felix, meekly, "that can't be got out by the ordinary pumping process, I'm willing to be put upon the rack, and if that won't do, I'll let you try vivisection."

"Oh, I know how to get at *you*," said Ferrars, with a short laugh. "And I'm tolerably sure of Talfourd, after he has satisfied his scruples, and gets thoroughly aroused to the necessities and possible dangers of the complication. I'm not so sure of Quinlan. What are you going to do when you get to your lawyer, eh?"

"Turn him over to you," replied Sir Felix, promptly.

But again Fate frowned upon them. Sir Felix toiled up stairs to the door of the lawyer's office, only to read, by the glare of an electric burner, these words, scrawled in ink upon a card that was nailed against the door-post,

"*Out of town for a week.*"

CHAPTER XLV.

THE ALTERNATIVE.

When Polly Cousin arrived at the door of the stately old house where his welcome was so ready and so cordial, he was in a frame of mind not compatible with caution, or any of the cool and comfortable emotions. His heart was throbbing in a manner quite novel to him, and extremely uncomfortable. His head, too, was throbbing; the big veins on either temple stood out boldly, showing dark through the white rim of his forehead. His eyes were hot and strangely brilliant; his cheeks burned, and his throat and mouth felt parched. He had begun the journey pale and listless, but every step that

brought him nearer the beautiful, stately calm woman, brought with it fire and fever, fear and anger, self-pity and suspense.

When he entered the drawing-room and took the two hands of Sara Volney, bending over them, as Ferrars had seen from his post of observation without, he was not the cool, practical, commonplace, awkward Polly Cousin who had first entered these rooms only a few weeks ago. He was a stronger man and a weaker ; a better and a worse. He had lost something which he was never to regain, and gained that which—bite and torture, writhe and sting him as it would—he would never part with if he could, and could not if he would.

What he did, as witnessed by the detective without, seemed a delightful and gallant act of homage. What he said, in a voice husky and tremulous, was :

"You got my note?" He held her slender fingers in his hot grasp, and his burning eyes searched her face.

"Yes," she murmured, softly. "Come into the library."

She led the way, and he followed. But when she held back the *portiere*, as on his first visit, and waited again for him to pass, he did not enter humbly, obeying her gesture and awaiting her royal word. Instead, he took the hand that hung by her side, and held it, while with the disengaged other hand he drew the curtains together. Then, with a tightening grasp upon her fingers, he led her forward to a divan at the extreme end of the long room, seated her thereon, and, still holding her hand, sat down at her side.

For a long moment his eyes searched her face—that serene face, turned toward him with a look of inquiry and nothing more. After a moment, she gently drew away her hand, but kept her calm gaze upon him.

"What is it?" she asked, quietly. "Something has happened. Is it not so?"

Still he continued to gaze, and ignoring her question, asked another:

"Do you remember our first interview—here—in this room?"

"Surely," she said, "I remember it; remember it in detail. Do you?"

"I remember so well," he said, slowly, "that I believe I shall take that one memory with me beyond the grave, if there is a beyond. I have not forgotten it, sleeping or waking, for one moment since. One thing—one thing—you said to me—I wonder if you have forgotten it?"

"What was it?" she asked, softly. The surprise was gone out of her face now, but no indignation, no pity, no look whereby to index her thoughts, came to take its place. She did not draw away from him, nor in any way seek to widen the distance between them. She simply sat erect where he had placed her, with her white hands lying lightly in her lap.

"You said—" He breathed the words rather than spoke them, and he, too, was unchanged in his attitude, even to the hand that lay as she had left it, after withdrawing her own. "You said that there was no loneliness like that of a lonely woman, no helplessness like hers. I do not quote your words exact, but that was your meaning—was it not?"

"Yes," she said, "that was my meaning." A little sigh parted her thin red lips.

"Yes, it was your meaning. I could not mistake that. It has been in my thoughts night and day ever since." Again he put out his hand but only to lay it on the palm of hers. "You

are a lonely woman," he said. "And, in most things, very helpless?"

"True."

"When a woman is very lonely and very helpless," he went on, almost pathetically; "when she has no relatives and no friends—real friends I mean; not surface friends—when such a woman is most helpless and most in need of a friend, she feels and knows that because of such need she, herself, must do what, but for this, she would never do. If to such a woman, in such a moment, there should come one who is as far below her as is the mole from the eagle, the earth from the shining stars; who is nothing and worse than nothing; uncouth, untaught, unloved ever, but who brings to her adoration; a life to lay down at her bidding; head and hands, heart and soul, only to do her will, to stand between her and all the world—if to such a woman such a man should come, offering her all, only that he may serve her in prosperity and save her in time of need, asking only a little kindness, only to be near her—what, tell me, what would she say to him?"

A long moment of strangely weird silence, in which two statues could not be stiller—he, with a hand upon hers, each looking the other in the face.

"I think," she said, very slowly and very softly, "if she were wise, and very sure of his entire devotion, such a woman would hold such a friend as her dearest possession, and never let him go."

Suddenly, then, he dropped upon his knees beside her, taking both her hands in his, lifting first one and then the other, looking at each caressingly, and then clasping them both together between his own.

"Listen," he said. "I am not going to speak of myself. I

am nothing; nothing but the screen, the watch-dog, the safeguard between you and all harm—*all*, remember. From the moment when I first looked upon you, dazed and bewildered, in the house of Abner Paget, the world has held for me yourself, and nothing more. I have lived and worked, eaten and slept, in a dream. Day and night my thoughts have been of you, to be near you, to save you. I have lived only when in your presence, and I have impiously prayed that Leah Paget might never be found, if her return would shut your door to me. At first I lived upon seeing you now and then, when I was permitted. By and bye that was not enough, and I began making a shrine of the place that held you. I came here at night, and every night. I soon learned which was your window, and I came each night to worship before that. It was my climax, for which I lived through the earlier hours of the day with what patience I could. Last evening, when my work was done, it was yet early, only half-past ten. I am a light sleeper, and accustomed to awake at will. So, to while away the time, I threw myself across my bed and went to sleep. It was a thing that never happened to me before, but I overslept, and when I awakened it was past midnight."

He stopped short and looked down at her hands. They had stirred in his, he thought. They were even quivering a little. He noted it with dull curiosity, as if they had been his captured birds. Then there was another movement, and he looked up. She was bending a little toward him, her lips slightly apart in a pensive half-smile.

"Yes," he went on, "it was half-past one, and I had a long walk before I could reach here. It was after two o'clock when I halted opposite your house to watch, as usual, my little hour."

Again he stopped short to look at her, half expectantly, half

like a culprit. She was still bending toward him, still faintly smiling, and the look in his face changed slowly to one of surprise. Then, softly, and with the smile deepening a little, she withdrew one of the hands he had held, and placed it upon his, the palm downward, the slender fingers closing over his own.

"Go on," she said, gently.

But he remained silent. He was looking a thousand questions, but his tongue refused to frame them.

"Your little hour," she murmured. "To think of it! And did you watch out that little hour?"

"Yes," huskily. "That, and more. I stayed at first because I thought, I feared— Oh," he broke out, fiercely, "do you think I was spying? Do you think that I came, night after night, to watch—you?"

She breathed a little low sigh.

"I believe nothing of you that is not good," she said. "Think of it! When I have been sitting here alone, feeling all life pass me by, leaving me solitary—to think that you were there, that I might have put up my window and called to you, and you would have come."

The fire in his face, that had been slowly dying out, flamed up again. "Would you have called me?" he asked, breathlessly.

She lifted the hand that had rested upon his, placed it upon his forehead and bent his head back, and so looked down into his eyes.

"Yes," she said. "I would have called you, and you would have come, and would have helped me, and been able to understand, but now—"

"But now—" he cried. "It is not too late! You need me now; you may need me even more."

"SUDDENLY, THEN, HE DROPPED UPON HIS KNEES BESIDE HER, TAKING BOTH HER HANDS IN HIS." Page 326.

She stopped him by a gesture, and drew back a little.

"Listen," she said. "As I would have trusted you in my time of need, you must trust me now. Do you remember what I asked of you at our first meeting? The time of trial has come. It is not for myself that I shall ask anything. When you have served me, and trusted me, as I have served and trusted my friend, I shall know how much I may trust you. Do not think that I have not known your worth from the first. Do not think I do not recognize the value of such a friendship as you are capable of. Do not think I shall not regret you, if you go; that I shall not be doubly dreary."

She removed the hand from his head, and withdrew the other from his grasp, drawing back as she did it, and away from him.

"I want your friendship," she said, sadly. "I want it, but I cannot buy it at the expense of a friend. Once I could have opened my whole heart to you. Now, until my lips are unsealed, you must take me upon trust—or leave me."

She made a movement as if to rise, and he staggered to his feet. She sat still for a moment, and then stood erect before him.

"I can forgive you," she said, "for you do not understand, but I cannot ask you to spare me now, even for friendship's sake." She put out her hand, "Good-bye," she whispered.

That aroused him from his dizzy stupor.

"Good-bye?" he echoed. "No. I choose the alternative." She drew back "Do you hear me! Let come what will, I choose the alternative—I choose you!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

A MEETING WITH SIR FELIX.

The strong will and clear, cool reasoning of Ferrars brought Sir Felix Wyntoun out of what had become something of a frenzy, so pained, bewildered, and alarmed was he at the succession of strange events rapidly transpiring about him, all so closely connected with Fabrice. During the homeward drive he had time to tell Ferrars how he had, himself, met with Mr. Clarkson at the home of Max Talfourd, and how, later, at her request, he had presented the lawyer to Fabrice.

"What a wretched complication!" he exclaimed, finally. "It grows more and more painful, don't you think? And how long we may have to wait for a solution!" He sighed deeply.

"So much for your wisdom!" rejoined Ferrars. "I take this departure of Madam and the lawyer as a good augury."

"Of what?"

"Of the ability of your friend, Fabrice, to explain away doubt or suspicion when the time comes. Is it not natural to conclude that she, having found a reason for absenting herself, has now sent for her friends?"

When they arrived, Sir Felix was accosted by his servant, who seemed to have been waiting for his return.

"There is a gentleman for you, sir," he said to his master. "He said that he was expected and would wait."

"Talfourd, of course," said Sir Felix, and led the way with eager haste.

But it was the elder Talfourd who arose upon their entrance, and Sir Felix, hiding his surprise as best he could, hastened to give him cordial greeting. Before he could present Ferrars, his visitor said:

"I am here, Sir Felix, in response to a note signed 'Ferrars,' and asking me to meet you here. I don't quite understand it."

"If Sir Felix will present me," spoke Ferrars, "I will explain."

Wonderingly, Sir Felix performed the introduction, and his surprise was not lessened by the manner of the elder Talfourd. He bowed formally and with a set, unsmiling face. He did not speak nor extend a hand in greeting.

Somewhat embarrassed, Sir Felix turned to his friend. But Ferrars was by no means ruffled at the cool greeting, and the coldly-inquiring glance of Mr. Talfourd. Instead, he was standing before him, scanning his face closely and with an air of interest. At the end of his momentary survey, he turned and said:

"If you will kindly allow me a few words with Mr. Talfourd, Sir Felix, I think I can explain myself."

"With all my heart," rejoined Sir Felix. "You will find me, when wanted, in my dressing-room."

When they were alone, Mr. Talfourd took a letter from his pocket and laid it upon the table at his side, near which Ferrars was standing.

"Are you the author of that note, sir?" he asked.

Ferrars bent over the note for a momentary glance but did not touch it.

"Yes," he said, then, "I am the author of that note, and I see that I have blundered. I intended it for Mr. Max Talfourd, your son."

The elder man took up the note; his hand shook a little, and Ferrars could see that his lips trembled. Again he studied the face of the man before him attentively. Then, as if he had found there what he sought, he turned, and drew forward a chair.

"I am not sorry for this opportunity, although the mistake that brought it about was a possibility that I never contemplated," said Ferrars. "I have made the acquaintance of your son, under rather peculiar circumstances, and I beg you to believe that it was a friendly motive that inspired that letter."

"A friendly motive?" Mr. Talfourd now took up that note and read it aloud:

"DEAR SIR: I am just from the scene of the murder in Dresden Flats. I cannot see you until this evening, at a late hour perhaps. But then, do not fail to be at the rooms of our friend, Sir Felix. In the interval, do not rashly put yourself in the way of a possible summons before the Coroner's jury. Yours,

"FERRARS"

"Yes," said Ferrars, when Mr. Talfourd had finished reading the note, "I don't often put such plain words into writing. It's seldom safe. But the emergency was an exceptional one. Time was of value, and your son and I am not yet sufficiently accustomed to each other to talk in riddles, or correspond in cipher."

"You are talking in riddles to me," said Mr. Talfourd.

Ferrars was, in his way, a proud man, and something within him rose in rebellion against the haughty look and tone of the

man before nim. He made a quick gesture toward the door that separated them from Sir Felix.

"I believe that Sir Felix Wyntoun is fairly well known to you, is he not?" he said.

Talfourd bowed assent.

"Then do me the favor to go to him in there, and ask who I am and why I am here."

After a long look at the author of this strange request, Mr. Talfourd arose, and went slowly into the next room, with something like a smile upon his face. When he came back, the smile had changed to a look not so humorous but, to Ferrars, far more satisfactory,—the look which a self-respecting man gives to a man whom he respects.

"Mr. Ferrars," he said, "Sir Felix has convinced me and converted me. I offer you a thousand apologies." He extended his hand, and Ferrars took it with cordial frankness.

"I do not imagine that Sir Felix has solved the riddle, however," he said.

"No." Mr. Talfourd resumed his seat, and his face was again grave and anxious. "You can scarcely wonder at my surprise upon reading that note," he said. "I will not conceal from you that I at once concluded it to be a mistake. In fact, I had evidence that it was a mistake, that it was meant for my son,—evidence quite as mysterious as this note of yours, and even more disagreeable."

"Now," said the detective, "it is I who do not understand."

"It came in the form of another letter," said Mr. Talfourd, "and that, too, no doubt, was meant for my son."

"In all my experience," Ferrars said, thoughtfully, "I think I never encountered a case, or cases, so complicated, so

curiously blended together. I came, at first, to serve your son, for my friend's sake. Having made his acquaintance, I am now anxious to serve him for his own. But you must see that I am hampered, as an American, a New Yorker, perhaps, would not be. I need some one in whom to confide and upon whom to rely; some one, I mean, besides the police. I do not lack help in that direction, thanks to your very serviceable Chief."

"Connors is a fine fellow," assented Mr. Talfourd. "I wish I might presume to offer my services."

"If you do," said Ferrars, "I shall probably accept." He glanced at his watch and then at his *vis-a-vis*. "You said something of another letter?" he said, inquiringly.

Mr. Talfourd looked doubtful, and more and more anxious. "I don't know what to say or do about that. Of course, it is my son's letter."

"Perhaps I had better tell you," said Ferrars, "that I parted from your son not long ago. I think we shall see him here soon."

"Does he know—?" The father stopped short and left the question unasked.

"We had had little time for conversation. I had an appointment, and so had he."

"Mr. Ferrars, I must ask a question. You speak in your note of the Dresden Flats murder. In Heaven's name, is my son to be in any way mixed with that?"

Ferrars noted his look and tone. "Why do you ask," questioned.

"Because—because—I may as well tell you; it will ease my mind. That other letter to my son was from—" He stopped again.

"Was it from Hortense Novalis?" Ferrars asked, quietly.

Something, a sudden turn of his own thoughts, the stress of the occasion, the look and tone of Ferrars, or perhaps, a simple human instinct, turned the scale against further indecision on the part of Mr. Talfourd.

"I want you to observe, sir," he said, firmly, almost sternly, "that I have full confidence in my son, even in the face of the fact that such a letter as you saw the need to send him, was preceded by a note from the woman who was murdered last night."

"Then you have seen the papers?"

"Yes, I have seen the papers. And you—you have seen the facts. May I ask, are you able to tell me any of the details?"

"Mr. Talfourd," said Ferrars, earnestly, "I am able to tell you, and I want to tell you. If I had not met you here tonight, I should have sought you out tomorrow. I have every reason to believe that you are the man, of all others, who can be of much help to me."

"I can't speak for the ability, Mr. Ferrars, but the will is all on your side."

"Then let me tell you about the murder, as briefly as possible," said Ferrars, rising, "and Sir Felix had better be one of us. He does not know all the story, but what he does is from a point of view likely to be helpful to us." He opened the door and spoke to Sir Felix, who was pacing restlessly up and down the floor.

"I've been thinking over things, Frank," he said as he followed his friend, "and I believe I can now tell you a connected story. I see something like a ray of light ahead."

As the two came into the apartment where Mr. Talfourd

waited, the opposite door flew open, and Max Talfourd shot into the room. He was pale, and his dress was slightly disordered. He manifested no surprise at the sight of his father; rather, he seemed not to have seen him, for he strode straight to Ferrars and caught his arm in a tight grip.

"Say something to me!" he cried, hoarsely. "I think I am going mad! Have they played me a hellish trick, do you think? I have seen Leah Paget!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

A DROP OF BLOOD.

Strange as his first words were, Ferrars thought that he comprehended them.

"My dear fellow, compose yourself," he said. "Miss Paget came home today."

"Today!" Max could only stare at him.

"Yes; this morning." Then, his voice changing to one of brisk, business-like good humor—"If you'll be good enough to note Mr. Talfourd, here, and then draw up your chair and give an account of yourself, we will settle down to business."

Max looked about him. His father and Sir Felix were already seated, and as Ferrars quietly lowered himself into an arm-chair beside the table, Max gave his hand, first to his

father and then to Sir Felix. Then he sat down and looked inquiringly from one to the other.

"Have you seen Quinlan?" asked Ferrars.

"Yes."

"What was the result?"

"Just what you told me. Quinlan said," smiling scornfully, "that he was busy looking out for number one. He strongly advised me to do the same."

"A piece of advice, it would seem, that you are very much in need of," said his father, not unkindly.

"I dare say you are right," said Max, trying to speak composedly but failing in the effort, and turning an agitated face toward Ferrars. "Tell me," he began, "tell me what it all means. You said—"

Ferrars lifted his hand. "This morning, while I was in conference with Captain Connors, word came that Miss Paget had returned. Before we had found time or breath to comment upon the fact, a letter came. It was from Mr. Paget, brief and curt, and it confirmed the statement of the messenger. His daughter had returned, and he would see Captain Connors soon. No explanation, no comment; just the bare fact. You, who know Captain Connors, can fancy its effect upon him. Probably Mr. Paget would have been surprised by a call from Police Headquarters a litter sooner than suited his august pleasure, but for the coming in, a moment later, of the summons to the scene of the double murder. Captain Connors set off for it at once, and I accompanied him."

As he spoke of the murder, Ferrars slowly turned his gaze upon Max Talfourd; but the only sign that Max gave of having heard was one of impatience.

"Then you knew tonight," he broke out, "that she was alive and at home? Why didn't you tell me? Do you think I would not have seen her before this?"

"I shudder to think what you might have done," said Ferrars, quietly. "Will it serve to restrain your eagerness, Mr. Talfourd, if I tell you that, unless great caution is used, the name of Leah Paget, already sufficiently quoted by the newspapers, will become mixed with this affair of the Dresden Flats?"

Max Talfourd half arose in his chair. The detective was seated near him at the round table, not so close but that they might face each other without a change of position. At the first movement, he fixed his eyes upon Max. Under his gaze, Max seemed to recover his self-command. He dropped back in his seat, and met the eye of the detective squarely.

"Having made that statement," he said, "don't tax my self-command too long, Mr. Ferrars."

The only change in the face of the detective was in the eyes that still rested upon Max.

"Perhaps I had better say to you now," he said, "that the return of Miss Paget does not necessarily mean an end to the mystery. I am aware of how you must feel at this moment; but if I had informed you at once that Miss Paget had returned, and you had rushed off to see her, possibly getting into an altercation with her father, the result might have been disastrous. I have found it necessary to instruct the parents of the young lady not to let the fact of their daughter's return become known at present."

"You!" was all Max could ejaculate.

"Yes; I have lost no time, you see. I paid my respects to Mr. and Mrs. Paget this morning."

His three listeners were now past the exclamatory stage. They could only gaze mutely. Ferrars turned squarely toward Max.

"Is there any reason why you should prefer to hear my explanation, or the part that concerns you most, at another time?" he asked.

"Mr. Ferrars," Max said, gravely, "as far as I am concerned, I have no reason for wishing to keep back, or to conceal, any act of mine. You will answer me one question?"

The detective nodded.

"Has anything transpired to connect me, in any way, with the strange fate of Hortense Novalis? Have I also, along with Frederick Quinlan, fallen under suspicion?"

"Yes."

There was a start, and a smothered ejaculation from Sir Felix, and a sound that was almost a groan from the elder Talfourd. Max did not remove his gaze from the face of Ferrars.

"Then," said he, "I beg, I demand, that you speak out, that you keep nothing back. I know, from Quinlan, that I can speak upon my call and encounter with La Belle Fabrice, since it is no longer a secret which I am bound to respect, and, beyond that, I have nothing to conceal. No matter how serious the case, my father and my friends would be my confidants, my advisers."

Ferrars put out his hand. "Now," he said, "I see my way. In more or less degree, each of us is concerned in what I am about to set before you. Strange as it may seem, and is, the case of Miss Paget's disappearance, and the murder of the two women in Dresden Flats, are, or seem to be, connected. Patience, my dear fellow—" Max had started and flushed hotly

again, at the mention of Leah in connection with Hortense Novalis. "I am going to begin over again, at the point where Captain Connors and I set out for the Dresden Flats, after being apprised of Miss Paget's return. And then I am going to call upon you, each of you, for your active but not too inquisitive co-operation. If I get it, I shall hope to unravel the present mystery."

Never had a story-teller better listeners. Ferrars began like a born narrator, telling of his entry with Captain Connors upon the scene of death—describing everything: the rooms in their disorder, the bodies as they lay, the presence and appearance of Frederick Quinlan and Dr. Grove, the search, the daggers with blood upon the blade-hilt, the blood-stained statuette.

When he came to the subject of the letter and photograph, he described faithfully their finding, but nothing more. He did not say that he recognized the picture, nor that the letter bore signature of any kind; neither did he break off to describe his sudden visit to the house of Abner Paget. He went on to the end of the story, telling how the Chief of Police had unearthed the envelope in the ashes—but still speaking no name. Then he gave a graphic account of the Coroner's investigation, as far as he had followed it. At the point where he had left the scene of the inquest, he stopped, ignoring all that came after. And one other thing he omitted—he did not speak of Frederick Quinlan's request, nor tell them that his identity was known to that young man.

Apparently, his narrative had been so complete as to leave no room for a question or comment. At any rate, no one spoke for many minutes. Then the detective turned to Max again.

"At this part," he said, "will you answer a few questions?"

"Anything," said Max, promptly.

"When and where did you make the acquaintance of Hortense Novalis?"

"On the day on which Quinlan and the janitor testified. Shall I relate the circumstances?"

"By all means," said Ferrars, while Sir Felix leaned forward eagerly, and the elder Talfourd drew back in his chair and put up his hand to shade his face. Max noted the movement, and, that the hand was rather unsteady.

"That morning," Max began—"I can't recall the precise date—Fred Quinlan came to me. It was at my down-town rooms, I remember, and I was writing at the time. Quinlan said that he brought an invitation to dine with a friend of his; in short, with the Novalis. She had been creating quite a sensation, and I had seen her at a distance, and knew her as any other club man naturally would. Quinlan said, with some of his usual chaffing nonsense, that she had seen me in the Park and elsewhere, and that she wanted to be introduced. He ended by saying that he had just received a note from Hortense, in which she assured him that he must bring me, for La Belle Fabrice would be present. I believe I manifested surprise, for I didn't think the two were compatible. I can't say that I needed much urging, although I did hesitate a little just at first. So I told Quinlan that I would be on the spot at the appointed hour, and that he had better be on hand a little earlier, to introduce me."

He paused here, as though he had reached the end; but Sir Felix continued to look expectant, and Ferrars said, "Well?" in a tone not to be misunderstood.

"Somehow, I suppose because the drive to the place was shorter than I thought, I was a little early. When I got inside, the maid helped me to take off the light top-coat that I wore over my dinner-dress, and I heard voices in the room beyond. As I made my appearance in the little reception-room, I saw in the next room, two women. One was tall and superb, in a magnificent toilet, and blazing with jewels—my hostess, Hortense Novalis; the other was La Belle Fabrice. I suppose that both were too excited to have heard my entrance. At any rate, before I could think to make my presence known, I caught a few words—parts of a sentence or two. 'You'll be very sorry for this,' I heard Hortense say, and she added something about 'intentional insult.' I didn't hear a word from the lips of Fabrice, but she turned at that moment, and I saw that she was pale, and looked shocked or frightened. As she turned, M'lle Novalis, who had not yet seen me, flung after her a gross, insulting epithet. The next moment, both saw me. The face of La Belle Fabrice flamed and paled again under the insult, but still she did not open her lips. She was hastening toward the anteroom, near the entrance of which I still stood. As she saw me—Hortense I mean—she struck a bell violently, and before Fabrice could cross the two rooms, a maid appeared. 'Show that person out at once,' Hortense cried, angrily. Then she advanced toward me, trying to muster a smile and say some word of welcome. I did not hesitate a second. The scene provoked and disgusted me. I did not so much as glance at my would-be hostess, but, as Fabrice approached, I stepped to her side, and said, 'It appears that I am on time, as I came to look after you, M'lle Fabrice. Please take my arm. We will not trouble M'lle's servant.' I spoke as if I were an acquaintance, and as I looked down into her face it lighted up, and I saw

that she understood me. She put her hand on my arm and walked out with me like a little princess. At the door we encountered Fred Quinlan. It was not the place for explanations, and none were made. By the time we were well out of the place, Fabrice had regained her composure, and she made a brief explanation. It was to the effect that she had been decoyed to the rooms of Hortense upon a misrepresentation. She had received a note, she said, and had gone in response to it, expecting to meet an old acquaintance, ill or in trouble, and hoping that she might be able to serve the person. Instead, she had found Hortense Novalis, blazing with jewels, and was informed that she was called to dine with some gentlemen who wanted very much to know her. In order to make sure of her coming, Hortense had said that she had perpetrated upon her a harmless little joke."

"In making her explanation," asked Ferrars, "did the lady say that she found, in Hortense Novalis, the acquaintance who was in supposed distress?"

"N—now that I think of it, no."

"On the contrary, then, did she say she did not find the person she expected to meet?"

Max considered a moment. "No," he said again. "I see your meaning. I have held the impression that she found a stranger, but she did not say it was a stranger."

"And about your subsequent call upon Quinlan—how was that?"

"Very much as Quinlan related upon the witness-stand. When we left the house together, the lady and myself, we walked a short distance, she telling me in substance what I have just related. She was very reserved, and used as few words as possible. She finished by asking me not to mention

the fact of our meeting at that place, to any one. In fact, she laid so much stress upon it that I promised her very solemnly, and volunteered to procure a like promise from Fred Quinlan, which I did, as you have been told. It seemed to relieve her anxiety, and I confess that I did not much wonder that she was anxious."

"And was that your first and last call upon Hortense Novalis?" asked Ferrars.

"It was. I have since received two notes from the woman—one a day or two after the event, and the other perhaps two weeks later. I gave them no attention. They were the same in purport. She wished to see me, regretted the unpleasant incident at my first call, and would like an opportunity to explain, to set herself right in my eyes."

"And you say you ignored the notes?"

"I did; simply threw them into the waste-basket or the grate. You will remember, you reminded me of the fact once tonight, that on the day after my call at the Dresden Flats, I learned of Leah's disappearance?"

While they were talking, Mr. Talfourd had slowly lowered his hand from his face, and drawn himself erect in his chair. He extracted from one of his pockets two envelopes, and placed them before him on the table.

"A mistake which I made tonight," he said, gravely, "is now accounted for. This letter," taking up one and handing it to Max, "came into my hands late this afternoon. I had opened it, and puzzled my brains over it for some time, before it dawned upon me that it was meant for you. As you may judge, it made me very anxious, and as you did not come home to dinner, I humored my impatience and came here in your stead. Take it, Max."

Max took the letter, and glanced at its contents. It was the letter from Ferrars, and he said, as he put it down, "It's just as well that it came into your hands; better, in fact. Is the other mine also?"

"Yes," said his father, pushing the other toward him. "That's the letter that stirred me up to act as I have in this matter. Perhaps," he added, as he turned once more toward Ferrars, "you can guess how those two letters, followed up as they were by the news of the murder, affected me."

Max had taken up the second letter and opened it.

"Ah!" he ejaculated, throwing it down before Ferrars, "that's the third."

Ferrars took up the letter and read it aloud.

"'DEAR SIR,'" it ran: "Do not think that I mean to persecute you, for I do not. But you owe me an opportunity to say a word for myself. Will you not give it to me? Tomorrow I appear before all New York. Previous to that, I want to see you. I am very busy, and so, not to encroach upon your valuable time, I ask you to come and see me for a few minutes only, at twelve o'clock (midnight) tonight.

"HORTENSE."

Ferrars laid down the note. "Were the others like this?" he asked, thoughtfully.

"No; they were not so wordy, nor so grammatical. The other notes were sent to my club."

Ferrars was silent a moment; then—"May I have this note?" he asked, "or will you lend it to me?"

"Certainly; it is yours."

Ferrars took from his pocket a tied packet, which he laid upon the table before him, and proceeded to open under their eyes. He drew from it a photograph of the size known as

small cabinet, and laid it silently before Max, who caught it up, and exclaimed :

" Where did you get this ?"

Sir Felix craned his neck and looked too.

" Why it is yourself, Talfourd !" he ejaculated.

" Yes, it's myself, certainly," said Max. " Where—"

He stopped short. Ferrars had placed before him a letter. It was torn and soiled, and bore marks of much crumpling, although it had been restored with care. Again Max stared, then caught the sheet, and colored to his temples.

" Do you recognize that, too ?" asked Ferrars.

" Of course." Max did not put this down as before. " It's my own writing."

" You are sure of that ?"

" Yes, I am sure."

" Look at this." The detective held before his eager eyes the envelope that bore the name of Leah Paget.

" Good Heavens, man !" cried Max, " where did you get these—?"

Ferrars put down the envelope, and looked hard at the questioner.

" That photograph," he said, slowly, " and the letter also, I took from under the pillows and the bed-spread in the dressing-room of Hortense Novalis. The envelope, bearing the name of Miss Leah Paget, was found by Captain Connors in the ashes of the fire-place, as I have described to you. Do you still claim these as yours ?"

As they waited a silent, breathless moment for his answer, the face of the father was filled with suspense, that of Sir Felix alive with sympathy, indignation, and poorly-suppressed excitement. But Max Talfourd's hand was firm, as he took

up, in turn, the picture, the letter, and the envelope, glanced at each and laid them down. His voice was steady and calm as he said:

"Yes, they are mine. The letter and the photograph I sent to Leah on—wait—my God! what does it mean? I sent them to her on *that* day—the day of my visit to Hortense—the day before Leah disappeared. How came they there? How—"

"Wait," broke in Ferrars. "Turn the letter over; look at the left-hand corner."

Max obeyed mechanically. "What is it?" he said. "A blot—a stain?" He held it up toward the drop-light above the table, and looked again. "My God! he cried, as the sheet fell from his now nerveless fingers—"my God! *it's blood!*"

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MINOR PRECAUTIONS.

To say that Francis Ferrars, the English detective, on the third day of his sojourn in New York, had found occupation sufficient to preclude all possibility of *ennui*, would be to put it farcically. And yet he went about his business, manifold as it was, in a manner as cool and free from hurry as if instead of many tasks he had but one, and that one a sinecure.

His first business visit, after a long, and in the end satisfactory argument with Sir Felix and the Talfourds,—father and son,—was to the Chief of Police. His first question was:

"Have you seen Mr. Paget?"

"I wish *you* had!" was the Chief's reply, and then came the story of Mr. Paget's call.

"I believe that old curmudgeon thought he could muzzle my whole force with his confounded dollars," said the Chief, wrathfully. "His daughter had returned, and that was to be the end of it. I might send in my bills, and I was to give, in his name, a present of money to the 'men who had been most efficient in working in his behalf.' Efficient! Fancy my telling that to Waters and Nickerson and Polly Cousin! But I forget; you do not know them."

"I hope to, soon," said Ferrars. "And how did you part with Mr. Paget?"

"Well," said the Chief, with a sly smile, "as you know, I was not in a position to go into particulars. So I tried the high-handed business. I flatter myself," he added, "that it was a success. He insisted upon hearing my reasons for what he called my astonishing message; said he had no mind to be kept longer in a state of siege by the Police; had found it irksome, etc., etc. Then I told Mr. Paget that over my men he had no control; that the 'siege,' as he chose to call it, would be raised at my pleasure, not his. And finally, I asked him if his daughter had given him a satisfactory account of her absence. I knew he wouldn't lie outright; but, of course, he bullied me, and declined to answer. At length, I sent him away with a hard nut to crack. I told him to go home and question his daughter. If she gave him a reason for her strange flitting, and stranger return,—a reason which would bear the light of publicity,—it might be well to announce it openly. But, I said, if you are not prepared to be perfectly frank, and let her return and her reasons for going be made known together, you had better heed my advice a little longer. In such

a matter as this it will not do to court the attention of the reporters, and then slam the door in their faces. I wound up by adding that I should wish to see Miss Paget myself soon, or, if not myself, some one with authority from me. I didn't want to be too definite upon that point."

Ferrars smiled. "You certainly have done well," he said. "I pity his daughter, if she is as sensitive as she looks. I have seen a picture of her, you must know; and a very good one it is said to be. Did you learn from Mr. Paget any of the details of the return?"

"No, not from Paget. Luckily, I had been informed on that point beforehand. When he came, I was prepared to be very wise."

"I wish you would prepare me," said the detective.

"To be sure. It was Polly Cousin who gave me the information."

"The one who was first to tell the news?" queried Ferrars, carelessly.

"The same. It seems that in the beginning of the hunt, Cousin had made the acquaintance of one of the housemaids, and had won her confidence. The old business—every day at a certain hour, night and morning, Polly was on hand to steal a few words with the housemaid; all for her own sweet sake, of course. And, of course, you do not need to be told that every time he saw his housemaid he knew what had happened in the Paget household since their last interview. Yesterday morning, she told him, in a flurry of excitement, that Miss Leah had come back; that she came very early in the morning and rang the bell, thereby arousing the house. But although every servant was up and awake and brimming over with curiosity, no one of them was rewarded by a sight of

the returned prodigal, not even her own maid. Miss Paget went straight from the door to her own room, and then sent for her mother. At the time when Cousin had received his report, neither mother nor daughter had emerged from that locked chamber."

Ferrars mused a moment, then he got out his note-book and ran his eye over several pages.

"By the bye," he said, presently, "when you see this young man, Cousin, again, get from him the name of the maid, his informant."

"That's easy enough."

"You have not named me to Mr. Cousin, of course?"

"Certainly not."

"That is well." He seemed to ponder a moment over something in his note-book. Then he spoke: "This man, Cousin, is not on your staff, I understand?"

"No," said the Chief; "I only wish he were. He's a reporter by profession, and a detective by instinct." And seeing a look of interest upon the face of Ferrars, he launched into a brief biography of Polly Cousin.

"I see," said Ferrars, at last; "an odd sort of fellow, tenacious in his grip, honest and faithful according to his lights."

"Yes; you have about measured him."

"Captain," said Ferrars, "I want to ask you once more, and until we are out of the labyrinth of the present, to take me on trust, as much as you can. I can work best in my own way, and in the end I think you will see that it has simplified matters greatly. I'm not going into this business in my proper person, and, after the inquest is over, and my line of battle marked out, I shall not be seen about Police Headquarters. I'm going to set up a little branch department of my own."

"My dear sir," broke out the Chief, "I am only too glad to have you take this thing out of my hands upon any terms. Don't feel that you need to explain to me, but command me when you need me. I'll see that your way is clear, and no questions asked; and if you want any light artillery—" He stopped in response to a gesture from Ferrars.

"I do want a couple of good men," said the detective. "You have a man—he was on duty at the inquest today—a keen-eyed fellow, a little too openly alert, in fact. I had occasion to notice him especially." And now it was his turn to break off abruptly. Captain Connors was shaking with laughter.

"Yes," the Captain said, finally, "I know who you mean; it's Michael. Michael considers you a very suspicious character."

"Yes," assented Ferrars, smiling; "he made that plain to me when he followed up the woman—of course he has told you of that?"

"Yes, and I fancied that you might have made yourself a bit conspicuous, just for Michael's benefit; as a test, perhaps."

"I didn't try very hard to escape his observation," admitted Ferrars. "I think he's the man I want, or one of them. For the other, I fancied that Nickerson would do."

"Yes, sir. With some one to put them properly to work, you couldn't have two better men. Will two be enough?"

"For the present, yes."

"Very well. I'll send for them and have them ready to report to you at short notice."

"That, then, is settled. Now, what do you intend to do in this Paget affair? Consider the case closed?"

"No, sir," said the Chief, with decision. "Not yet; not as

it now stands. Not until I have heard a better reason for dropping it than the unexplained re-appearance of Miss Paget."

"I think you are quite right," said the English detective, "and, *a propos*, how much of a secret, do you fancy, is the return of the young lady, at this moment?"

"Umph! that depends upon the discretion of the servants, I should say, and a little upon the young lady herself."

"Exactly. Already there are several who are aware of it, besides ourselves and your friend Cousin."

"Eh! who are they?"

"Last evening," began Ferrars, "I accidentally ran across Max Talfourd, and he left me to see Quinlan about this business of the inquest and La Belle Fabrice. After leaving Quinlan, it appears, the young man took a walk in the direction of the Paget place. It was late, and, as you of course know, the streets about there are a perplexing maze of light and shade, owing to much shrubbery and many trees."

The Chief nodded.

"It followed, of course, that our friend Talfourd kept in the shade, and took advantage of the light. At first, he tells me, he was not especially struck by the fact that the upper windows just above the place where he stood, were well lighted. Then it came upon him that those were the windows of Miss Paget's own rooms. To make my story as short as possible, he was noticing those windows with great eagerness, hoping to see some sign of an inmate, when, from the security of his lurking-place, he saw another figure moving stealthily toward the house. He watched this figure until he was certain that it was a spy, and then glancing up, saw that the lights were out in the room he had been watching, but that one of the windows was partially illuminated from the street. As he gazed,

the curtain was pushed up, and he saw, very clearly, he says, the face and form of Miss Leah Paget. In his surprise he called her name. At once the form withdrew, and after a few moments another form approached the window and pulled down the curtain."

"And the other," asked the Captain—"the spy?"

"The spy?" said Ferrars, slowly. "Talfourd followed him, as soon as he could gather himself together. The Paget house, you will remember, stands upon a corner. The fellow went round to the side gate—one, Talfourd informs me, that is used by the servants. There, late as was the hour, he was joined by a woman. He could not get near enough to make sure, but thinks it was one of the servants." The detective spoke with marked deliberation and watched the Chief's face the while.

"By Jove!" exclaimed the latter, with a start, "that must have been Cousin!"

"Where does Cousin lodge?"

The Chief named Cousin's street and number, adding, "It's a quiet, unpretending neighborhood. Cousin is a studious, hermit-like fellow out of business hours. Did Mr. Talfourd pursue him—I mean the spy?"

"No. He was too much excited, too anxious to see me and tell the news, to take time for that. Captain, I would like to give you a bit of advice. Get Mr. Cousin out of this case as quick as you can, without raising his suspicions. You can make the return of Miss Paget your reason. Assume to drop the case."

The Captain favored him with a broad stare.

"I cannot answer questions," said Ferrars, warningly.

"I don't want to ask them. I prefer ignorance at present.

There won't be any trouble about Cousin, though. He's only a volunteer."

"So much the better." Then with a sudden change of subject, "Have you seen the Coroner?"

"Oh, yes. I knew I could manage him. He's a reasonable man, when he sees the object of a thing. Of course, he demanded to know why I wanted that will suppressed, and why I turned him off the track, once or twice, in his questioning of Quinlan and the others. I explained to his satisfaction, but it will all have to come out when the inquiry is resumed."

"Of course," assented Ferrars. "When the inquiry is resumed, let the Coroner conduct it in his own way. Leave him and his jury to work out their own solution."

"Eh! Don't you intend to manifest yourself?"

"No. It won't serve any good purpose. After this interview, you will not be likely to see much of me, as my natural self, for some time. I am going to see Quinlan at once. After that, I shall be very busy, I fancy. I shall want to know the result of your call upon Miss Leah Paget."

"Certainly you shall. By the way, that envelope which I found in the grate—are you going to produce that at the inquest?"

"No," said Ferrars, promptly. "It will do great harm to the living and no good to the dead. I only wish I could get possession of that little blood-marked statuette and suppress that also. In the hands of the Coroner it will do mischief."

"Well," said the Chief, after pondering a little, "I don't see why you shouldn't. It's to you we look for a solution of this mystery, not to the Coroner. It can't prove anything in his hands that isn't set forth over and over by the other tell-

tale, blood-bespattered articles. I'll try to manage that for you."

"If you would," said Ferrars. "As you say, in the hands of the Coroner it may only serve to warn the guilty one; in mine—"

"It may be a valuable clue," exclaimed the Chief. "You shall have it; say no more."

"Thank you," said Ferrars, and for a few moments he was again very busy with his memoranda.

"The Coroner is bent on finding those runaway witnesses," broke in the Chief, "and of course, in that, I'm bound to aid him. He has got into his head that the lady, Madam Congreve, as they call her, has merely changed her place of abode temporarily; taken some less aristocratic and more secluded quarters. So I shall have to scour the city for them, as also for that woman with the white hair; I dare say, it's the one you and Michael followed yesterday."

"Possibly," assented Ferrars. "I suppose you men have her under surveillance?"

"Well, they've got an eye on the hotel. I guess she won't get away," smiled the Chief.

Ferrars tore a leaf from his note-book, wrote an address upon it, and arose as he handed it to the Chief.

"There," he said, "is my address for a time. Do not look for luxury and ostentation when you come to see me. And do not expect to find me there at all hours. It's only a meeting-place. Send my men there at once. And I would like to take another look at some of those papers in the Paget case."

"They're at your disposal." The Chief produced them and placed them, a neat but rather bulky package, upon the table

before Ferrars. "There!" he said, "and much good may they do you. It's a burning shame; such splendid work as went into that case, and then to see it end a failure, and such a failure!" The Captain's face flushed. "I don't need to wonder what my men will say, those of them who have put so much active and tireless work, so much interest and patience, yes, and chivalry, into it all. The 'Paget Case' will be a sore word for some time in this office; for many a day, I fancy."

Ferrars, who had taken up the package, laid it down again and came a step nearer.

"Captain," he said, gravely, "let us speak for a moment non-professionally; simply as man to man; your opinion for mine. Do you really consider the Paget case closed?"

"I don't know what to think," cried the Chief, "except this: Closed or not, the Paget case is a farce, a fiasco, an insult to the profession!"

Ferrars laughed one of his low rare laughs, and laid a hand upon the Captain's arm.

"My acquaintance with the case is not quite three days old," he said. "But, thanks to your thorough system, it's very clearly before me. Captain, I predict that the end of this case will not be a fiasco, and that it is far from being closed. Indeed, it is only begun; and, more than that, do you know why I want these papers?" touching the packet before him.

"No, I'm blessed if I do."

"Well, I will tell you. I want them because they will furnish me with data that will save my assistants and myself long days and perhaps weeks of active labor. With these papers in my hands, I have the beginning, possibly the middle, and a clue to the end, of the Dresden Flats Murder Mystery!" He put on his hat and took up the packet again. "Think it

over, Captain, and when you have seen Miss Paget, let me know, as soon as possible, the result of the meeting."

When the Chief of Police was alone again, he paced up and down his private office for many moments, biting his lips and muttering disjointed words and fragments of sentences. Finally he sat down at his desk, and placing before him two blank and separate sheets of paper, he wrote in huge letters across the top of one, "The Case of Leah Paget," and upon the other, in the same manner, "The Murder in the Dresden Flats."

CHAPTER XLIX.

LEAH.

Leah Paget had arrived at her father's door in the grey of dawn, rang, and was admitted, as has been told, only to go, with almost her usual quick elasticity of tread and erectness of bearing, straight to her own room.

When Mrs. Paget, in response to the joyful news, came eagerly, with outstretched hands and fast-beating heart, to welcome her daughter, it was Leah herself who opened the door and closed it again after her, locking it with quick unsteady fingers, and then turning to fling herself, voiceless and dry-eyed, into her mother's arms.

"Leah! Leah!" And the glad mother had held her tight in her arms, sobbing, and murmuring fond words of welcome, and catching her closely and sobbing afresh. It was Leah who was the one to soothe, to be calm, and after a moment, to lead

her mother to a seat upon a divan, sinking down beside her, and waiting, her mother's hand within both her own, for the sobs to cease.

When, at last, calmness came, and mother and daughter sat gazing into each other's eyes, it was Leah who first spoke.

"Mother," she said, drawing back a little, "look at me. No, do not speak yet, and do not say that I look pale and worn and sorrowful; I do not need to hear that. But look into my face, my eyes—I wish you could see my heart, too—and tell me, am I your daughter Leah, the same Leah that went out from your doors a little more than a month ago? It's a life-time ago to me. Do my eyes meet yours less frankly? Do you see any trace of deceit, falsehood, or shame? Do I look as if these had touched me? Have I come back to you as I went? Look, mother!" She came and stood before her mother, as pale and still as a statue of despair.

Such a rare figure she was! Not tall, just the medium height, but so slender as to appear stately; such a lovely face and shapely head; such dainty curves and perfect shoulders. Even then, in that trying time, her look was full of gentle dignity, her manner respect-compelling.

"Tell me, mother?"

Again the mother put out her arms and drew the girl down at her side.

"My darling," she said, "your mother knows you, and loves you, and has never doubted you through all these miserable days."

A long, deep sobbing sigh broke from the girl's lips. "Thank you, mother dear," she said, wearily. "And be patient with me. Do not ask me a question yet, and above all, do not leave me."

For an answer, Mrs. Paget kissed her daughter and held her closer in her arms.

"I am weary," the girl went on, "and lonely!" Suddenly her great calm was broken. "Mother, I have been so lonely!" she cried. "I have been in a grave!" And she threw herself upon her mother's bosom, and broke into sobs that shook her whole frame, and that were an agony for her mother to hear.

And so, all that day, Leah lay upon her bed with her mother's hand gripped fast in hers, and with her eyes half closed; or sat in her big softly-cushioned chair, and watched her mother as she moved about the room, content to have her daughter with her again; and with a heart so full of love and pity, that doubt and curiosity found no room for entrance. Even Leah's faithful maid was shut out, but she waited near to receive Mrs. Paget's gently-spoken commands, and to do her bidding promptly, joyfully, for the love she bore her fair young mistress. Once or twice, mindful of her duty always, Mrs. Paget had gone below for a few words with her husband, or upon some household affair intent. But she always came hastening back, to find Leah's eyes wide open and wistful, but ready to close again when the dear hand was once more in hers, or the loved voice murmuring near her. Little by little, the mother began to understand her daughter's reserve and its true meaning, and, little by little, all was told that would cross the lips of Leah Paget for many days. It was a trying ordeal to Leah; how trying, her mother never knew.

To the combat with her stern father, she found herself equal. She had enough of his own strong will and tenacity of purpose—a tenacity, which, in her, stopped short just this side of unreasoning stubbornness, while, in him, it went far over the

boundary line. To him, in all his variations of command, reproach, argument, and anger, she had ever the same answer:

"Father, it is useless. I seem unfilial, I know; ungrateful, willful, wicked—what you will. In all things else, I will obey you. I will never again set my will in opposition to yours. I will leave your home, if you wish it, and earn my living as best I can. But you must not urge me further—and," drawing herself erect in her offended dignity, "you must not accuse me of the shameful things you have hinted at in some of your rages. And you must not speak to me as you have spoken today. I have borne a good deal, and if I were the sinner you seem to think me, I would bear all meekly, as an atonement. But I have been sinned against, and for the sins of another I will not do penance. You must let this hideous past month be dead between us, or let me go out from your house. I am your daughter, or I am nothing. I will not live under your roof as a culprit. Choose!"

In her mother, as against her father, Leah found a firm ally.

"Abner," said his wife, "you must leave Leah to work out her own release from whatever danger or terror now seems hanging over her. I can see that she is sorely tried, and you are doubling her burden. Either you must ignore much, and let our home be the same shelter to Leah as of old, and you must be more than ever a father to her, or else we must go. Yes, I said 'we.' You are my husband, true, and I have given you a life-time of allegiance. But Leah is my child; she needs me more than you do. I ask nothing for her or for myself; my own fortune is ample. Shall I take my daughter and go away?"

This was too much for Abner Paget. He shut himself up

in his library, and for the remainder of that day would see no one, not even his wife, until the visit of the detective broke his seclusion.

But when it came to denying her mother, Leah could not bear up so bravely. After much entreaty, and many tears on both sides, the girl flung herself down upon her knees, and clasping her arms about her mother's waist, entreated her in an agony.

"Mother, mother, spare me! I want you to know all, everything. Don't you see how it hurts me to deny you—you, my mother? Yet I cannot; I have sworn it. But for that vow I might not be here. I might never have seen your face again. I can say no more; and even this must be locked in your heart, for fear fresh ill may come of it. Spare me, mother, or let me go away!"

And the mother was won.

The evening of Leah's return was passed, by the girl, in restlessly pacing to and fro the length of her two rooms; by the mother, in anxious study of the girl's face and movements, and in occasional efforts to persuade her to rest.

"Leah, my daughter, if you can lie down—if you will only try—you look so weary, my darling!"

All day the sad-hearted mother had struggled bravely for composure, fought down her tears, disguised and denied her own weariness, praying ceaselessly for strength to meet her own and Leah's bitter need. And all day long she had succeeded. But now, sitting in the inner room, where she had made the dainty white bed as tempting as possible, and toned the lights to softness that in itself invited repose, she was not quite so strong as she had meant to be. And Leah, passing near her on her ceaseless march, noted the tremor of voice and saw the

tears glistening in her tired eyes. Swiftly she turned and knelt beside her mother's chair.

"Mother," she said, softly, plaintively, "do not mind me, please; do not let this grieve you so. Oh, be strong for me now. It is my time of utmost need!" She caught her mother's hands, and holding them tightly between her own, bent her hot face upon them. "When I was a child, mother," she went on, in a low hushed tone, "you used to tell me that nothing could really harm us, really, for this world and for what was to come, but ourselves; that all wrong not self-inflicted, all suffering undeserved, would end in good, bye and bye. Mother," the white face and burning eyes were lifted, the one word was a wail—"mother, tell me *that* now, make me believe it—or I shall go mad! I shall die!"

What is that which comes sometimes to a weak woman when all her soul seems stricken, all her heartstrings wrenched, all her faith and hope tottering, all her future a mockery, all her life chaos? What is it, if it be not a flame from heaven—a word invisible, dropped from the hand of the Virgin Mother?—and the earthly mother is strong to seize and hold and save the soul of her child.

"Leah," the two hands of the mother released themselves and took the daughter's hands in hers, while the eyes of each were fixed upon the other—"Leah, my daughter, listen. The woman whose heart is pure, whose conscience is open and clean to the eyes of God and His Angels, cannot be wholly crushed, wholly cast down. The Leah Paget who has lived her life purely and sweetly in the eyes of all the world, cannot be so bent and broken by a passing shadow, a few days of darkness against all the bright, clear years of her life. Have you lost faith in yourself, my daughter?"

"Mother!" the girl's head was lifted proudly, and she drew back and would have drawn away her hands, but they were held fast.

"Have you lost faith in your mother, then? in your friends? Is truth less beautiful in your eyes? Is crime, vice in any form, less hideous than of old?"

"Mother!" cried the girl again.

"Look at me, dear, and listen. From this time, I shall never ask you about the past month, and you need never mention it to me, until you can do so freely; until you wish to do so. I am going to trust you, as I always have. And I can trust you. Neither shall I in any way interfere with your perfect freedom of action, where your secret is concerned. But I am your mother, Leah, and you have never disobeyed me yet."

As she spoke, the form of the girl was swaying toward her, and a newer and softer look was dawning in her eyes.

"I have always obeyed you, mother," she said. "I will obey you now, only—"

"One moment, dear. You have been a self-reliant girl, Leah, capable of doing your own thinking. I have been proud of your rare dignity, for it is rare in one of your years; but above all, I have prized your straightforward methods and frankness. There; it is only the present peculiar circumstances that could justify so much praise. Now, Leah, I am going to lay my commands upon you."

Leah sighed and drew closer to her mother's knees.

"They are very simple. You may find them hard just at first. My daughter, I want you to begin tomorrow morning just where you left off when—when you last sat at your father's table. I want you, unless you feel tired or really ill, to come down tomorrow morning as usual. Take up your life again

in the old way, as becomes the only daughter of the house. Of course, I shall not expect or ask you to go out, or to see visitors against your inclinations. But here, at home, there must be no change. There is no reason for change. In the case of some certain visitors I may be a little rigid, but will you trust your mother Leah, as she trusts you?"

For a long moment there was silence; then Leah Paget arose and stood before her mother, and drew her form to its fullest height.

"Mother," she said, firmly, "I thank God that your blood flows in my veins. A moment ago all the world looked deadly black to me. God forgive me for hating the world, while my mother—and such a mother—is in it. As God hears me, there is no thought in my heart, no act of my life, that need make me unworthy of your love and trust. That is all I can say to you, to any one; and you must tell them so. I cannot promise to be in all things the old Leah Paget. I shall have my black hours, of course. But I will not shut you out even from them. And in all else I will do what you wish. To all but you I will be the same Leah. I can do it, I know. And you will help me. To all—" She broke off and caught her breath sobbingly. "Mother, you must not speak of him yet. I cannot bear it. You must not ask that. I cannot see him!"

"My darling," said the mother, "be sure I shall not tax you beyond your strength in this matter. When you have taken time to think, your own good sense must guide you, yours and his. Until you need me, or ask my advice or help, I will not put my finger upon a thing so sacred."

But little was said after this, and the evening passed slowly. Mrs. Paget went below and applied for admittance at the library-door, but it was denied her, and she came back to Leah with a rueful half-smile upon her face.

"I am afraid I shall have to turn strong-minded in my old age," she said, sitting down beside the couch where Leah lay because her mother wished her to try and sleep. "Your father is really outdoing himself in the way of obstinacy."

"Oh, mamma dear, and it's I who have made you all this worry and—"

"Nothing of the kind, my dear child. It's I who am to blame. I have humored your father in his obstinate moods until he has got the idea that they are a necessary part of the family discipline. I have always felt that I had a large surplus fund of stubbornness stored away in my own person somewhere, because I have always conceded and seldom drawn upon my opposing forces. I intend to take the initiative, however, tomorrow."

"How, mother?"

Again Mrs. Paget smiled.

"Simply by showing him how easily I could have had my own way all these years, if I had chosen to try." She smiled again and bent over to kiss the pale face upon the cushions of the couch. "Don't you think you can go to sleep now, dear?"

"No, mamma. But I will make a bargain with you. If I am not asleep in half an hour, you shall lie down and try, and we will take turns."

Instead of replying, Mrs. Paget arose and lifted the softly-tinted shade that she might see the face of a tiny clock above the mantle.

"Before I do a thing so likely to leave me at your mercy, I think I will pay one more call below," she said, with an assumption of cheerfulness she was far from feeling.

But when she tapped at the door of the library, no one re-

sponded, and, thinking that her lord was still in the sulks, she turned sadly away.

At the foot of the stairs she paused, attracted by the sound of a latch-key and an opening door, and then Mr. Paget came in.

"I have been to see the Chief of Police," he said. "I have withdrawn matters from his hands. In the morning Mrs. Paget, I shall wish a few words with you."

His wife bowed and silently returned to Leah.

When Mrs. Paget's "turn" to rest came, she lay down without remonstrance, seeing that Leah was bent upon it; and Leah herself drew an easy-chair quite close, so that she faced her mother, and, after a few moments, laid her head back with half-closed eyes. The tired, watchful mother noted this and thought "She is going to sleep," smiling a little, and watching her daughter between her own half-closed lids, until she fell asleep herself, and slept soundly and long.

It was nearly midnight when something like a sudden rush past her couch, and a stifled cry, awoke her. Springing up, she saw Leah fling herself down upon the floor of her chamber, where she lay writhing and sobbing wofully.

Kneeling beside her, the mother besought her.

"What is it, Leah? Leah! My child! What is it?"

From the sobbing, quivering lips she managed to catch these words, "The window—Max." It was the first time his name had crossed her lips, and Mrs. Paget understood. She went softly into the boudoir, where, only a moment before, Leah had lowered the lights, that she might look out into the night; and, without looking out herself, closed the window and drew the curtains. Then she went back and knelt beside the prostrate girl.

"Leah," she whispered, tenderly—"Leah, my dearest, try to calm yourself. Are you sure?"

"Sure?" cried the girl, lifting her head and letting it fall again, "Mamma, he saw me! He called my name!"

CHAPTER L.

MRS. PAGET'S GENERALSHIP.

Mrs. Paget had not spoken idly when she told her daughter that she meant to take matters into her own hands.

In the grey of the morning, when Leah had fallen asleep from sheer exhaustion, she wrote a note to Max Talfourd. When this was dispatched, and she had breakfasted, early and alone, she again sought admittance to the sanctum where her husband, grim and obstinate as ever, still held himself aloof from the life of the household. This time she was admitted.

There was a new look in the eyes of Mrs. Paget when she confronted her lord; and, if, at the end of a scant half-hour, Abner Paget, alone once more, found himself wondering if the world had really slipped from its orbit, and if the day when "The last shall be first" had actually come, he had ample cause.

One thing had been clearly demonstrated to him; namely, that Abner Paget was no longer the center of gravity around which the affairs of the Paget household turned.

Mrs. Paget had not entreated her husband; she knew bet-

"WHAT IS IT, LEAH? LEAH! MY CHILD! WHAT IS IT?" Page 367.

ter than that. Neither had she commanded. She began by making one or two simple statements.

As you have seen the Chief of Police," she said, " there is nothing to be said on that point." It was evident from her manner that she had not expected anything like an explanation of what had passed between himself and the Chief of Police. " I have been talking with Leah," she went on, " and I am convinced that her case is one that I, her mother, can manage with the best results. You have never thoroughly understood Leah, and in her present state of body and mind, your methods will not serve any good end. I think you will do well to refuse yourself to interviewers, and leave all to me."

Of course, Abner Paget was not able to agree with his wife. But she had not expected he would, and she had not come to argue, any more than she had come to entreat. She simply stated the course she had marked out for herself and Leah, and added :

" That which is done we cannot undo. But we can ward off some notoriety, and bear what we must with dignity. Delicacy and tact may help us, and a properly-maintained reserve is the only fit and becoming course. If you will hold your self-control, and carry out my suggestions, I will undertake the rest. If not, I must ask you to inform me at once, for it is only upon these terms that we—Leah and myself—will remain under this roof. I must ask for your decision by luncheon time. If it is adverse, we shall leave New York tonight." She moved toward the door, and paused upon the threshold. " Do not misunderstand me. Leah knows nothing of my plans, but she has promised to be guided by me."

She stood for a moment silently regarding him, and then, as he did not glance toward her or speak, she went out.

Half-way down the long hall she encountered a figure in trailing black garments, and stopped short, with grave unsmiling self-possession, and put out her hand.

"Sara—Mrs. Volney—is it you?"

"It is Sara, Mrs. Paget." The long veil was thrown back with one hand while the other was given in greeting, and, for a moment, each woman scanned the face of the other. Then Mrs. Volney spoke.

"I have come at an inopportune time, have I not, Mrs. Paget? Do not hesitate to send me away if I have, or perhaps I may see Mr. Paget? I want his advice; it's merely upon a little matter of business. It's not urgent—" Then, as the grave eyes of the hostess still lingered upon her face, she broke off to say, eagerly, "Mrs. Paget, you look—oh! have you any news?"

Mrs. Paget released the hand she had been holding. "Come with me," she said, and led the way to the little morning-room. When they were within, and the door closed, she came close to her visitor. "What I tell you, you must receiveas a confidence for the present. It is not to be known outside of this house until certain arrangements have been made. Of course, we can trust you, as one of us."

"I hope so, indeed!" murmured Mrs. Volney.

"Leah has returned."

"Leah!" The two dainty gloved hands were fervently clasped, the two beautiful pathetic eyes were uplifted. "Oh, thank Heaven for that! Mrs. Paget, is she well? May I see her?"

"Leah is not ill. Perhaps you may see her soon. I cannot give you particulars, Sara. I was just going out. Mr. Paget is in his library. I think he will admit you." A slight smile accompanied the last word. Abner Paget's admiration

for Sara Volney was an open secret to the friends of both. "And perhaps you can win him over to our side. You must ask him what that means. Go to him now, my dear. I must order the carriage. I will leave you a message, if I do not see you again before I set out."

Leah was in her room when, a few moments later, Mrs. Paget entered, dressed for a morning drive. The girl was languidly brushing out her long brown hair before a large mirror. She seemed calm enough, but the eyes she turned upon her mother were very sad.

"Going out, mamma?" she asked, as her mother approached.

"Only for an hour at the most, my dear. Why didn't you ring for Martha?"

"I was waiting for you, mother; you may ring now if you will."

"One moment, dear; Mrs. Volney is below."

"Mrs. Volney!" As the girl uttered the name she seemed to stand more erect, her head to poise itself haughtily, her lips to set themselves in firmer lines. "Does she know?"

"I told her. Of course she would like to see you. Are you equal to it?"

"Equal!" the girl turned swiftly. "I? Look at me."

She held out two firm hands, her eyes were proud and cold.

"She is with your father now," Mrs. Paget hastened to explain. "She has some business matter to discuss. You need not see her unless you wish."

Leah interrupted her by a gesture.

"I will not refuse to see Sara Volney," she said. "Only ring for Martha, mamma. She shall dress me, and I'll breakfast in my room, when it is ready. Sara may come up. I'll

send Martha down for her, but I shall keep Martha with me—to serve my breakfast, you know."

"That will do excellently," said Mrs. Paget. "Good-bye, dear, for a little while." She rang for the maid in passing out, and met her a moment later at the foot of the stairs, hastening breathlessly to answer the welcome summons.

Martha had not yet been permitted to see her young mistress, and her face was flushed with eager anticipation. Nevertheless, she stopped at sight of Mrs. Paget a step or two above her on the stairs, and as she stopped she cast a quick glance around her, above and below.

"What is it, Martha?" asked Mrs. Paget, pausing as the servant had done.

"Excuse me, Mrs. Paget," whispered the girl, her gaze still wandering, "but there's something I want to say to you."

"Well, Martha, be quick."

"Yes'm. It's this, and if it's none of my business I hope you'll be sure that I mean well."

"We are always sure of that, Martha," said the lady, kindly.

"It's about the new girl, Mrs. Paget—that Mary Hopkins,—and it's just this. She hadn't been here very long, you may remember, when Miss Leah Paget went away, and it wasn't many days before I found out that she had a follower. I didn't think of it before, but now I remember that she began to slip out evenings, quite late mostly, and by the side gate, to meet him. The first must have been not more than two or three nights after we missed Miss Leah."

"Ah!" Mrs. Paget started, and laid a hand upon Martha's arm. "Come up here, Martha." She turned back, went up

the stairs and stopped at the top, where she had a full view of the hall from front to rear.

"Now the rest, Martha," she said, "and as quick as you can."

"Yes'm," said the girl. "It's only this: When you told us all yesterday that we must not speak of Miss Leah's comin' home, I happened to notice Mary Hopkins' look, and I didn't like it. It was impudent, and as if she didn't mean to hold her tongue. I just said to myself then, 'I'll watch you, miss,' and I did. Last night she crept out, and I contrived to follow her. I'll tell you all about how I managed it another time, when you ain't in a hurry. I didn't get near enough to hear all she said, but she told him that Miss Leah was certainly home, and that she was shut up, and wouldn't see anybody. I heard him prasin' her up then, and he said somethin' about her bein' sure to remember all that was going on, and especially who came here and who went away."

Martha paused from sheer breathlessness, and Mrs. Paget was silent for a moment.

"You are a faithful friend, Martha, and when I come back we will talk this matter over again. Go now to your mistress, and take good care of her until I come back. Do not speak a word of this to her."

When Ferrars left the presence of the Chief of Police, he turned his face toward the down-town rooms of Max Talfourd, where he expected to find, by appointment, Talfourd the elder and Sir Felix Wyntoun.

Before separating on the previous night, he had advised Max, in very plain terms, that any effort to see Leah Paget or her mother, until after the next session of the Coroner's inquest, would be to expose one, or both, or all of them perhaps, to ob-

servation, and to run the risk of new and dangerous complications. Nevertheless, he found, upon descending from his own cab, a second vehicle in waiting, and in an instant after he encountered Max himself at the foot of the broad stairway, hastening streetward, a look of eager animation upon his face, and an envelope crushed between the fingers of his left hand, while his right tugged at the collar of his light top-coat.

The first glance is enough—the detective puts out a hand, and stays his progress.

"Whither, my friend?"

Max started and stopped short, recognizing him through the partial disguise of workingman's best, with its accompanying air of plodding honesty. It was a favorite *neglige* with Ferrars, easy to assume and safe to pass unchallenged in a crowded street, but not intended for close meeting.

"I hardly knew you," he says. "I have just received a note from her mother, Mrs. Paget, you know. She wishes to see me."

The face of the detective became very grave. "And you were going?" he asked.

"Yes. I—what else can I do?"

"You can do anything else with more safety. Talfourd, do not be a boy. You cannot go there now."

"Cannot?" Max flushed hotly.

"I said cannot—yes. Consider, man. The lady who has sent for you does not realize the situation. I thought I had made it plain enough to you. You have no right to jeopardize this young lady. Do you realize that?"

Max looked down at the note.

"Yes," went on Ferrars, hurriedly, "I understand. The lady expects you." He put his hand upon the young man's

arm and his voice was suddenly and cuttingly cold. "Either I am to be obeyed, or I leave the game in your own hands. It is too late for half measures. I thought we understood each other, Mr. Talfourd." He drew out his watch and glanced down at it. "I have said that you must remain here until it was time to go to the inquest. If there is a new commander, I abdicate. Choose."

The clear, cutting tones recalled Max to his sterner self.

"I beg your pardon, Ferrars," he said. "I believe I am a bit knocked out. Mrs. Paget asks me to come to her this morning. I thought I might, perhaps. She says—but read it," and he thrust the note into the detective's hand.

Ferrars opened it and glanced at its contents.

"Leave it to me," he said. "You must not go there now. There's a spy in the household. Go back to your den, and—have you been summoned?"

"No."

"Oh, they mean to put it off until the last moment, so that you may be taken by surprise, and have no time to prepare your story. But do not flatter yourself that some sheriff's deputy is not watching your every movement. Trust this to me. I'll see that Mrs. Paget does you justice. As for you, your place, until the tocsin sounds, is here." He gave Max a gentle push in the direction of the stairway, turned quickly and went out. A moment later, Max, standing with rueful countenance in the shadow of the doorway, saw him enter the waiting cab which had been summoned for himself, and rolled rapidly away.

Ferrars did not go at once to the house of the Pagets. Instead, he drove to his own lodgings and made some hasty changes in his personal appearance.

When he again set out, he was a brisk, business-like person, such as were thick upon the street, with nothing remarkable in his appearance, unless it might have been his want of resemblance to Francis Ferrars.

CHAPTER LI.

A BUSY DAY.

After hearing the story of Martha, the maid, Mrs. Paget took a few moments for reflection, and then went back to her own room, where she removed her bonnet and street wraps. This done, she went below, on a tour of inspection.

All the servants, at that hour, were or should have been on duty below stairs. But when the mistress of the mansion came down she encountered Mary Hopkins at the top of the basement flight. The girl had been taken as an assistant to the cook, who was an old and valued servant, and temporarily in need of an auxiliary, because of her too frequent attacks of rheumatism. The cook was trustworthy, and Mrs. Paget, assuming to suppose that Mary had been sent above by the head of her department, passed on with her usual kindly glance, and sought her *chef*, who was at that moment alone in the kitchen.

"Jane," said the lady, "I want you to keep Mary Hopkins under your eye. Give her plenty of work here, and do not let her get up stairs nor out of doors, until I relieve you. It won't be long. Do you understand?"

Jane thought she did. She shared Martha's confidences and prejudices, and she heartily disliked Mary Hopkins.

When Mrs. Paget came quietly up from the kitchen a moment later, she surprised Mary loitering suspiciously near the door of the library, and this time she spoke.

"Your place is below, Mary." The words were accompanied by a significant gesture, and she paused at the head of the basement stairs while the girl went sullenly down.

As she again passed the door of the library, and heard the hum of voices within, she remembered, suddenly, who had sent her this girl, that had been playing the spy in her household, and some new thought presented itself.

"I'll wait," she soliloquized. "I'll question her before I go." She turned and entered the morning-room, seating herself near a window, with the door half open, giving her a view of the hall and stairway.

Nearly half an hour had passed, when glancing out, she saw a man approach the entrance. He came on briskly, holding in his hand a little packet that might have been a file of bills or receipts.

"A collector," she thought. As he rang, something prompted her to go to the door of the morning-room. In another moment she was confronted by the stranger, who had asked at once for Mrs. Paget, and then, she hardly knew how, they were within in the morning-room and the door was closed.

The man took off his hat and bowed low.

"I am come with a message from Max Talfourd, Madam."

"Yes?" It was all she could say in her surprise. Ferrars, who thought and acted upon the instant, had made no effort to "speak up to his character." He was in the presence of Mrs.

Paget, whom he had seen only yesterday, and he had formed his opinion of her first through his ability to judge of character, and then through the Talfourds, father and son. He knew that he would need a friend in the Paget household, and that he could not expect to find in Abner Paget that friend. Abner Paget must be convinced and converted, and for this there was no time to spare. Already the detective had chosen Mrs. Paget as the one he must trust. She had not lost faith in natural instincts and intuitions. She was quick to perceive; he believed that she would be firm to execute.

"It was impossible for Mr. Talfourd to come to you at present, Madam," he resumed. "Rather, he was persuaded that it would be unwise, perhaps absolutely unsafe—for himself and for your daughter."

At first she had seemed only to listen to the tone.

"Impossible!" she repeated. Then her hand went out quickly to her breast, as if her heart had suddenly startled her by its bounding. "Unsafe!" she said, tremulously, "and—for my daughter?"

He bowed a silent repetition of the alarming words.

Then she came close to him and bent her gaze upon his face.

"Will you tell me who you are?" she asked, quickly

"Gladly, if for the present you will allow me to withhold my name, and will consider what I say a confidence."

"Yes, yes!"

"First, then, I am the person who came to you yesterday with a warning."

"Ah!" The puzzled look went out of her face but the anxiety remained. "I thought so."

"Yes; I hoped you would recognize my voice. Next, then,

I am a friend of Max Talfourd. And lastly, I am a detective, endeavoring to serve him, and yourself."

She stood as at first, with her gaze intent upon his face, and he went on, speaking rapidly.

"Two days ago I was committed to Max Talfourd, to aid him in the search for the lady who has so unexpectedly returned to you. Yesterday, while in consultation with the Chief of Police, he was called to the scene of the late murder." He stopped, seeing by the look on her face that she did not understand. "You have been preoccupied," he said. "You may not know that a woman was murdered night before last?"

"No," she said, "I have had no thought for—"

"Pardon me," he broke in, "you can get all the details from the newspapers. The murdered woman was slightly known to Mr. Max Talfourd. He had once chanced to call at her house. He will have to appear, as a witness, before the Coroner today, and as the time is very near, I thought it best that he should not come to you."

"Why?"

Her voice was very steady now, but as she uttered the one word she sat down in the place nearest at hand.

"Madam, your daughter's name has been widely published. Owing to this, is it not wise to be doubly careful? Max Talfourd is known, to some at least, as your daughter's betrothed. Would it be well, do you think, to let his name figure, as it assuredly will, in the report of the Dresden Flats Murder, and again, possibly in the same columns—for reporters are sensation-hungry fellows—coupled with that of your daughter? I have pledged myself to young Talfourd, but I found difficulty in persuading him to let me act as his messenger. I have

spoken hurriedly. My time is limited. I hope I shall not be misunderstood."

Mrs. Paget arose, and without speaking went to the door, opened it and looked up and down the hall. Then she came back and stood before him.

"You have made me apprehensive," she said, "and I understand this: In some way, whether through Max Talfourd or otherwise, my daughter's name promises to become connected with this—this murder. Who is the victim?"

"An actress,"—his eyes were the watchful ones now—"called Hortense Novalis."

"She?" Her face betokened surprise but nothing more. "She was to appear yesterday—last night. She who has been so praised, so advertised?"

"The same."

She stood for a moment regarding him silently.

"There is a mystery here," she said, at last, and her face had grown very pale. "There was enough of that before. I was about to call upon the Chief of Police, in behalf of my daughter. Will you go there with me?"

She put the question with sudden emphasis, and he smiled as he answered. Evidently, this quick-witted woman intended to put his claims to Captain Connor's confidence to the proof.

"I see you are prudent as well as prompt, Madam. I regret that I cannot go with you until after this inquest, or this day's session, is at an end. I am too fully occupied. But I give you full permission to tell Captain Connors of this visit of mine, and, when you have seen him, if you will honor me with an interview, say tomorrow, and at some place or other than here, I shall be your debtor. You are right in your surmise.

There is a mystery. But do not be unduly anxious. Above all, do not alarm your daughter, nor doubt Max Talfourd. One thing more : You have a spy in your household, Mrs. Paget,—one of your servants. Be watchful, and get rid of her as soon as you can ; if possible, without letting her know that you suspect her. I cannot name her—"

"It is not necessary, sir," she said, with sudden frankness. "I have already discovered the spy."

He took from his pocket a card and pencilled a few words upon it.

"If you will give this to the Chief of Police," he said, "he will make plain to you all that I have omitted."

She took the card and moved toward the door, following him as he crossed the threshold.

"Mother !"

"Ah—Leah !"

Mrs. Paget advanced a pace, startled, and, for a moment, bewildered.

The self-confessed detective was standing, hat in hand, in the wide hall, midway between the door of entrance and the foot of the stairway, upon which, half a dozen steps above him, stood Leah. She had put on a flowing gown of palest grey, and she seemed not to have noted the woman with the golden hair and black garments, who stood half-way down the long hall, with her face uplifted and her eyes fixed upon the grey-robed figure upon the stairs.

In reality it was but a moment. To Mrs. Paget minutes seemed to pass, while Leah looked down at her mother, Sara Volney looked up at her, and the detective, near the entrance, looked with a long and steady gaze first at one and then at the other.

It was Leah who broke the spell, turning slightly and seeming to see Mrs. Volney for the first time.

"Oh, Sara—Mrs. Volney—is it you?"

She came down a step or two and leaned over the stair-rail, but she did not put out her hand. And as the lady in black swept forward to the foot of the stairs, the detective seemed suddenly to remember that he was making his exit. Mrs. Paget had signalled a servant, the outer door opened and closed again, and Francis Ferrars, striding down the broad steps, was muttering to himself:

"If only I could have heard her speak!"

A moment later, an observer would have seen in the morning-room nothing more remarkable than three ladies, each intent upon being civil to the others. And after a few moments of conversation, Mrs. Paget arose.

"The carriage is waiting," she said, "and I have an order to give to Jane. Leah, will you ring and ask Martha to bring down my bonnet?"

"Pray, Mrs. Paget, do not interview Jane on my account," Mrs. Volney said, laughing lightly. Mr. Paget has asked me to stay to luncheon."

"Then I must indeed see Jane," replied the hostess, and she went out smiling, while Sara turned to Leah.

"I have brought him some troublesome papers," she said, "and he wants time to look them over. I am going to do something very desperate, Leah."

"Jane," said Mrs. Paget, when she had beckoned the cook into the pantry and closed and locked the door, "I want to get Mary Hopkins out of the house as soon as possible. Do not be surprised at me, Jane; it's an odd thing I am asking

of you. I do not want the girl to know that I am aware of her shortcomings. She is your assistant, you know. Can you not manage to quarrel with her just a little, and then make a complaint, or, better still, let her do it?"

"That I can!" said Jane, only too willing to be rid of the unpopular new help. "I kin make two or three complaints right now, if you like, and be glad of the chance."

Captain Connors was alone in his office when Mrs. Paget was announced. He had been giving some serious thought of the case of Leah Paget and Hortense Novalis, and some new ideas had dawned in his mind. Hastily putting away the two strips of paper which were still before him, and upon each of which were now some queer-looking hieroglyphics, which he could read usually but which would have puzzled another seriously, he gave the word and the lady was admitted.

Their talk was long and earnest; and when Mrs. Paget went away, Captain Connors handed her to her carriage like a man doing homage to something fine and admirable, above the ordinary. And he went back to his inner office with a softened, and earnest, and preoccupied look upon his face.

The lady had given him her hand at parting, and as she drove away there was an expression of hopefulness in her fine eyes, although a long sigh escaped her lips, as she gave the order, "Home."

CHAPTER LII.

MAX IS ADVISED FOR HIS GOOD.

When Ferrars was again upon the street, he found that he must change some of his plans. It was too late, now, for his interview with Frederick Quinlan, but for this he did not much care. He was becoming interested in this young man, just as he always found himself taking an interest in any strong or particularly marked character. But the interest of a student of character, and a searcher after motives, such as was Ferrars, did not necessarily mean admiration or sympathy. It was not often that this clear, cool-headed Englishman was seriously "put out;" but once he had been known to sulk for three days because a noted criminal, brought by his own skill to the end of his tether, had been executed before he, Ferrars, had been able to decide, by personal observation, whether the man had become what he was through circumstance or by heritage. For Ferrars, like most "specialists" of his kind, was a theorist as well.

His first act was to send a message to Quinlan, appointing an evening hour for their meeting, with the brief explanation that he thought it best to let the open inquiry pass before he "put a finger upon the business."

"The fellow is shrewd enough," he assured himself as he penned the lines, "whatever else he may be. He will understand me, I think." And in this opinion he was quite correct.

Next he sent a note to the Chief of Police. It was brief and could not be misinterpreted.

"Send the two men to me at the close of the afternoon's proceedings. Send also a third, an elderly man, a scribe, to remain at 'headquarters.'—F."

When Captain Connors read this note he considered a moment, then went across to the office where the old man sat upon his high stool, and three or four "Specials" were always scratching off their reports at the long table.

"Daddy," he said, "I've got a fat job for you. Come in and receive instructions."

The old man wrote carefully on to the end of the line, dotted his I's, crossed his T's, added a period, wiped his pen, and then slid from his stool and followed his Chief.

When the second message had been dispatched, Ferrars hastened to his lodgings, the "headquarters" where he had just established himself. And here he soon retransformed himself, becoming once more the shabby, red-lidded reporter of the previous day, with the soiled note-book and cringing manner.

Then he hastened to the rooms of Max Talfourd, where he found Talfourd senior and Sir Felix, as well as Max himself.

It was nearly time to set out for the scene of the inquest, and the Coroner's summons had been served upon Max in the presence of his father and his friend.

"I should like to go with you," began Mr. Talfourd, but Ferrars broke in with a peremptory negative.

"It will not do. It will look as if you were anxious, as if you were making too much of your son's small share in this business. As for Sir Felix, I sent him away yesterday; he will not go now, I hope."

"Not I," said Sir Felix; "but I shall expect a full account of proceedings."

"And that you shall have," the detective assured him. Then he turned again to the elder Talfourd. "I must remind you, sir," he said, "that we have a complication of interests to guard. We cannot afford to risk anything. Neither can we venture to hope that, at the close of the Coroner's investigation, we shall have things our own way. In a case like this, and in a city overrun with detectives, private, regular, and irregular, there will be many complications. When we are out of the Coroner's clutches, Mr. Talfourd, I shall ask for more of your aid and counsel, perhaps, than you will find it comfortable to give."

"If I find it possible," said the father of Max, "we will not consider comfort."

A moment later, Max and the detective were rolling toward the scene of the murder.

"I shall leave you before we reach the entrance," said Ferrars. "And remember, you are not to see me, not to signal me. We cannot be too guarded before the Coroner and his good men and true."

Ferrars spoke quickly and his tone was grave. He was no longer the interested friend and sage adviser; he had taken command.

"I do not pretend to disguise from you," he went on, "that the situation is a critical one. Do you fancy that Quinlan has any clue, any reason, any object, that he could further by bringing forward, in any way, the name of Miss Paget?"

Max started as if he had been stung.

"Do you mean before the Coroner?" he asked, quickly.

"Yes."

"If he dares—" said Max, between his teeth.

"Tut," broke in the other. "Whatever he dares, in the presence of the Coroner, nothing can be so unsafe, so likely to injure her, as for you to show excitement, resentment, or fear of consequences. You must guard yourself for her sake. You were very near making a great mistake today. I arrived at an opportune time, and now I lay a new command upon you: You must not go near that house until you have the word from me."

Max looked a bit dissatisfied.

"You can write a note, if you choose," said Ferrars, seeing the look, "but it must be purely personal—not a word else, you understand?"

Max nodded.

"I have fully decided to suppress the photograph and letter," went on Ferrars. "Of course, you will be called upon to tell your version of the story of La Belle Fabrice and her unlucky call. And now, let me give you two or three hints. If you tell your story as you told it to us last night, it will not prejudice any one against La Belle Fabrice. You would naturally guard against that. But you must also guard against anything like being inclined in her favor. And there are two or three rules for 'amateur' witnesses: Do not carry the air of knowing anything worth telling. Answer as often as possible by direct yes or no. Do not notice implied questions, do not hesitate over your answers. Do not consult your memory: A direct 'I do not remember,' often saves complications."

Max laughed outright. "I will try to be a model 'amateur,'" he said, "but I do not fear the ordeal, thanks to you," his face becoming very grave. "If it were not for that suppressed documentary evidence, it might be an ordeal indeed."

He started up as if struck by some unpleasant thought. "Ferrars," he said, gravely, "in sparing me, are we making it harder for Fred Quinlan?"

"No," said Ferrars, shortly. "To tell all wouldn't change or better Quinlan's position. It would make yours hideous."

Max was silent for a moment.

"I abhor this thing that I am to do," he said, then. "It's simply securing myself at his expense."

"Nonsense!"

"If it were not for Leah—"

Ferrars laid a kindly hand upon his shoulder.

"Nothing that you could do or leave undone would alter the position of Frederick Quinlan," he said, firmly. "And it is not yourself that you must consider. It's the peace of mind, perhaps the safety, of the woman you love. Harden your heart, banish your scruples, and trust a little to me. Oh, I must get out here." He caught Max by the hand, gave it a reassuring pressure, and in a moment was out of the cab and away.

CHAPTER LIII.

COUSIN WITHDRAWS.

There was a crowd before the door when Max alighted alone, and people were surging and clamoring all up and down the street.

Newspapers and newsboys had made the great hostelry known as the Dresden Flats, notorious, and a large posse of

policemen were now required to keep place for those who must come in, as against those who would ; for those who were necessary to the Coroner, as against those to whom sensation was as the breath of their nostrils.

The second session of the Coroner's jury, in the case of Hortense Novalis and her maid Virginie, was a long one, and quite as interesting as the first. It might be added that it was quite as unsatisfactory in its results.

Max Talfourd was examined, but his testimony threw little if any new light upon the case. His answers were straightforward, clear, and prompt, and left the gentlemen of the jury convinced that, aside from the occasion of his single call, he knew nothing whatever about Hortense Novalis or her maid Virginie.

Frederick Quinlan was again questioned. It was his third appearance before the Coroner, and he seemed to think it quite superfluous. He was questioned more closely than on the day before, and his answers came promptly, and were marked by a cynical sort of frankness, and a manner of growing impatience quite new with him. At the end, the jury were not much enlightened.

Concerning Hortense Novalis and her career abroad, he could say little. Concerning her identity, nothing. He could only repeat and emphasize his story of the previous day.

As a last feature of Quinlan's examination, the will was produced and put into his hand

"Mr. Quinlan, did you ever see that document before?" asked the Coroner, with much gravity.

"I have," Quinlan smiled as he replied.

"May I ask when?"

"I saw it yesterday, Your Honor, when it was produced here by the Chief of Police."

And now the jury smiled.

"Of course, of course—yesterday. I mean, sir, did you ever see it previous to that time?"

"I have. I cannot name the precise date. It was shown me by the testatrix."

"Then you know what it contains?"

"Yes."

"State its contents briefly, if you please, prior to opening it here in evidence."

"It is, I believe, the last will and testament of Hortense Novalis. It leaves a small legacy to her maid, Virginie, and the remainder of her possessions to myself."

This announcement caused a sensation among the listeners. But the opening of the will proved its truth, and the result was, of course, an added item in the scale against Quinlan.

When the will had been disposed of, the Coroner addressed the jury.

It was impossible to close the case here and now. There remained most important witnesses to be found and examined. It was impossible to guess what new turn their evidence might give to this lamentable affair, this twofold mystery. The Chief of Police and his detectives hoped to find these witnesses, all of them women, and it had been suggested that a postponement of several days be made. It was now believed that some of the witnesses, perhaps all, had left New York, and time was required to find and bring them back. In the meanwhile, it was his painful duty, etc., etc.

Which meant that Frederick Quinlan was held to bail as under suspicion. The inquest was to be re-opened as soon as

the needful witnesses were found. And the bodies of Hortense Novalis and her maid were placed in the hands of the undertakers, to be embalmed and deposited in a vault, there to await further developments or possible claimants.

And now there was plenty of sensational material for the newspapers. Reports of proceedings, interviews, prophecies, descriptions, conjectures. Rewards were offered for information concerning the absent witnesses, for the apprehension of the murderer or murderers.

In the midst of these, on the day which followed the second adjournment of the Coroner's inquest, a modest little paragraph, in a not too conspicuous corner of the leading papers, announced that, "Miss Leah Paget's absence, and the mystery concerning it, had ended in a most commonplace manner, the young lady being now at her home; and the reason of her absence, a very simple one, and of no importance to any but the lady and her friends, had been made clear to all whom it concerned to know."

On that same day an advertisement which had held its place in the columns of half a dozen papers for as many years, was dropped from each of them. It was quaintly worded, and had drawn forth many a comment during the long years of its steadfast unchanging appeal. It ran thus:

Dear little Bettie. The latch string is out, and I'll try to make you happier. Come back to your poor old Seth.

That was all, but it told its own pathetic tale.

Two other small happenings, of more or less interest to our story, occurred on the afternoon of this same eventful day.

The first was of greatest importance, perhaps, to the new housemaid in the establishment of Abner Paget. As may be presumed, the cook was ready with her complaint, which was

sufficient to arouse Mrs. Paget to instant action. She asked no questions and she answered none. Mary was paid liberally, a month's wages in place of a month's warning, and sent to Coventry forthwith.

The second event took the form of a letter, written by Polly Cousin and addressed to his friend the Chief of Police. In it Cousin regretted that his increasing reportorial duties, together with a slight indisposition, made it necessary for him to withdraw, for the present, from all work that was not connected with his obligation to the "*Call.*" He would see Captain Connors at his earliest leisure, but feared that, between his literary work and the aforementioned indisposition, it might be some days before he could hope to call, etc.

This was the purport of Mr. Cousin's letter to the Chief, and it threw that worthy into a rage. Nothing is more trying to friendship of the sort which existed between the Chief and Cousin, than a sudden launch into the unexpected. And not only was this note unexpected in matter and manner, but it was out of character, coming from Cousin. Worse yet, it was evidently a thing that the English detective had foreseen.

"Polly Cousin is getting off his head," he declared to himself. "I must look after him a bit. I must show Ferrars that *billet doux.*" And he did at the earliest opportunity.

Ferrars read the note and smiled. "And you do not understand how to account for this?" he said, carelessly, as he laid it down.

"No, and neither would you, if you knew Cousin as I do."

"Knowing him as I do," said Ferrars, "let me advise you. Before many days, Cousin will drop in upon you, and make careless inquiries about Miss Paget. If this happens, or when it happens, be very guarded."

Captain Connors favored him with a prolonged stare. "Well," he said, at length, "it's your affair now, and I'm glad of it."

CHAPTER LIV.

FREDERICK QUINLAN.

When the English detective, according to appointment, paid his visit to Frederick Quinlan, the advantage was not all upon the side of the latter. Before approaching his man, Ferrars had of him as exhaustive a study as time would allow, aided by the information set forth in certain neat and firmly-written documents, each bearing upon its outer folds the words, "The Paget Case," and marked severally within, upon a top line, "F. Quinlan," "Possible enemies of L. P.," "F. Q., discarded suitor," "Quinlan's habits, haunts, etc.," and signed, severally, Nickerson, Waters, Brown, etc. This was supplemented by verbal information from Max Talfourd, from Talfourd senior, and from other sources. So Ferrars, who one week before had been ignorant of the existence of such a man as "F. Quinlan," now knew him quite well.

"You see," said Quinlan, when he had greeted his guest, "I had a slight advantage over you at our first meeting. I happened to be in London about seven, perhaps eight months ago, at the time when the Corriston Case was the topmost sensation. Naturally, I wanted to see the lion of that famous affair, and you were pointed out to me one day in the Park. I have a good memory for faces."

Ferrars received this with the greatest composure.

"A good memory is an excellent gift," he replied. "I believe that I remember voices best."

As he seated himself before a long, narrow library table, in the chair indicated by his host, who took another just opposite, Ferrars looked around him with some interest. Quinlan lived in bachelor's apartments; and if the other rooms were like this, Ferrars thought, then indeed, the sybarite, the favorite of ladies, the dainty trifler with cards, and fastidious owner of fast horses, must hav· a sterner, a more practical side. The room was a well-equipped combination of library and study, and, while in all its appointments it indicated wealth and a refined taste, there was no obtrusive display of either. There were books in costly bindings upon low shelves, upon high shelves, upon tables and brackets; there was an *escritoire* that was evidently for use; there were easy-chairs and a long low divan; costly rugs and furs were scattered about the polished floor; a few rare engravings and good bronzes. But nothing for mere display; nothing useless, no affectation of "collections" or "odd bits," nothing amateurish.

As his eyes wandered from point to point, Quinlan noted his gaze, and recognized the approval in it.

"I hope you like my den," he said, lightly. "It's my resting-place, my refuge from petty storms. I fitted it up two years ago, when I felt the need of a place where I might flee now and then 'far from the maddening crowd,' from bric-a-brac and five o'clock teas, and germans and drawing-room gossip. Some people, who think they know me, and who do know of a few of my vices, wouldn't believe it, but it's nevertheless true, that no woman has ever put her foot across my threshold. I have one superstition: When a woman succeeds in forcing an entrance here, I shall be undone. I am sure of it."

Ferrars, sitting opposite him, smiled slightly, and Quinlan checked his speech, not abruptly nor as if conscious of too much volubility. He smiled too, and pushed a box of cigars across the table.

"Make yourself comfortable," he said, he himself setting the example. "And then tell me—have you considered my request?"

"It was not necessary," said Ferrars, not heeding the box at his elbow; "I am committed."

"Committed! and may I ask to whom?"

"To justice," replied the clear-eyed detective, "and to the innocent."

"If by that you mean that you intend to devote yourself to the solution of this mystery,—to the finding of the murder or murderers of poor Hortense,—then I ask no more—except this: that you spare no pains, no expense, and that you allow all that is done to be at my cost."

Ferrars never permitted himself to harbor a prejudice, nor to form an opinion based upon the evidence of others, although he sometimes arrived at swift and astonishingly accurate conclusions at first sight, or upon very brief acquaintance. As he sat there, his calm eyes studying the face of the man before him, he found himself mentally forcing his mind to hold judgment in abeyance and only to observe minutely. He said as little as possible. He came to listen, and Quinlan found that he could listen well.

"Of course," Quinlan went on, "I do not care to have this made too public. Do not mistake me there. I do not crave notoriety; not of that sort, at any rate. I want justice done, and I am ready to do the thing I can do best; that is—" smiling slightly and with a touch of cynicism in the smile—

"to put my hand in my pocket. May I ask if you were at the inquest yesterday?"

It was now Ferrars' turn to smile. "I was at the inquest," he said.

"Ah." Quinlan's gaze was openly admiring. "I looked for you, I assure you, and my eyes are tolerably keen."

"Yes," assented Ferrars, "I noted that. You had a companion—a legal gentleman, was he not? May I ask—" He hesitated.

"You may ask anything, Mr. Ferrars—that is, anything pertaining to this subject, and I'll answer as well as I am able. Indeed, that was my motive in seeking an interview. I wanted to tell you what I know about Hortense Novalis, and then ask you to make such use of my information as seems good, in finding the key to these bloody mysteries.

He stopped speaking, and sat for a moment looking straight into the face of Ferrars.

"At any rate," thought the latter, "it cannot be said that this young man has not a direct gaze."

"You asked about my companion," resumed Quinlan. "He is a friend and a lawyer; the man I should retain in any serious encounter with Dame Law. He's young in years, but already pretty well known; Herbert Grote—perhaps you have heard of him?"

"Yes," assented Ferrars, "I have heard of him."

Frederick Quinlan threw himself back in his chair, and took a long look at his *vis-a-vis*. Then he leaned forward and spoke.

"Mr. Ferrars, if you intend to interest yourself in this case, regardless of me, I consider it more than ever necessary that we should understand each other—at least that you should under-

stand me. From the first moment that I stood beside the dead body of Hortense Novalis, I have foreseen the natural, the inevitable, consequence of this investigation. I do not intend to stand up before the Coroner and his jury and tell what I shall tell to you, and such information cannot be drawn from me, because of his lack of knowledge. I do not fear the result to myself of anything that may be developed at the inquest."

"It was evident to me," said Ferrars, drily, "that you had no reason to fear undue pressure at the hands of the Coroner."

Quinlan smiled slightly, and banished the Coroner from the conversation with a wave of his hand.

"A Coroner's inquest always seems to me a farce," he said. "Its publicity is more apt to result in harm than good. It keeps the criminals forewarned, and I believe it has helped more scoundrels to escape than it has ever brought to justice. If you will listen to my story, you may depend upon it to be complete and truthful. All I ask is that you will not use the information I give you until after the inquest."

"I do not commit myself with the business in any way until after the inquest," said Ferrars. "You may count upon my discretion, now and then. I am ready to listen."

He leaned back in his easy-chair and half closed his eyes.

"And I am ready to begin," said Quinlan. "If you want to ask questions by the way, do not hesitate."

"I shall not," said the detective.

"My knowledge of Hortense Novalis," began Quinlan, "dates back to the time of her advent upon the London stage. I arrived in that city at the very height of her popularity. Why," stopping to look keenly across at his guest, "you surely must have seen her then?"

A slight smile hovered about the lips of Ferrars.

"I did see her. Go on, Mr. Quinlan."

"Then," resumed Quinlan, "I need not speak of what she was, of how completely she filled the eye, how perfect an image of beauty she was, how the painters raved over her. You must know all that. In all the universe, among all the beautiful creations of God and nature, there has never been anything that could equal in all things, in anything, the beauty of a beautiful woman. Pictures are mere mockeries; no artist has ever yet caught and preserved the entire charm of living, breathing, graceful womanhood, at its best. I am an admirer, a worshipper, of beauty, and for a fortnight I haunted the theatre where Hortense Novalis, the most thoroughly beautiful specimen of the Andalusian type that I have seen, was nightly visible. I did not seek her acquaintance then, and I have since had reason to think, that if I had, it would have been an unsuccessful effort." He uttered a half laugh. "I should not have been doubtful of my success here, but in New York there is no Royal favor to be bestowed upon houris. While Hortense still held sway in London, I set out on a further pilgrimage. Not long after, while I was at Monaco, I read of the sudden exit of Hortense from the stage, and, so far as could be known, from London."

As he paused, Ferrars, who had been listening with half-closed eyes, looked up.

"I know nothing of the movements of Hortense Novalis, after she left the London stage," he said, in answer to the look of inquiry in the face of his *vis-a-vis*. "I was not interested in the career of that young woman—beyond a certain point."

"Ah!" Quinlan flashed upon him a look of intelligence. "It was in Paris that I next met Hortense Novalis, and there

made her acquaintance. She was in a position of peculiar isolation. You perhaps know, since you know so much, that she was not a person of deep culture or varied knowledge. Here, and perhaps in London, by using great care she might have passed successfully, and for a long time, for a Frenchwoman. But Hortense Novalis was not a Frenchwoman, although she undoubtedly had French blood in her veins. She never could have been made into a Parisienne. She lacked lightness, adaptability, and the patience to apply herself to any tedious effort. She had come to Paris with a purpose, with a strange ambition. It was said of her that she was extravagance incarnate, that she never saved a penny of her salary upon the stage, and that she was always in debt. Nevertheless, she brought with her, when she came to Paris, a modest fortune. She installed herself in sumptuous apartments, and with high hopes."

He pondered a moment and then resumed.

"I may as well say it: Hortense was both ignorant and vain, although it sounds ungracious for me to do so. The little French she knew was execrable, and she could not master Parisian French. She was just opening her eyes to the fact that she could not make herself a career in Paris, when Fate threw me in her way. I was travelling for amusement, and having learned the world pretty well, I carried my honors as an American citizen modestly. But I was a godsend to Hortense; the only man she knew who was not likely to hail her in French, or otherwise stir her grievances into fresh life. We became great friends, and under the impression that I was an American abroad upon a limited income, she patronized me amazingly, and gave me the novel sensation of being valued for myself alone."

He was smiling cynically at the recollection, and Ferrars smiled too. The latter had ceased to sit with half-closed eyes, and was listening now with direct attention.

"We became, as I said, very good friends," went on Quinlan. "I took care not to let Hortense be undeceived about myself and the state of my purse. She thought it was not worth while to make me a victim, so she made me a confidant. I have every reason to believe that the little she told me of her story was true, and I will try and tell it to you, not as she told it to me, disconnectedly, in fragments, as caprice moved her. What I am about to tell you is the result of many meetings and many words, on the part of the narrator. Some of it I had pieced together into a partial history of a strange career, before I left her in Paris. And some I have learned since she came to New York. Yes," in answer to a look or movement of surprise, "I left her in Paris. Did you fancy she came with me? By no means. That only shows that you do not know me yet."

Across the face of Ferrars a queer smile flitted. "There are indications," he said, "of a better acquaintance. And now—"

"And now I will give you—mind, this is not my history; as nearly as possible I shall efface myself—I will give you what I have named to myself 'The Parisian Episode.'"

CHAPTER LV.

"THE PARISIAN EPISODE."

"Hortense Novalis was American born, and grew to girlhood in a country town. I do not know her name. About herself, and her life previous to her *debut* in London, she was very reticent. I have no doubt, however, that she had French blood in her veins,—good blood, probably unfairly come by. As you may suppose, I did not trouble my head with speculations as to the past of the new Star. Some one had given her a brief stage training, and launched her as an actress, in the Provinces at first, of course. Then she attracted the admiring notice of some influential personage, and lo! she was a great actress, and all London was at her feet."

Mr. Quinlan paused here to place his own feet more comfortably, and resumed.

"As I have said, I was at Monaco when I heard that she had left London suddenly and very quietly, and soon after that she was established in Paris. Later, I learned some of the facts connected with her flitting. Perhaps," pausing to look sharply across at Ferrars—"perhaps I am telling you an old story?"

"Go on," was the non-committal reply of the detective.

"It appears that a certain young heir to a title and a fortune fancied himself in love with Hortense. He was betrothed to a very proper young woman, with attractions similar to his own. A worldly parent coming on the scene, with plenty of

money and a superabundance of executive force, arranged matters, probably with a little assistance and in a worldly-wise fashion. It is said that the young lady visited Hortense in person. At any rate, by bullying and cajolery adroitly mingled, and backed by an ample purse, the dangerous beauty was safely transferred to Paris. Before going, it is said, she treated the love-lorn youth to a severe snubbing, and he, believing himself outrivalled, gave up the chase and returned to his old allegiance."

"One moment," said Ferrars; "do you know the name of the young man in question?"

Quinlan pondered a moment. "If I did," he said, finally, "it has escaped my memory."

"Am I to understand, then, that the lady, Hortense, did not confide in you to the extent of—"

"Allow me," broke in Quinlan. "Hortense Novalis was the last woman in the world to recount or dwell upon any episode which did not reflect credit upon herself. Vanity was her ruling passion, and her desire to be thought clever was only second to her vanity."

"And how did such a woman as you have described succeed, or hope to succeed, in Paris?"

"First, she was fortunate in securing the services of a thoroughly Parisian maid, who was of much use to her. The woman conceived one of those queer womanish attachments for her mistress, and soon became her *confidante*. Before I left Paris, I knew that Hortense and Virginie were plotting some new enterprise, but she had grown so cunning under Virginie's tutelage that I could get no inkling of it. We parted on the most friendly terms, and I told Hortense, half in jest, that she ought to come to New York; she would be sure to score a

triumph, on or off the stage. Of course, I promised to introduce her to all the gaieties, if she chose to come. That she came, you know. But before she came, she had reaped the benefit of another turn of fortune's wheel. Some secret or remembrance, carried in her memory since childhood, she had made known to her maid Virginie, when they had become sufficiently intimate; and, behold! connected with it was the name of an old, proud, and enormously wealthy family residing in Paris. In this family were three marriageable daughters, and two married sons; and it is not likely that Hortense would have been able to establish even a very remote claim to kinship. But there was no such need. With a courage born of ignorance, egotism, and a certain lawlessness that was one of her strong traits, Hortense called at the house of these great people, and lo! it was done. The resemblance between the youngest daughter of the house and Hortense Novalis was so strong, so wonderful, that it threw the great family into a panic. And once more Hortense was bidden 'move on,' which she did, with considerable addition to her neat little fortune. Of course, I did not learn this, all of it, from herself; but a friend, residing in Paris, chanced to have dealing with parties who acted as mediates for the great family, and I was in possession of the facts before Hortense had landed in America. I have no doubt but that the woman, Virginie, reaped a rich reward, for she was the one who finally prevailed upon Hortense to give up her idea of setting herself up for a sort of Cora Pearl, and using her strong resemblance to the French family's beauty for her own advancement."

He checked his speech for a moment while he chose a fresh cigar.

"Probably, the good souls who like to think the worst of

me and of mankind in general, would be surprised to learn that Hortense Novalis did not cross the ocean out of regard for me, but simply because it seemed to her expedient to do so. She wrote me that she was coming, and instructed me to secure for her suitable apartments. I don't mind owning to you that I was rather glad she was to come. I do not take defeat kindly, and, in a little affair in which my feelings were uncomfortably active, I had been getting the worse of it. More than that, I was seeing the 'other fellow' scoring an easy victory over me. When I learned that Hortense was really coming, I decided to make the most of it. I got a little enjoyment in thinking of the surprise it would be to her to find that I was not quite 'nobody' over here. Of course, I knew that Hortense would make a sensation, and I was willing to help her to the little triumph here that she had missed on the other side. When she came, and found all in readiness for her, she was really grateful. I had made my arrangements through an agent, and they suited her perfectly. Poor Hortense! poor girl!" He sighed heavily. "Now, about La Belle Fabrice: All that is a mystery to me—her connection, if any, with Hortense. I believe that there was a reason, something more than she told, but the nature of it—well, an idea has occurred to me, but it's only an idea. Hortense had a vein of superstition, and she was childishly afraid of sickness and death. When she was angered, or as she thought 'insulted,' she was inclined to be vindictive. She was also, out of her inordinate vanity, jealous."

"You mentioned an idea, concerning La Belle Fabrice," suggested Ferrars, mildly.

"Yes. Pardon me; I was working toward that when I mentioned the superstition of Hortense. She came here, as I

have said, the possessor of a considerable fortune. She was pleased with her new home, and looked upon me as the cause of her present comfort, and possibly, as needful to her future prosperity. At any rate, one day, after her recovery from one of the attacks such as Doctor Grove described before the Coroner—you may remember it?"

Ferrars nodded.

"She was subject to these attacks, purely nervous and the result of fatigue, too many sweets—Hortense was a bit of a gormand—outbreak of temper, or a combination of these causes. And she looked upon them as very serious, as was natural to her temperament. Well, as I began to say, after one of these fits of hysteria, she astonished me with the information that she had been making her will, and she produced a copy of the document. Imagine my surprise when I found that I was her principal legatee, with Virginie, her maid, to whom she had bequeathed her wardrobe—all but the jewels—and a few thousand dollars."

"Oh!" Ferrars turned upon him a look of re-awakened interest. "Was that the will now in the Coroner's possession?"

"Yes. You can see why I was very glad that it was not opened and read at once."

Ferrars made no comment, and Quinlan went on.

"One does not often grumble at a will made in one's favor; but I assure you that the possibility of inheriting from Hortense Novalis did not fill me with unalloyed pleasure. If I had been a poor devil, I might not have been so thin-skinned—who knows? Besides, I knew, or believed, the will to have been made upon the impulse of the moment. I sat down and for the first and the last time, tried to talk 'conscience' to Hortense. It was upon this occasion that I learned the very little that

I know of the girl's past. You do not need to hear what was said on both sides. From being serious Hortense became reminiscent. She talked a little of her mother, to whom she had never written, and did not even know if she was alive; and a little of two girls, who had been her playmates in her country home. She fancied that they might be dead, possibly married—of course to some clown, and raising in poverty a brood of children. She spoke of them patronizingly, and called them 'poor things.' Evidently, she had been the daring one, the leading spirit, in the days when they were comrades. One of them she described as 'A sweet little thing, good-natured and sort of pretty, but with no wit and no ambition.' Of the other, I remember her exact phrase: 'Slow and sleepy and selfish. Nothing seemed to put her out, and yet she always managed to have her own way.' I remember that I laughed over this, and she finished by describing her: 'She wasn't much to look at, though; a slim pale thing, with red hair.' "

"Did she name them?"

"Not she. I told you Hortense was a mixture of openness and cunning. She did not tell me their names, nor did she change the will. She simply drew up a sort of codicil, which she placed in my hands while she retained the will herself. By this codicil she stipulated that in case of her death, and my inheriting after her, I was to use every effort to find, first, her mother, and then her two girl companions. If the mother lived, I was to make certain provision for her, and each of the two girls, as she called them, was to receive a small legacy. If the mother was dead, that which would have been hers was to be divided between the two girls. In either case, she left all to my honesty, only her maid, Virginie, being a witness. And the document, the codicil, was given into my hands

sealed, and not to be opened until after her death, and I, by the terms of her will, had become her heir. By this means, I was not much wiser than at first, for the names of her mother and the two girls were written in the sealed document I held, and were not made known to me."

"And that document?" asked Ferrars. "You have that, of course?"

"No. It has been destroyed; and here is the point; here we get back to La Belle Fabrice. In telling my story before the Coroner, I told it with sundry reservations. Over these things, Mr. Ferrars, I have thought much within twenty-four hours. Let me tell the rest, from my present point of view."

"As you please," assented Ferrars.

"Mention has been made of a woman, who was seen in the rooms of Hortense, or hanging about them. It was on the occasion of my first encounter with that woman that Hortense first mentioned to me the name of La Belle Fabrice. I had promised to come at a certain hour, and drive with her out Harlem Way. I arrived prompt to the minute; M'lle hated to be kept waiting, and it ruffled her temper. As I entered the anteroom, which I did without the ceremony of ringing, I heard the voice of Hortense. She was in her dressing-room, and she said to some one invisible to me, 'Don't fail, then. I'll be alone and I'll have time to talk with you.' I did not hear the answer, but in an instant Virginie came out, and opened the outer door for a woman, a small woman with black eyes. It was on this occasion that Hortense said of her, in answer to my question or comment, 'Yes, the beggars have found me out.' I did not press the subject, but I lingered a little beyond my usual time on our return from the drive, and when I left I saw the woman hovering about outside as if she

were waiting for some signal. This was less than a week before that memorable dinner, which was spoiled by the abrupt departure of Max Talfourd and La Belle Fabrice."

"Oh!" broke involuntarily from the lips of Ferrars.

"I saw Hortense again that evening, after the second visit of the strange woman. And then, for the first time, she spoke the name of La Belle Fabrice, plying me with questions about her. Had I seen her? Seen her upon the stage? Was she a fine actress? Was she at all pretty? When would she make her *debut?* Where did she live? etc. I think it was on that evening, also, that she began to talk of Max Talfourd. She had seen him two or three times, and it was clear to me that his big figure and fine head had made a strong impression upon her. She made me promise to bring Talfourd to call upon her. She was greatly excited that evening, and unusually talkative and capricious."

Again his eyes sought the face of Ferrars, again he smiled as he resumed his story.

"After that, I heard a good deal about Talfourd, and a little about La Belle Fabrice. Knowing Hortense as I did, it was evident to me that she was unusually preoccupied. To be quite candid, I fancied that she was nursing her admiration for Max Talfourd, and laying plans for his subjugation, and I confess that it amused me, and that it also amazed me a little."

"Go on," said Ferrars, like one growing impatient.

"One day she said to me, 'I have seen your La Belle Fabrice. I don't call her a beauty.' Two days later she sent me word that La Belle Fabrice was to dine with her, and that I must bring Talfourd, without fail. You know the rest of that chapter?"

"Yes," assented Ferrars.

"But there is a sequel. There was never any explanation of that episode—the sudden leaving of La Belle and Max Talfourd. Hortense had already got herself unduly stirred up, and she went off into one of her very worst 'attacks' of nervousness. It was on that occasion that Doctor Grove was first called in. Two days later, she commanded me to bring her the codicil. Of course I complied, and then Hortense cut out that paragraph by which she gave a legacy to each of her two girl friends, and made Virginie so much the richer, so that myself, Virginie, and her mother, were left as heirs. The names were held back even more carefully than before, and the new codicil given into my keeping. It contains, I suppose, her mother's name, and place of abode, and was to be opened, like the other, after the reading of the will, and acted upon at my discretion. That document I have in my possession."

"Is there no more to tell?" asked Ferrars, gravely. "I would like to ask a few questions, just here."

"There is more to tell," said Quinlan, "but the questions may come first."

For a moment Ferrars scanned his face narrowly, then he got up, as if sitting had become wearisome, and standing before the table looked across it and down into the face opposite him.

"Mr. Quinlan, what is your precise object in being thus frank and circumstantial with me?"

Instantly Frederick Quinlan, with head thrown back and eyes meeting his fairly, was on his feet.

"My object, Mr. Ferrars," he said, with dignity, "is to put you in possession of all the facts in the case, as nearly as I can, or as they are known to me; to be perfectly frank on my own part, lest by any reticence of mine, I cause you to err or to be at a loss."

"Yesterday," went on Ferrars, "in what might have been a moment of excitement, you said something like this: that you expected the finger of suspicion to point to you, and that the circumstantial evidence in the case would be against you. Was that your meaning?"

"That was my meaning."

"Then, let me ask you, since you foresee, even now, that you must put yourself on the defensive, since virtually you are —pardon me, but how do you hope to be benefitted by such an avowal as you are now making?"

"My avowal is intended to benefit you, Mr. Ferrars, as well as myself. Wait; hear me out. You have said that you are committed to justice and the defense of the innocent Is that still your ground?"

"Undoubtedly."

"Then let me tell you what I expect of you. First and best, I expect you to find the murderer. Failing in that, I expect you to vindicate the accused, be it myself or whomsoever it may. The horrible wrong, so often done in the name of justice, will not satisfy me in this case. If I am openly accused of the murder of Hortense Novalis and the woman Virginie, I expect you to prove me guilty or prove me innocent. No jury's 'disagreement' for me! No 'not proven!' Show that I did the deed, or that I did not do it, and could not have done it! Hang me, or send me forth vindicated! And, if the shadow falls upon another, do for him or her the same good work. Do not send a human soul out into the world with a bloody doubt suspended for life over his head, darkening all the future for him."

For a moment their eyes met as if in a challenge. Then the detective put out his hand.

"What does that mean?" asked Quinlan, for a moment holding back his own.

"It means that I am going to take you at your word," said Ferrars, in a voice that was very solemn in its low, slow impressiveness.

And then the two hands met.

CHAPTER LVI.

THE CODICIL.

"If that man is guilty," thought Ferrars as he resumed his seat, "he's an actor to wonder at. Now," he said, aloud, "I'm going to cross-examine you."

"Go on," said Quinlan, indifferently.

"At the time when the lady made known her wish to meet Max Talfourd, what were your relations with him?"

"Of the ordinary sort; acquaintances of long standing, moving in the same society, belonging to the same club. Not congenial spirits, by any means; and a little additional coldness had sprung up because of—because we both wanted to marry the same woman."

"I comprehend," said the detective. "Will you give me your opinion of Max Talfourd, as a man?"

"There's only one word to say of Max Talfourd; his worst enemy couldn't change it. He's a fine fellow, with no 'bad habits.' Popular, and deservedly so. There's no use in crying down Max Talfourd."

"What were your feelings when your friend Hortense asked you to present him?"

"Candidly, as I have said before, I was a trifle amused at the caprices Fate seemed bent upon, and a little annoyed to see Talfourd winning everywhere—to my loss. If I had loved Hortense, it might have been worse. But I did not love her well enough to be jealous. And I knew I had no cause to fear Max, in this case. He's one of your loyal Quixotes, and I knew Hortense wouldn't weaken him."

"When you were told that La Belle Fabrice was to be of the party, on the day of Talfourd's presentation, what did you think was the motive—on the part of Hortense?"

"Simply this, at first: I took it as a bit of Hortense' peculiar cunning. I had expressed my admiration for La Belle Fabrice a little too openly, unfortunately for myself; and Hortense, bent upon making a conquest of Talfourd, had hit upon the idea of using Fabrice as a means by which to divert me, and give her a chance of exercising her charms upon Max. She meant to pair us off to suit her purposes."

"Do you know how she contrived to get La Belle Fabrice to come?"

"No. Hortense had no lady visitors, and her isolation was a sore wound to her pride. To be snubbed by a woman was more than she could bear, and she was not attractive to women. She did not speak of Fabrice, after that little *contretemps*, until she got it into her head that she must appear upon the stage with her. Of course, I knew that her pride was involved. But I gave the Coroner my real theory about that; all the opinion that I had or have."

"All?"

"All, with this reservation. Looking back and pondering

over these things, I had reasoned like this: It was after the two visits, upon the same day, of the old woman we have spoken of, that Hortense first mentioned La Belle Fabrice. It was after the *contretemps* that she revoked her legacies and changed her codicil, cutting out her two former friends. Considering these things I asked myself, Might not this old woman be some former acquaintance of Hortense; some one who knew the two companions as well? Might not this old woman have seen Fabrice and, afterward, Hortense? May she not have told the one of the nearness of the other, and the rest have followed naturally? Hortense, not knowing or realizing or caring for the difference in their social standing, writes a little informal note, which brings La Belle Fabrice here quite as informally. She comes, and has only to use her eyes to know the truth. Don't you see that it would be quite natural for La Belle Fabrice to seek to bury the whole thing in oblivion, by holding her tongue and asking Talfourd and myself to do likewise? It would be natural, to Hortense, to hold her peace from sheer chagrin at her defeat."

"True," assented Ferrars; "it's a clever theory. And now, did Hortense succeed in meeting Max Talfourd?"

"Not to my knowledge."

"Did you hear her allude to him again?"

"Yes. I think she fully expected, at first, that he would repeat his visit. Hortense, as I have said, was vain and perhaps a little obtuse. It did not occur to her that any man would ignore her in that cool way. After a time she became silent concerning Max Talfourd, and finally she changed her mind about him, and only spoke of him to say some derisive thing. This proved to me that the slight hurt her more than she would own."

"Did she ever write to him?"

"To Talfourd? No, I don't think so."

"Could it be possible that Mr. Talfourd and she met clandestinely?"

"I might think that of her, not of Talfourd."

Ferrars was silent a moment. He seemed not to see his way clearly. Then—

"Mr. Quinlan," he asked, suddenly, "did you ever hear Hortense Novalis utter the name of Leah Paget?"

Across the fair face of young Quinlan came a quick wave of crimson. "No!" he said, curtly.

Again for a moment both were silent, each studying the face of the other. Then Ferrars spoke.

"Has it ever struck you, as a coincidence merely, that Miss Leah Paget disappeared from her home on the night of that unlucky affair, that encounter of La Belle Fabrice, Talfourd, and yourself at the door of Hortense Novalis' apartments?"

"No," said Quinlan, with a start; and then he added, "But I do not see the connection."

"No?" said Ferrars, absently. "I only asked you to see—the coincidence. Let us go back to the original subject. I want you to give me a more detailed account of your last interview with Hortense Novalis."

"What I can tell you about that night and what followed it, is, in my opinion, more important than all the evidence the Coroner will hear. I should not have let you go without hearing it. You know, of course, all that was said before the Coroner?"

"Yes."

"Well, it was true, but not all of the truth, up to a certain point. I told the Coroner that I came to the place at ten o'clock or thereabouts; that Hortense was in fine spirits, and

that she turned me out soon, to try her new gowns. All was true ; but when he asked me about the maid, I lied."

Ferrars looked grave but made no comment.

"I did not care to tell the Coroner's jury that I admitted myself with a pass-key, but that is what I did. The first thing I saw was Virginie, asleep, and breathing heavily, coiled upon the divan, where she was found by you next morning. I left my key in the door, on the outer side, and went past her softly, upon the further side of the room. There were two pass-keys: the one I carried, and the one which always hung upon a gilded hook at the side of the door ; on the inside, of course. As I have said, the rooms were one blaze of light, and Hortense was fairly glowing with excitement, and full of her anticipated triumph. She had brought out her jewels, and they were scattered all about, and I could see that she was anxious to have me out of her way so that she might dress and admire herself. I asked her why she did not rouse Virginie, and she said she didn't want Virginie; she was a nuisance sometimes. I would have aroused the woman, as I had sometimes done before, if Hortense had not said that. Instead, I passed out as softly as possible. As I came into the anteroom, and the curtains closed behind me, I fancied that the light was burning dimmer than when I first entered. But I dismissed the thought as only a fancy. My key was in the lock, and I remember distinctly that I locked the door carefully, thinking the while that Virginie slept too heavily to make a good outer sentinel. When I came in the morning, I found the door locked, apparently just as I had left it."

"Oh," broke in Ferrars, "you said—"

"Yes. I told you I had lied to the Coroner. When I went out that night, I set the spring-lock and noticed that the

key was in its place upon the hook inside. When I came back the door was locked still, and I used my key to admit myself. The other key, when I found my senses enough to look for it, was hanging in its place. You see—" he groaned, and dropped his head upon his hand, "you see now, perhaps, what it is that I have in my mind."

The eyes of the detective were fixed upon one of the rugs near his feet, and he did not lift them as he said:

"It will be best, I think, now that you have gone thus far, to put into plain words all that you have not yet spoken."

"Perhaps you are right." Quinlan dropped his hand and lifted his head again. "Sometimes things that have passed under one's observation, almost unnoticed, come back at a later time with startling distinctness, and with a new meaning. In this way some thoughts have come to me. Now, note this: I went to see Hortense, as I have said, at ten o'clock or a little later. The door was fast locked, the maid asleep, Hortense, with all her rooms aglow with light, was hovering over her finery, full of excitement and eagerness. As the minutes passed—I can see it clearly now—her excitement increased, and she was eager to have me go. It was a relief to her, I am sure of it, when I finally went. I can see her as she stood beneath the hangings at the door of her boudoir. I never saw her so handsome, so glowing and triumphant. I laid it all, at the moment, to her enthusiastic expectations of the coming stage *debut*. She was like one intoxicated with her own charms, and with visions of coming conquests. *Now*, I think that she was so ready to have me go, and so full of eagerness, *because she expected some one else.*"

Suddenly Ferrars looked up. His thoughts flew instantly

to the letter in his possession, the letter signed "Hortense," and written to Max Talfourd.

"If that was true," went on Quinlan, hurriedly, "if she *did* expect a visitor, say at midnight, and if that visitor came, while I was yet there, let us say, and while my key was in the door, what then? He opens the door, while the maid sleeps on, lowers the light a little, stands close back against the wall at the foot of the couch where the maid lies, and where there is a little space between the wall and the divan's foot, and the hangings fall in heavy folds. One could easily stand or crouch there, unseen in the dim light of that room. If some one *had* entered so, and lurked there until I had passed out, *don't you see—*" His voice ceased from sheer huskiness.

"I see," said Ferrars. "For your own sake, Mr. Quinlan, say no more."

"I have said enough, have I not?" said Quinlan, with a mirthless laugh. "At any rate, I have now told you all that I know—all. If I had said this to the Coroner, when he questioned me about the condition of the door, what would have been the result?"

"The result?" Ferrars was again upon his feet, but his tone was perfectly calm and not unkind. "The result? Mr. Quinlan, you know as well as I, that, if you had told this—all that you have told me—to a Coroner's jury, you would now be a prisoner charged with double murder."

"That is what I anticipated," said Quinlan, gloomily. "And after that, a long-drawn-out investigation, with all its attendant notoriety."

"I hope," said Ferrars, with a sudden change of manner, "that we may be able to find an end to this tangled skein without so much delay as you seem to anticipate. Mr. Quin-

lan, that codicil you told me of—is it in your possession?"

Without a word Quinlan went to the *escritoire*, unlocked a drawer and took from it a sealed envelope.

"Here it is," he said.

"And the seal unbroken?"

Quinlan took up a paper-knife and deftly broke the seal. "Read it," he said, and held it out to the detective.

Without a word Ferrars complied. "Do you know what it is?" he asked, then.

"No; except as I have told you."

"Listen," said Ferrars.

"'Instead of to my two old playmates, let one of the legacies meant for them go to my maid, Virginie; the other, to my mother, whose name is Mary Holly, of South Brandon."

"South Brandon," echoed Quinlan. "No state, then? that's like her. South Brandon—Mary Holly. Well, Mary Holly of South Brandon will have a decent fortune, if she is still living."

Ferrars put the codicil down upon the *escritoire*. "You mean by that—what?" he asked, curtly.

"Simply that if the mother of Hortense Novalis can be found, she will have her daughter's fortune."

Ferrars laid a hand upon his arm.

"That will sound very well," he said, coldly, "if you reserve it, and it is said—at the right time."

"And when will that be?"

"When the innocent are vindicated, the guilty punished, and the mother of Hortense Novalis found—alive."

CHAPTER LVII.

BEGINNING IN EARNEST.

"At last we may begin in earnest."

It was Francis Ferrars who spoke, with Captain Connors and the elder Talfourd sitting opposite him. The place, his new "headquarters," and the hour, midnight, following upon the day which saw the examination of the Coroner indefinitely postponed.

Once at the end of this ceremonial, the detective had lost no time in calling upon the two, and laying before them an outline of some of his plans, together with his reasons for the same.

His two auditors looked convinced but somewhat startled, while Ferrars was his usual composed and grave self. And when they had listened for a half hour to his low, firmly-spoken, terse sentences, this gravity was reflected in both their countenances. In the face of the elder Talfourd there was regret and anxiety, and Captain Connors remarked upon it.

"I confess," Talfourd said, "that I'm thinking about Fred Quinlan. And my son feels a bit uneasy yet. Somehow, it looks as if we were putting all the weight of suspicion upon him."

"We are," said Ferrars.

"Yes. And Max—he hasn't been too fond of Quinlan, but he feels now as if he were enjoying immunity at his expense."

"I don't think you quite know young Quinlan," said Fer-

rars. "He wouldn't trouble himself with such scruples. What he wants is conviction or vindication, and I have promised him *one or the other*."

When Max Talfourd's father left them, the Chief drew his chair close to the round table and took up a pen. "Now," he said, "I'll write you that little document." He began to write, and Ferrars, with a very serious face, paced the floor.

"The little document" consisted of only a few lines, and as he signed, folded, and enclosed it in an envelope, the Chief began to talk.

"I've been asking myself what would have become of this precious muddle if you hadn't dropped down among us, Mr. Ferrars. I confess that I should have floundered at the first bog. I wish I might ask you one question."

Ferrars stopped short, just opposite the Chief. "Ask," he said.

"Is the course Quinlan has taken that of a guilty man?"

"It's the course Quinlan would take—if he were guilty."

"By which you mean, that, if he had committed a murder, he would be the man to ask himself, 'What would I do if I were an innocent man?' and then to do it."

"Yes," assented Ferrars; "Quinlan's quite equal to that."

"———it all!" The Chief pushed back his chair and got up. "There's your note, Commander; excuse my forcible language. What I wanted to ask is this: Is Quinlan guilty?"

Ferrars came nearer and looked at him steadily across the table.

"No," he said, at last.

Another "forcible" ejaculation burst from the lips of the Chief.

"Then—then, what about Max Talfourd? Aren't we—excuse me—but are we not running a great risk?"

"Are you jumping to the conclusion that if Quinlan did not do the deed, Talfourd must have done it?"

"Doesn't it look so?"

"Not to me." He came closer to the Chief and lowered his tone almost to a whisper. "I do not believe that murder was committed by any man alive."

The Chief opened his lips, but a gesture from Ferrars stopped his speech.

There was a hasty step outside and some one knocked loudly at the door. It was the man Michael, already entered upon his duties. He came in panting, his shrewd face and alert eyes telling as usual half his story.

"Well, Michael?" said both his superiors, in the same breath.

"It's this, sir," said the man, saluting both. "The new firm is out in full cry—watchin' the Dresden Flats place, and," with a grin, "after Fred Quinlan."

"The new firm?" Ferrars turned a look of inquiry toward Captain Connors.

"It's a new Detective Agency," explained the Captain, with a touch of scorn in his voice. "Private, you know; working for rewards, for glory, for anything." Then his sense of justice came to the defense of the absent "new firm." "They have got two or three good men, though; I can't deny that."

When upon interrogation it was found that the "new firm" had done nothing, as yet, more startling than to place shadows about the Dresden Flats and the rooms of Frederick Quinlan, Michael was duly instructed as to his further duties. and dismissed. Then Ferrars obtained from the Captain all the in-

formation he could give concerning the new Detective Agency.

"I don't think you need anticipate much trouble from these fellows," said the Chief, at the end.

"Possibly not. Certainly not so long as they devote themselves to Quinlan."

"And Quinlan—by the way, I have thought over the story he told you. Do you think what he said about the career of Hortense Novalis abroad is to be relied upon?"

"I have the best of reasons for thinking so," responded Ferrars, gravely. "If I had not, I could easily verify any statements concerning the Paris or London business."

"Well," said the Chief, rising, "I wish we were all well out of this. There's your letter—I suppose I am not to be let into the mystery of its meaning?"

"Not yet," replied Ferrars, with a smile.

When he was alone Ferrars re-perused the letter with anything but a smiling face. It was brief and very simple.

It introduced the "bearer," and requested, over the official signature, of the person to whom it should be presented, that he would give any information, and in every way possible assist or serve the person who should present it, thereby obliging, etc. In short, it was an official passport, to the confidence of any to whom it might be tendered.

"I hope I may not need it," muttered the detective, as he put it away carefully. "But if I do, it will serve, I think."

CHAPTER LVIII.

LEAH AND MAX.

Francis Ferrars was a good general, and he soon had his small force in perfect subordination. First, there was Sir Felix Wyntoun, who, during these days of suspense and anxiety, had no thought but for La Belle Fabrice, her probable whereabouts, and possible danger. Given a clue and a word of encouragement from the detective, he would have followed it around the world, a very knight-errant. For, while he was very silent, very undemonstrative, and at no time inclined to argue or question, he clung grimly to his faith in the girl he loved.

"Of course, you know what you're about, Frank," he said to the detective, at the close of a long and exhaustive argument, "and I'm bound to fellow your lead. But all this silence and mystery is deuced hard on a man, and I cannot make myself doubt that little girl, even in the face of the whole of it."

"My dear fellow," said Ferrars, "I don't ask you to doubt her. Of course you mean La Belle Fabrice. On the contrary, do not doubt her, until you must. Never doubt any woman until she forces your scepticism."

And with this Sir Felix was compelled to be content.

It cost the detective more than one argument, however, before he had fully conquered Max Talfourd.

When the Coroner's inquest had been for the second time postponed, Max would have set out for the Paget mansion

forthwith. But this Ferrars would not permit And after a time his arguments prevailed.

Max was not lacking in common sense and courage, and to these the detective's reasonings were addressed.

He might write, however, always under certain restrictions; and write he did. At first just a few lines, an eager assurance of his unswerving devotion, and an appeal for an interview.

It was Mrs. Paget who replied to the first note, briefly and kindly.

Leah was grateful for his kindly expressions, but at present she could see no one. She begged him to be patient and to wait.

Max waited—twenty-four hours. Then he wrote again, this time to Mrs. Paget as well as to Leah.

In the meantime Mrs. Paget was being enrolled among the conspirators.

On the second day after her call upon Captain Connors, that official sent her a note, and acting in accordance with instructions therein contained, the lady ordered her carriage, and after an early luncheon set out alone. Ostensibly, she was going shopping. But she left her carriage on Broadway, and walked a little distance, turned down a cross-street, hailed a cab, and was driven straight to the new "headquarters" of the English detective. She found both Captain Connors and Ferrars awaiting her arrival. After a long conference with these two, she returned home with a very serious face, and with her mind filled with new thoughts, new hopes, new fears. But with no doubt, from first to last, as to her own part in the strange drama about to begin, and full of courage for the trial.

It had been decided, during her interview with Captain Connors and Ferrars, that Mrs. Paget was to receive Max Tal-

fourd, before he was permitted an interview with Leah ; and that she, always of course with her daughter's consent, was to make him acquainted with the facts concerning Leah's home-coming. The mother was then to advise her daughter to receive Max, but was to leave her to take her own course during the interview.

And so, when Max sent his third note of appeal, he was rejoiced to receive from Mrs. Paget permission to call, with a promise that when she had said a few words to him, he should see Leah.

But if Leah was left free, as she must be, to pursue her own course, Max was not. And when he set out for the home of his affianced, it was with a grave countenance, and anxiety was mingled with his eagerness. Eagerness, at the very thought of her ; of her face, her voice, her touch, of what she might say to him. Anxiety, when he remembered all that he must say, or that might be said to him, as it should happen.

Just what passed between Mrs. Paget and Max Talfourd need not here be recorded.

With her new and keener insight into the complications surrounding them all, she had taken on, if that were possible, an added tenderness and consideration. But then Max had always been dear to her, first for his mother's sake, then for his own, and lately for Leah's.

She told him the story of her daughter's home-coming, without comment, just as she had told it to Ferrars and the Chief. And she made him aware of the present state of affairs in her household.

Leah had been prepared for his visit, and had consented to see him. Presently the mother rang, and sent a message to

Leah, asking her to come down, as if the call were of the utmost ordinary nature. Eager, yet hesitating, she came slowly down.

Mrs. Paget was waiting for her at the foot of the stairs, and she took her two hands gently but firmly between her own.

"My dear," she whispered, "I have told Max all that I know. Is not that what you have wished?"

"Yes, mother," said the girl. "It is what I should have done, and—I think it would have been more than I could go through with. Thank you; thank you a thousand times! Now I can say the rest; can tell him good-bye, I hope, with decent composure."

"Then go, dear." The mother smiled a little as she pushed her toward the door. "God bless you both!"

Leah opened the door of the morning-room, crossed the threshold, and then,—she could never tell quite whether she herself had closed the door or whether—but what did it matter?—somehow, the door closed, and she, who had meant to enter so calmly, to preserve her dignity and be quite determined yet reasonable, found herself caught and held by two strong arms, kisses showered upon her lips and cheeks and eyes, murmured words of love and welcome and thanksgiving falling upon her ears! For one glad moment everything was forgotten, except that she loved Max Talfourd with a mighty love, and that he was beside her.

Then everything came back in a rush of misery, and she uttered a low stifled cry, so full of pain that it struck him like a blow, and wrenched herself from his clasp, putting half the width of the room between them, and turning upon him a pallid, despairing face.

So, for a moment, they confronted each other, and then all

that was best and strongest in each seemed to assert itself. He came toward her and spoke gently and firmly.

"Leah, my darling, your mother has told me everything that is necessary, more than I would have asked of you, more than I needed to know. There is one thing that I care for now, only one. You have come back to me, and I only care for you." He was looking, smiling, straight into her face.

She sighed, and a long shudder shook her whole delicate frame.

"I have come back—yes," she said, brokenly, "but not to you."

"Not to me? To whom, then, and why?" He took a step nearer, but she put up her hand.

"Don't—" she said, sharply; "don't come nearer; you must not."

"But why, Leah? Why may I not approach my promised wife?" He held his place, and she moved back and sank into a chair, that he might not see how her coward limbs had failed her, how she was quivering again from head to foot. But she gained no advantage by this, for he at once seated himself and drew his chair directly before her, with scarcely the space of a foot between.

"My promised wife," he said again, softly, as if he enjoyed the sound of it, and he smiled still, though the smile was touched with sadness.

Sitting thus, with his eyes upon her face, she was silent for long moments, fighting to regain her self-control, and at last her strong will and the Paget pride conquered. He did not know it, but his very attitude, the smile upon his lips, helped her immensely.

"Max," she began, slowly, as though not quite sure of her-

"TORTURED! YOU? WHAT DO YOU THINK I HAVE FELT, AND AM FEELING NOW?" Page 431.

self, "if my mother has told you all, she must have told you that, for me, there is no past, and no future except such as comes from day to day. Max, I beg of you, do not try me too much. I cannot bear it. I am not as strong as you think, and I need to be very strong. I am not your promised wife any more. I retract all my vows, and you must not object. It will make no difference if you do, only—that it will be harder for me."

For a moment he sat regarding her silently, a great pity and a great longing in his eyes. Then, with evident self-suppression, he spoke.

"Do you want me to understand that whether I wish it or not, however much it may hurt me, you mean to give me up, to retract your promise?"

"Yes," she breathed, with her eyes upon the floor.

"When did you first arrive at this decision, Leah? Was it before you left—even a day, an hour before?"

"No."

"When, then? Answer me; when?"

She lifted her eyes to his face. "You will not spare me," she said. "I see that I must suffer it all. It was when I first found that there must be a passage in my life, a time to be counted by weeks—weeks that have been longer than years, that must be ever dark to you and to all my friends. It was not before my going away. You know that."

"Then the change is not in you? not in your thoughts and feelings?"

Again her eyes were downcast. "It may be in my thoughts; it is not in my feelings."

"Leah, do you know what that implies?"

She did not answer.

"Answer this one question," he urged. "Is it solely because of this mystery, which you cannot make clear to me, to any one, that you wish to break our bond? Is that the only reason?"

She pushed back her chair and arose to her fullest height.

"Yes," she said, passionately, "it is because of that. How often will you make me say it before you will be satisfied, before I have been tortured enough?"

"Tortured!" And now was Max on his feet again. "Tortured! You? What do you think I have felt, and am feeling now? Leah—" Before she could evade him, he had caught her hands and held them fast, drawing her forcibly toward him as he spoke. "Look at me. Answer me. I know that you loved me when you promised yourself to me; do you love me less now?"

"No." She made no effort to release herself, and she looked him full in the face.

"And since then, has there been any time, any day, hour, or moment, when you have loved me less?"

"No, no, no!" she cried. "Don't you see! don't you comprehend! It is because I love you that I will not be the cause of any shame to you, or any doubt, now or in time to come. Between husband and wife there should be no secrets, nothing less than perfect mutual understanding, perfect trust. Max, you know that. Ask yourself, if, in my position you would not do as I have done. One may ignore past errors, past sins, even; may forget and forgive a wrong confessed. But a mystery in the life of the being nearest you, a closed door in the heart that loves you and that you love—you could not bear it, and the stronger the love the greater the torture. I will not tell you an untruth, Max. No, no!" He had made a sudden movement

toward her. "Be strong for me, Max, if not for yourself. Not long ago, by hours and weeks—ages ago, it seems to me, by the torture of the intervening days—I stepped across my father's threshold and out upon the street. All my life looked fair before me; there was not a cloud upon my horizon. I was thinking, oh, how happily! of you; and of—yes, I will say it—of our future, yours and mine. Yesterday," her voice fell to a hushed whisper, and every word marked a stab in the girl's heart—"yesterday, I crossed that threshold again, the same Leah Paget, just as honest, just as free from any taint or intended wrong, just as true to you, and loving you just the same—yes, more; for it was the love that feels the wrench of parting already began; that hears the clods upon the coffin lid. It was your promised wife that went out. It was a broken-hearted woman who came in; a woman lost to you, lost to herself, lost to hope, and almost lost to her faith in God!"

He had released her hands, and now, before she could stay him, he folded her in his arms again.

"It was an angel who went out," he cried; "an angel and a martyr who came back!"

CHAPTER LIX.

SOMETHING UNEXPECTED.

Leah caught her breath sobbingly. Before she could speak or stay his movements, he had lifted her hands, first one and then the other, to his lips, and seated her in a low chair, dropping down upon one knee beside her, and began to speak in low and earnest tones.

"Leah, do not remonstrate, my darling! Do not think that I disregard your trouble, or that I hold it lightly. By and bye, if you will, we will return to that again. I cannot give you up yet, dear, although later I may be forced to do so—not because of your secret, my dearest, but because—because I may come under the ban. I am menaced by a serious danger, Leah."

"You!"

"Yes, I. Wait, dear, and let me ask you a question. It takes you back to the day on which we last saw you, or the day before—I hardly remember which."

"What is it?" she asked, quickly.

"On that day, or one of those days, I sent you a photograph and a note; quite a letter, in fact."

He stopped, she was looking at him inquiringly.

"Leah, did you get that note?" he asked, huskily.

"No," she said.

"Leah, are you sure? Think, dear! The photo was one of Rowan's, a profile only; the letter—"

She shook her head.

"I asked you once to sit for a profile," she said, slowly. "But I never saw it." Then something in his face made her start. "Max!" she cried, "what is it?"

He was very pale and his lips were quivering. He held out both his hands, and looked straight into her eyes.

"Put your hands in mine, Leah," he said, gently, and she complied. "Listen, dear, and take away your hands when you will. Yes, I, too, have my mystery."

"You!" Her fingers tightened about his.

"Leah, have you read in the papers of the murder of the French actress?"

"Hortense Novalis? Yes, I have read a little. Only the head-lines, I think."

"About the time of your flitting, I sent you a letter and a photograph. On the same day, or a day after, I had occasion to call at the house of this woman, Hortense Novalis."

Instantly the girl drew back a little.

"Wait, dear. Hortense Novalis was killed on the night before you came back. And one of the officers who was first on the premises, and who made a thorough search through them, found, under the dead woman's pillow, a letter signed 'Max,' and a photograph. It was *my* photograph, Leah, and it was the letter I had written to *you*. I had not used your name, and it began simply 'My darling,' do you see? as if it had been sent to her."

The fingers clasped in his quivered and loosened their pressure, but they did not withdraw themselves.

"If this had been all," he went on, "your name, my darling, might never have been mentioned in connection with that hideous event. But, in searching further, they found in the grate, I believe, the envelope that contained that letter, with your name upon it."

The loosened fingers tightened their clasp again. She bent toward him a white, scared face.

"Max," she whispered, "what does it mean?"

"They are trying to find the murderer, Leah. Fred Quinlan has fallen under suspicion; it is known that we were not friends—"

"Max!" she broke out with a sharp cry, "Max, have they accused you?"

"Not yet, Leah."

"Thank Heaven! Now tell me everything, Max—everything."

An hour later Leah Paget came into her mother's presence with pale cheeks but glowing eyes.

"Mother," she said, "Max has told me much. I want you to tell me more. Especially, tell me about this English detective."

"Didn't Max tell you about him, dear?"

"A little. But I do not understand how he came to be here so opportunely."

"My child, Max Talfourd caused him to be sent for. He came to help us find you."

Leah drew a hassock close to her mother's side and seated herself upon it.

"Now," she said, "give me the history of that search for me. Tell me all, everything."

That evening Ferrars received, through the Chief of Police, to whose care it had been sent, a brief little note. It said :

SIR :— If you will kindly grant me an interview, I will come to you at any time and in any way you may think best. My business is important.

LEAH PAGET.

The detective read it and smiled.

"I thought it would happen so," he said to himself. "At last, things begin to run smoothly."

He recognized in the sending of the note, under cover through Captain Connors, the hand of Mrs. Paget, and he seated himself at once to reply.

He thanked Miss Paget for her promptness and her confidence. He would not ask her to come to him on this occasion, but would wait upon her in her own home that evening. Necessarily, he must come in as unobtrusive a manner as possible,

and, having said this much, he would rely upon her to receive him as seemed best.

Considering this note, his manner of going seemed a little strange.

Early in the evening, while it was yet daylight in fact, the handsome open carriage of Mr. Talfourd might have been seen rolling through the Park, down Fifth Avenue, and across Union Square. It had two occupants, Talfourd senior and Sir Felix Wyntoun.

A little later, this same conveyance stood before Sara Volney's door, while the two gentlemen paid their respects to that lovely lady.

As Talfourd senior and Sir Felix were taking their leave, a hansom drove up, stopped just behind the open carriage, and deposited a third caller, none other than Max Talfourd, who entered as the others came out, exchanged a jesting word with them, and said:

"Come back, won't you? I've only dropped in to ask after Sara's health. Come in, and then take me to town with you. I dare say that Sara won't let me stay long—it's an opera night, I believe."

"But I'm not going, Max," broke in Mrs. Volney, "and I shall consider you a godsend if you will tarry a while. Of course—" She turned to the others with a charming smile, but the elder Talfourd lifted a warning finger.

"You are going to tell a polite little fib, Sara," he said. "You've seen enough of us for once, and we really must go. Keep Max, by all means. He couldn't be in better hands. As for us, I'm going to present Sir Felix to Mrs. Paget. You youthful dames have monopolized him too much. He must see what a perfect creature the American matron is."

"When he has seen Mrs. Paget," flashed Mrs. Volney, "he will have seen the matron *par excellence*." And she laughed up into the face of Sir Felix, and slipped a white hand under the arm of Max Talfourd. "Come in, Max. You and I know who is even lovelier than the matron, do we not?"

She was looking especially brilliant, with more fire and color than usual in her face; and Sir Felix said, as the two went down the stone walk to the waiting carriage,

"Mrs. Volney has the beauty of all the sirens. However, has Max known her so long only to lose his heart to somebody else?"

"When Max knew her first, she was the wife of my cousin, my dear fellow," the father of Max replied. "And perhaps the sirens even might not have shone so fair alongside of two hundred pounds of husband each."

"Possibly not," replied Sir Felix, as he seated himself beside his host, "except perchance in France."

As Mr. Talfourd's carriage rolled away, the hansom which had brought Max followed close behind, and soon the first vehicle turned into a quiet street, the second turning also. Then, as if by one volition, both stopped.

Nothing was said, but Sir Felix sprang from the Talfourd carriage, and at the same moment, Ferrars stepped from the hansom. It was simply an exchange. When the carriage moved on, it was Ferrars that sat beside Mr. Talfourd, who ordered his coachman to drive to the Pagets, and it was Sir Felix who drove townward in the hansom.

CHAPTER LX.

AN ALLIANCE.

And so it happened, a little to her own surprise, that Leah Paget, on the evening of a day that had changed the current of her sombre thoughts, sat awaiting, with mixed emotions, the coming of the English detective.

Her thoughts were strangely confused for one usually so clear-headed. She had heard the story of the Dresden Flats tragedy, first from Max and then from her mother. Yet, somehow, only a few facts seemed to stand out from the mass with anything like distinctness, and even these did not at all concern Hortense Novalis and her fate. Indeed, if she had analyzed her feelings, she would have found among the incoherent medley something strangely like resentment against the dead actress. But now, as she sat waiting the summons to the drawing-room, she was not thinking of Hortense Novalis, but of Max Talfourd. And not of him as connected with the affair of the Dresden Flats, but of Max grieving for her absence, of Max holding fast his faith in her against all doubt and suspicion, of Max sending afar for help to find her. Yes, Max had done all this. And now, for his reward, she must send him from her ; must close her lips and her heart and her life against him. No, not her heart ; never that ! That she had given, that she would not recall. And her life ? Well, what was it ? What was the life of any woman, when she dares not look back for fear of heart-break, and when there is nothing but a long series of blank,

hopeless days ahead? And they would not even let her have peace! Because she forced herself to be calm, they thought she was very strong, and in one way or another, they would always be besieging her. They might spare her, perhaps, if she implored them; if she told them they were simply killing her. But she never would ask them. And as for the killing, if only they would not do it so slowly! Why, that was the one thing in the gift of the future that she could anticipate hopefully! And now this detective was coming, and because she had wished to see him. Why? she wondered. "He might have much that was important to tell her," her mother had said. But it was not that. No; she knew well enough why she had consented to see this Englishman. It was because that Max had sent for him, for her sake. Well, she would see him, but it could do no good. None. It was for Max' sake; that was all.

Thinking thus, the summons came, and Leah forced herself to look calm, and a trifle haughty, and went down to the little drawing-room where she was to receive him.

She had chosen to array herself in a gown of soft white stuff, severely simple and wonderfully becoming. And as she stood before him, pallid, clear-eyed, and stately, Francis Ferrars assured himself that it was worth while to have come across the ocean to know, and to serve, and to win, perhaps, the friendship of such a one as Leah Paget.

And she—a single glance assured her that this was not the "detective" of her imagination,—the man of gimlet eyes and cat-like tread; the self-made being whose every movement told of suspicion, shrewdness, and social inferiority.

Instead, she saw a fine-mannered, unaffected man, with a firm chin, a sensitive mouth, and eyes that were full of respect-

ful sympathy. It was not a face to doubt, much less to fear.

And Leah Paget soon found herself, the first moments of introductory formality being well over, seated near her visitor, and quite at ease.

She had taken the initiative, in her own sweet way, by speaking of her mother and of the story she had heard from Mrs. Paget's lips. And Ferrars had added a few words, in the manner of one who is quite willing to be frank, and then had waited as if for her to speak, which she did after a little hesitation.

"My mother has told me their was a special reason why I should see you, sir," she said, "quite outside of my own affairs."

"Yes, Miss Paget, and I am coming to the point at once, first asking you to keep in mind the fact that I came to America upon your account, and that my connection with this case of murder has been the result of accident and proximity. I have not sought this interview, however, solely upon your own account. Miss Paget, your friend Max Talfourd is threatened with serious trouble."

"Max—" She started and paled. In following the history of the murder, as it was told by her mother and by Max, she had noted the coincidence of dates, and it came back upon her with a new meaning now. It was on the eve of her disappearance that Max and La Belle Fabrice had encountered each other at the rooms of the dead actress. It was on the day of the murder that she, Leah, had returned. The dates had been dwelt upon, first by Max, then by her mother, and she, in her preoccupation, had simply wondered why they should dwell so upon details. What was all this about Hortense Novalis to her, except for that letter and photograph?

She had thought of nothing else. Her letter and the picture of Max—they had been found in the rooms of the dead actress by this detective. Therefore, of course, he could tell her how they came there. Max Talfourd's picture, meant for her, and in the possession of that dead woman! It was for this she had wished to see him. She wanted him to say what she would not, could not, ask of Max. She had sent for him that he might exonerate the man she loved. Yes; and to question him a little, perhaps, about this mysterious La Belle Fabrice.

She passed her hand across her forehead. It flashed upon her now how slow of comprehension her own trouble and self-absorption had made her.

"What is it," she faltered, "this trouble you speak of—?"

He drew his chair nearer her own.

"Max Talfourd has told me," he began, gravely, "that you did not receive a certain letter and picture sent to you by himself, a short time ago."

She shook her head.

"I can understand," he went on, "that at that time you may have been preoccupied, perhaps, even to the point of mislaying the picture or the letter unopened. Try to remember, please,—a letter upon smooth grey paper; a picture upon a large square card, in an envelope of its exact size and shape."

"No," she said, flushing hotly, "I never received either letter or picture."

Ferrars took from his pocket the letter and picture and ash-begrimed envelope.

"Look at this," he said, and he put the picture into her hand.

"It is he!" she exclaimed, "but it never reached me."

"Nor this?" He gave her the envelope.

"My name!" She scanned it with eager eyes. "I never received it. Why, don't you see, it bears no postmark?"

He flashed upon her a quick glance of admiration.

"Yes. Now look at the letter."

She took it, read a few lines, and then let it fall; her hands were trembling violently, her face was aflame. "There's blood upon it," she whispered.

The detective picked up the letter and proffered it again, but she waved it back. Her hand had grown suddenly firm, her eyes brightened, her whole face was vivid with some strong emotion.

"It is not mine," she said. "I never saw it before."

"And yet Mr. Talfourd tells me that the letter—unluckily there is no name used except his signature—was addressed and sent to you together with the picture."

"Was it you who found it?" she asked, faintly, knowing what his answer would be.

"I found it, yes, in the rooms of Hortense Novalis, after the murder."

For a moment the room was as still as a sepulchre; then, "What does it mean?" she said, in a hoarse whisper.

"It means, I believe, that Max Talfourd has an enemy, or that you have one, and that this enemy is striking at one through the other."

She got up and stood erect before him. "You are a detective," she said, "and do you say that, and believe it?"

"I say it and I believe it, Miss Paget. The secret connected with your disappearance, the secret you are guarding so care-

fully, and the mystery surrounding this double murder, are in some way connected. Stop! Do not speak yet. Let me ask a question. Is there any reason, known to you, why this should not be the case?"

She shook her head.

"Are you still determined to hold your peace, to keep secret the history of the last few weeks?"

"I must," she said, sadly.

"Very good. Is there any reason, then, why this secret, if it were found out without your aid, should not be told? Supposing, for instance, it became known to me, would you wish it suppressed?"

"No!" she said, clasping her hands and raising them aloft. "If you, if any one, could tell the story, all of it, and explain it clearly, I would bless him upon my knees. I would give him my life, if need be!"

"And if, to do that, and also to vindicate Max Talfourd, I should need your aid, such aid as you could give without any betrayal of trust, might I count upon it?"

"Yes, in any way, and to the limit of my poor strength."

"I may have to ask you to do a very distasteful thing, and I shall exact, perhaps, blind obedience. Have you the courage, the strength of will, the self-control, to play, if need be, a difficult part?"

"If need be, yes."

"Wait. I warn you that the thing I have in mind is not easy. The culmination may be terrible. I shall not ask for your aid except as a last resort, and if you are not strong and a good actress, you might fail me, and then—"

She interrupted him by a gesture.

"Tell me," she said, "is it to vindicate Max Talfourd that you propose this?"

"That—yes."

"And what else?"

"Possibly to vindicate you.'

A strange look came into her eyes—a look almost of terror.

"You don't know what you would do," she said, tremulously.

Ferrars was silent.

"But I will not fail you," she said, suddenly regaining her self-command. "All women are actresses upon occasion. They would appear pitiable creatures, sometimes, if they were not. If you will trust me, Mr. Ferrars—" She held out her hand, and he took it and lifted it to his lips.

CHAPTER LXI.

NICKERSON ON THE TRAIL.

"Well, what is it now?"

It was Captain Connors who asked the question, having just stepped from his cab at the door of Ferrars' "headquarters," whither he had driven in response to a note from the detective.

"Abner Paget must be brought to his senses, and I think you are the man to do it."

"Umph! What has happened?"

"Nothing of importance. But I have seen Miss Leah Paget, and now, in order to carry out our plan, her father must be brought into sympathy with his daughter's wrongs. The man has a heart, I suppose. Can't you put the matter before him somehow, so as to waken him to a sense of the real situation?"

The Captain considered a moment. "Seriously, yes," he said, "and it ought to be done. If you give me *carte blanche*, say, in any argument I may think best, I'll try it."

"Do it; and today or this evening, if possible. At any rate, you must say enough to cause him to remain neutral, if you cannot do better."

"I think we can do better. Is that all? By the bye, I'm having those fellows watched."

"Those fellows?"

"Yes; the new detectives who are shadowing Quinlan. They are not so slow, either, let me tell you. They've sent to Scotland Yards for information about Hortense Novalis, and to Paris for the same, and for a history of Quinlan's career there. Somebody's coming—I'll tell you more another time."

It was the man Michael who broke in upon their interview.

He bowed to his new commander, and, at sight of his Chief, bowed again, his mouth widening into a grin.

Captain Connors consulted his watch and took up his hat. "Michael is brimfull of information," he said, good-naturedly, "and it's time to go upon my own little affairs." He shot a meaning glance toward Ferrars. "If all goes well, I will let you know by messenger; if otherwise, personally." Ferrars followed him to the door, and said a word or two in a low tone. Then, as the door closed, he turned to Michael with a brisk movement.

"Well, Michael?" he said.

"Yes, sir," said Michael, rubbing his hands. "Well, sir, I've got her; I had to do it."

"You have got her? Where, Michael?"

"Down stairs, sir. In a carriage at the corner. I didn't think it would do to bring her up till I saw you."

"Certainly not. But the woman—who is with her?"

"Oh, I brought one of the boys along with me in the cab, sir. Yer see, she came out of the new place without her feathers and war paint, and she had a little gripsack in her hand. She went straight to a ticket-office and I saw her buy a ticket, but I couldn't get near enough to hear where it was for. But I heard the agent tell her that the train left in about an hour, so I just nabbed her. I expected she would make a big stand-out, but she didn't. One of the boys happened to be handy, and so I brought him."

Since Michael had risen from the ranks to special duty, he had condescendingly dubbed all the rank and file of uniformed police "the Boys," and it was a 'boy' of double Michael's age and avoirdupois who escorted Michael's captive up stairs and into the presence of Ferrars. Then Michael was dispatched upon some errand, which, to judge from his hasty departure in the cab, was of importance and against time.

"Tell him to come prepared for a two or three days' absence," Ferrars had said, as Michael paused at the door for this last word. "And there's not a moment to lose. Don't bring him up; come yourself, and look after your prisoner while I go down to him." As Michael went clattering down the stairs, Ferrars consulted his watch. "About an hour," he said to himself; "and a quarter of that time already gone."

When the "boy" and Michael's prisoner were in the room,

Ferrars closed the door, and said, without so much as a glance at the woman,

"I want to send a word to the Chief of Police." He scrawled a few words upon a card and put it into the hands of the officer, accompanying it with a significant glance which the other was quick to comprehend. "Take this," he said, and the policeman bowed and went out. At the foot of the stairs he stopped and read the few words upon the card.

They were "Wait at the entrance for further orders."

"I thought so," muttered he. "Didn't I just see the Chief come out of this very door? Something's up." In which sage conclusion he was more than sustained by the after-events of his vigil.

After closing and locking the door, Ferrars raised a curtain just beside the woman. The long twilight was almost gone, and he wanted all its remaining brightness by which to scan her face. He drew up a chair and seated himself before her. She had dropped into one, as if she were exhausted, upon her first entrance.

It was the same woman whom we have seen upon the street, and in the character of unwelcome guest, and possible black-mailer, in the rooms of La Belle Fabrice. She was staring at Ferrars with a direct, unabashed, and somewhat indignant gaze.

"I'd be very much obliged," she said, at last, "if you'd tell me what all this means?"

Ferrars started slightly, and began once more to scrutinize the woman before him, feature by feature, with a puzzled look at first and then with a smile, as if at some suddenly occurring resemblance. But he suppressed the smile and the thought that came with it, and only said:

"I'll explain in due time, Madam. But first, I'll trouble

you to let me look at the railway ticket which you have in your pocket."

She started but did not comply.

"What do you want with that?" she asked, sharply.

"I would advise you not to parley now, Madam," he said, sternly. "How I shall treat you depends much upon yourself. Time is of value. If you want me to turn you over to the Chief of Police, try to put even straws in my way. I'm an officer, and I know you of old. The ticket, please."

The occasions upon which Francis Ferrars spoke in this tone, to man or woman, were very rare, and it showed that if need be this discreet and naturally delicate and kindly man could be merciless. And it had its effect. The woman produced the ticket and sullenly placed it in his hand.

"Thanks." Instantly his old suavity returned. "Ah, yes; just as I thought. You were going to South Brandon. I'll keep this ticket, if you please; reimbursing you for it, of course. And I'll make it for your interest to answer some questions promptly and truthfully." He read her face with a quick glance; it was still rebellious. "Of course, I cannot insist beyond a certain point. You do not possess anything in the way of information that cannot be got from others. You can put me to a little trouble, if it suits you. I can put you in prison, if it suits me."

"What for?" The woman paled a little, but still looked rebellious.

"Never mind what for. Choose: Will you go back to the snug little den which you have fitted up in such rare taste, with the money you got from the murdered woman, Hortense Novalis, or will you go to jail under—well, a serious charge?"

Even this did not seem to have frightened the woman, and she was still resentful. But she asked, like one who yields reluctantly to superior force,

"What do you want me to say?"

"The truth. First, about the railway ticket. Why were you going to South Brandon?"

"I wanted to look for somebody."

"Is that all?" he asked, sharply. "Are you sure it is not to meet somebody?"

"Yes, I am sure."

"Do you know where La Belle Fabrice is?" he asked, suddenly.

The red flush that overspread her face told him that he had hit the mark.

"No, I don't," she said, shortly.

"You know there has been a reward offered for her, or for information concerning her?"

"Yes," doggedly.

"What reason have you for thinking that La Belle Fabrice might be found there?" He held up the ticket.

"She lived there once," said the woman, sullenly—"a long time ago."

"Oh!" he exclaimed. "One moment." He sprang to the door and blew a sharp whistle. Then back again to catch a hat off a rack and lock a desk. By the time this was done, the officer whom he had bidden wait below was at the door, where Ferrars met him. "My good man," he said, "I leave this woman in your charge. I shall return in half an hour, I think. Lock the door and admit no one."

The man nodded. He did not know Ferrars, but he had been assured by Michael, whom he did know, that it was "all

right." Moreover, he had seen the Chief himself emerging from this very house.

"I'll see to it, sir," he said, and straightway took possession.

Ferrars hastened out and was soon upon the street, where he waited, watch in hand, until, after two or three minutes, a cab came tearing around the nearest corner, and Michael's head was visible before it came to a halt beside the pavement. A glance showed, too, that Nickerson, the man of theories, and now enrolled in the service of Ferrars, was seated within.

"Ah, here you are! Jump out, Michael, and wait for me here."

In another breath, Michael was standing alone upon the pavement, and the cab was rattling away at its liveliest gate in the direction of the Grand Central Depot. Under cover of the noise and confusion, Ferrars gave his instructions to Nickerson.

"Are you ready for a chase?" he began.

"Quite," said Nickerson, who liked this lively sort of work.

"Good. There's a possibility that the runaway Comedienne, La Belle Fabrice, may be in South Brandon. You are to go there by first train, provided we are in time."

"We shall be in time."

"Inform yourself as soon and as quietly as possible if the lady is there, or any of her friends. Don't make yourself known, but telegraph me, and look for a letter of instructions by first mail. Name—"

"John Nickerson will do."

"Very well." Ferrars produced the ticket taken from

Michael's captive, and put it into his hand. "You are going upon a chance, but I am inclined to think you'll find the lady. It's a delicate matter, and whether she is there or not, wait for your letter of instructions."

Nickerson pocketed the ticket and some money, pressed into his willing grasp in a pleasantly off-hand fashion.

"As I'm to be gone so long," he said, "I suppose you will fill my place?"

"I intend to take your place myself."

"I'm glad of that, for a number of reasons," said Nickerson. "And now I'll make my report. Polly Cousin came there nearly an hour ago. Up to the moment I left, he was still there."

"Very good. In your absence, Mr. Cousin will receive my personal attention."

"By Jove!" ejaculated Nickerson, "I begin to think he's worth it. There's my train. Good-bye."

CHAPTER LXII.

AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE.

When Francis Ferrars re-appeared, after seeing Nickerson safely *en route* for South Brandon, he found Michael on guard without, and the "boy" within, and he lost no time in dismissing them, each upon a special mission.

When he again seated himself near the impatiently-frowning woman, his face had relaxed something of its grimness.

"It's a long time since we have met, Madam," he said, just the shadow of a smile lurking about the corners of his mouth. "But I have a tolerable memory for faces, and for voices. As for names—well, ladies change theirs so often, you know; and you, I believe, called yourself at one time Mrs. Harris, did you not?"

She flushed angrily, but it was clear enough that she knew whereof he was speaking.

"I think it was Mrs. Harris," he went on, "and I think, at that time, you were more or less interested in the dramatic stage. It was in Chicago, I believe; and it must have been four, five, yes, nearly six years ago. Oh, I see you have not forgotten."

The woman had risen and was looking about as if for a way of escape. Ferrars merely smiled.

"Calm yourself, Madam," he said. "You have nothing to fear from me, unless you prove to be a greater sinner than I now believe you to be. You possess information that I want, and that I mean to have: I am not sure but you may be useful to me as well. Do you know who I am?"

The woman sat down again, the sullen look not yet gone from her face. "I know you are one of those detectives," she said. "There were three*of them and—" She stopped and studied his face a moment. "Yes," she said, "the newspapers were full of them one was big, and one was handsome, and one—yes, of course, you must be the Englishman."

"Right," he said. "Your memory serves you. Jocelyn was big, and Bathurst was handsome, and I'm neither one nor

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* See "Shadowed by Three" by same Author. Francis Ferrars was a prominent character in that remarkable book.

"STOP! IF YOU THINK I KNOW ANYTHING ABOUT THAT MURDER, YOU ARE MISTAKEN." Page 454.

the other ; nevertheless, I'm the Englishman. Are you going to answer my questions and trust to my generosity ?"

"Oh, of course," she said, and even in that moment of grudging submission there was a greedy look in her eyes, as the word "generosity" passed his lips. "I've got to live, and if you go and mix me up in some new scandal, I'll be all broken up again, and my business spoiled, just as I've got a start."

"Don't let that make you too anxious," he said. "I see you've taken a fancy to fortune-telling, and I won't interfere, if you are not too severe upon the seekers after knowledge of the future. I have had an eye on you for some time." He noted her start and the sudden look of fear that crossed her face. "And I know that you have been, in some way, connected with Hortense Novalis—"

"Stop !" she cried out, sharply. "If you think I know anything about that murder, you are mistaken ! I don't." And here, for the first time, she looked him full in the face. "I'm not afraid of that !" she cried again, fiercely. "Hortense Novalis was the best friend I had in the world ! I'd go as far as the next one to find out who killed her."

"As far as South Brandon, I suppose you mean ?"

Again she looked at him squarely. "You're mistaken again," she said, sullenly. "I don't believe that girl killed Hortense."

"Meaning Fabrice ?"

"Yes, meaning Fabrice. There was another one, and if I had my liberty and a little money, I believe I could find her."

"Now," said Ferrars, "we are coming to the point. When you have convinced me that you are sincere, you shall be paid well, and I will promise you protection. But I shall have you watched, and if you attempt to play me false, it will not

be pleasant for you. You know what I mean. I don't fancy that you are implicated in this double murder, but you possess knowledge that may help us clear up the mystery. Now, then, how is it to be? Are we allies, or enemies?"

"Oh, you know well enough that I've got to submit," she said. "I'm not going to put my head in a noose."

"You are a very wise woman," said Ferrars. "So let's begin, for time is passing. Oh, by the way, allow me to refund the money for that ticket, and you are going to want cash to enable you to make your *debut* as a prophetess in a proper manner, I suppose. Permit me to make you a small loan."

The sullen look faded from the face of the woman, as she clutched the "small loan," and when she had it deep into her pocket, her lips relaxed, and Ferrars knew that he had no need to fear, so long as he had money to buy and she a secret to sell.

When Francis Ferrars laid his head upon his pillow that night, or rather the next morning, for the small hours were striking, he felt, and justly, that a good day's work had been scored.

Nickerson was well on his way. The letter of instructions, too, so full of detail as not to admit of any possible error through lack of clearness, and containing matter which would be apt to startle even so level-headed a man as Nickerson, was already written and ready for the earliest mail.

Captain Connors, who had taken upon himself the duty of seeing Abner Paget, and reducing him to a more reasonable frame of mind, had reported favorably. Here again, Ferrars having seen Paget *pere* upon one occasion, had been wise in choosing his messenger. Captain Connors, when once thoroughly aroused was, like most easy-going men, capable of being terribly direct

and in earnest, and he had found the occasion in this visit to Abner Paget.

"I had to use knock-down arguments," the Captain said later, when he was rehearsing the scene for the benefit of the detective. "But luckily I was well supplied with arguments of just that kind."

The simple truth was this: Knowing his man, the Captain had taken a position squarely before the obdurate old merchant, and said, bluntly:

"Mr. Paget, do you want the name of your daughter connected with that of Hortense, the woman who was murdered night before last at the Dresden Flats?" Of course there was an angry outburst, and then the Chief had simply gripped the arm of the enraged and haughty man and forced him to hear some plain truths, tersely stated.

"If you will take the trouble to read the reports of the Coroner's inquest, that of yesterday in particular, you will see an account of a singular sort of meeting on a certain evening, a little more than a month ago, and you will see in cold print the names of Fred Quinlan, Max Talfourd, and a lady who is called Fabrice."

Of course he had already read this account, and the Chief had guessed as much.

"That cursed fellow, Talfourd—" Mr. Paget had broken out. But the Chief promptly checked him.

"Don't go any further in the wrong direction, man," he said. "There's one thing that you won't see in the papers, because we have thought it wise and kind to suppress it, and that is this: When the first search of the rooms was made, there was found an envelope bearing upon it the name of your daughter, Miss Paget."

"Bosh!" cried the old man, fiercely. "My daughter's name! I don't believe it!"

"Unfortunately for your scepticism, I was the one to find the thing."

"You!" Abner Paget weakly sat down in the nearest chair.

"Yes, I; and that is not all. On the night of this meeting at the rooms of the murdered woman, which the Coroner is making so much of, your daughter disappeared."

"Good God!"

"And, on the morning after the murder of Hortense Novalis, your daughter came back."

Abner Paget lifted both hands to his head like a man dazed.

"My God!" he groaned, "are you going to tell me that my girl killed that—that creature?"

"I? No. It has been left for you, Abner Paget, to couple your daughter's name with that deed—you, her father. What a father! I don't wonder that she left your house, but why did she come back? Ah! I forget; she has a mother. Man, *you* have suspected her, accused her, no doubt. Did it ever enter you heart, for just one moment, that she may have been a victim?"

"Oh, my God! Oh, my daughter! Leah!"

It was the cry of a strong man broken upon the rock of his own pride. The oak which never yet had bent, was broken. Henceforth, he was as wax in the hands of the Chief of Police, and meek and abject in his obedience to the English detective, of whom he heard then for the first time.

In the grey of morning, while Mrs. Paget lay tossing restlessly, unable to sleep for thinking of all that she had listened to that night, a tall gaunt figure came to her bedside, and bent

over her, and spoke softly, for Leah was sleeping, or seeming to sleep, beside her.

"Miranda, wife."

A shaded lamp was burning low near the center of the room, and by its light she could see the tall figure and care-worn face. She sat erect at once, lifting her face and peering anxiously into his. Then, also mindful of Leah, she whispered:

"Abner, what is it?" At the same time her hands met his instinctively. "Are you sick, Abner?" It was the quick nervous grasp of his hands that first indicated to her the change in him. "What is it?" she whispered, tremulously, and she drew him down to a seat upon the side of the bed. "Abner, tell me?"

"Wife, I have been generously dealt with." He bent his head and shaded his face with one hand as he spoke. "I have been arraigned before God while I am still living to make reparation. Wife, our daughter, our Leah—I have wronged her and wronged you. I don't know how to say it, but I want you to try and forgive."

"Abner, hush; we will waken Leah. Wait till I get up."

"No," he said, putting a hand upon her shoulder. "Don't. I cannot talk now. Only, wife, will you send Leah to me? Tell her that I beg of her to come to me in the morning, early." Again the hand gently pressed her shoulder, and then, like an awkward bashful boy, he stooped his grey head and kissed his wife's lips. In a moment more he was gone, and the door of the room closed softly behind him

A great sob shook the frame of the wife, whose cheek burned and flushed like a girl's, under the unaccustomed caress of the man who, for twenty years and more, had been her lord rather than her lover. There was a sudden movement, and Leah

sprang erect, and then flung herself down again, crying,

"Mother! I listened. I listened willfully. Mother, I am going to him. May I go now?"

"Yes, my child; yes."

Instantly the girl was out of the bed, and flinging a loose dressing-robe about her, adjusting it while she ran, she was out in the hall, hastening with flying feet, and calling softly as she ran, "Father, father."

And so peace was restored in the household of the Pagets, —peace and mutual confidence, but not happiness, not rest, for Leah's secret remained untold. The shadow still hung about them.

CHAPTER LXIII.

WHAT "SOCIETY" SAID.

For several days after the departure of Nickerson, Ferrars went and came, always busy, always self-contained, doing nobody knew precisely what. On the morning of the fifth day he received a telegram. After reading and replying to this, he wrote three or four brief notes, gave to his secretary some concise instructions, packed a small bag, and drove away in a hansom.

For five days New York, and the friends who were looking to him for all hope and comfort, knew him no more.

Then, as suddenly and as quietly as he went, he came back.

Perhaps he had exhausted the field of his first labors, or, possibly, he had fallen upon a new scent. Be this as it may, he was seldom to be found now at the "headquarters," where, however, the methodical secretary might now be met at all times. And the office of Captain Connors knew him no more for many days.

In fact, as time went by, the people who had been most absorbed in the affairs of our story, seemed to have fallen into a lethargy.

Concerning the murders, there were no new rumors nor discoveries, nothing to encourage the Coroner to re-assemble his "just men and true," until he began to fear that the end had been reached, and that the fate of Hortense Novalis and her maid might as well be counted among the mysteries that would defy time, and might, therefore, be "passed upon and so lost in oblivion."

But just as this decision had taken firm root in the astute mind of the Coroner, something happened.

It was nothing more than a visit from one of the members of the "Star Detective Agency," who begged the Coroner to stay this action yet a little longer; to wait, in fact, the result of certain efforts now being made, which promised to throw a new and strong light upon the Dresden Flats mystery. He could explain nothing, but he promised much, if time were granted him.

The speech of the officer was impressive, and the Coroner was impressed. As a result, the examination, or its conclusion, was again indefinitely postponed.

In the meantime, the body of Hortense Novalis, embalmed by skilled hands, and arrayed in the festal robes in which she died, still lay in the vault, where it would remain, subject to

the orders of the Coroner. The maid, Virginie, was beside her mistress.

And so the world moved on. Frederick Quinlan, always preserving a splendid unconsciousness of his double surveillance, went and came much as usual, save that all invitations to parties, receptions, and the like—and there were many—were "declined with thanks" and the proper regrets.

Of Max Talfourd, very much the same might be said, but for this exception : His father's house held two distinguished guests now—guests who had been induced to give up their down-town quarters by Talfourd *pere*, who had volunteered to put them through the 'city paces' in excellent style, upon condition that they took up their abode with him.

The "*Evening Call*" was among the first to chronicle the fact that Lord Louis Barham and Sir Felix Wyntoun were the guests of Mr. Talfourd ; and it added that the Talfourd home was a delightful one, and the Talfourd *chef* simply perfect.

"Only think," said Quinlan's friend and *chaperone*, old Mrs. Brevoort Davies, to Miss Ida Gadaway, "the Talfourds have not opened their house in an age ! And now they don't intend anything great. I have it from Mrs. Talfourd herself. The young men knew Max abroad, she said—fancy calling the titled personages just 'young men !'—and they were pleased with the opportunity to live for a little while in an American home."

"Yes," sighed Miss G. "I suppose they'll be quite absorbed by their quiet *dinners en famille*,—the Pagets and Sara Volney. Do you think Leah Paget will go, after all the talk ; and wasn't that a queer affair, though ?"

"Hush ! Of course she will. Leah Paget is one of those

girls who can do anything they like. Let me whisper a word, my dear—follow my example and do not repeat that question. Leah Paget's little sensation will be politely ignored by society, because she is Leah Paget, and because the Talfourds have not dropped her."

"She does not go out, I hear?"

"Only to quiet affairs and the concerts. I wonder if there is anything in the report that she is staying with Mrs. Volney?"

"I dare say; that would be clever; Sara is still wearing black, you know. Of course, with her, Leah has a good excuse for not going out much."

"Hush!" said the *chaperone*. "There is Papa Talfourd."

"Where?" asked Miss Gadaway, leaning out of her opera box.

"In the box next the Carrolls. Ah! and they're both with him—the two Englishmen. How handsome Sir Felix Wyntoun is!"

"Yes, and how unlike the other."

"Lord Barham?"

"Do you suppose it is Lord Barham?"

"I mean to know. Ah, the curtain."

Mrs. Brevoort Davies settled back in a position of luxurious interest, but before turning her eyes upon the stage she had caught the gaze of Mr. Talfourd, and made him a pretty and almost imperceptible signal.

Not imperceptible to Mr. Talfourd, however. He saw it and made his comment, tapping the newest comer lightly upon the shoulder.

"We have been signalled already, gentlemen," he said, "and

by Mrs. Brevoort Davies. Our fate is sealed. Will you go with me to her box, Lord Barham, and be presented ?"

Lord Barham elevated his eyebrows and applied his eye-glass, peering about near-sightedly.

"Pawn my word !" he drawled, "no, I think I won't ; not just yet, you know-er—weally."

"But it will come to that."

"Aw, I suppose. I say, though, couldn't you go over, and if I must, you know, why Wyntoun can *chaperone* me to you-er—and the lady."

"The ladies," corrected Mr. Talfourd senior. "Do not let Miss Gadaway take you off your feet."

"Off his head," substituted Sir Felix. "I'll bring him, if I must, Mr. Talfourd."

Of course it ended in Mrs. Brevoort Davies having her will. Such things usually did, and whether he would or not, Lord Louis Barham, with his pale face, slightly stooping shoulders, weak eyes and inevitable eye-glass, was duly anchored in the opera box of Mrs. Brevoort. He was wonderfully easy to get on with, so Miss Gadaway afterward assured any number of her dear friends, adding that he was "wholly unacquainted with American manners and customs," but was full of interest and very eager to learn. He wanted to make a study of their society, he had assured Miss Gadaway, and congratulated himself upon having begun most auspiciously.

Before the end of the evening, he was committed to Mrs. Brevoort Davies for a very informal luncheon, and to Miss Gadaway for a musicale.

Lord Louis Barham was not a great conversationalist, but then it was not necessary that he should be. One man can't be everything, and was it not enough to be a live lord ?

Besides, he was a charming listener, and as fond of five o'clock tea and gossip as was Mrs. Brevoort herself. In fact, he was as wax in the hands of the fair sex, and before the end of the week he was Mrs. Brevoort Davies' most devoted slave. So much infatuated did he become, that he gradually cut loose from Mr. Talfourd and Max and Sir Felix, and went about at the heels of his new *chaperone*, drinking tea, listening, and chatting. Sometimes he brought with him Max, Sir Felix, or Talfourd *pere*, but oftener he was alone.

CHAPTER LXIV.

MR. PAGET IN THE FIELD.

At the time this young lordling was making his bow to society, marshalled by Mrs. Brevoort D., as the lady was familiarly named by her "set," Leah Paget was passing through an ordeal.

One morning, early, and very unostentatiously, Francis Ferrars made his appearance before Leah Paget. He was serious and seemed hurried.

"Miss Paget," he said, at once, "I have come to claim your promise."

"Oh!" Leah caught her breath, but looked him squarely in the eye.

"It is time to act. The thing I wish to accomplish neces-

sitates a change of residence for you. I want you to take up your abode with Mrs. Volney."

The girl started again, flushed, and then paled.

"May I know why ?" she asked.

"Not yet."

"But Sara—Mrs. Volney—is going away."

Francis Ferrars smiled. "Leave that to me," he said. "The question is, will you go ? And will you obey my instructions once you are there ?"

He was looking her squarely in the face, and after a moment she lifted her head with a proud gesture.

"You have my promise already, sir. I will obey your instructions."

"Good. The rest you may trust to me."

On the evening of that day Abner Paget rang at Mrs. Volney's door and was admitted.

Mrs. Volney was at home, and two gentlemen arose as the last comer entered. Sara Volney's welcome was as gently cordial as ever, when she came forward to welcome him.

"Mr. Paget, ah, this is kind !" Then she turned swiftly, "Mr. Talfourd," she said ; and instantly Talfourd *pere* arose and gave his hand to Paget, dropping back in his seat again with utmost *sang froid.* Again Mrs. Volney turned. "Mr. Paget, allow me, Lord Barham."

Lord Barham arose and languidly saluted.

"Happy to meet you, Lord Barham," said Mr. Paget.

"Aw-er—yes, thanks, awfully pleased, I'm shuah."

Mr. Paget, always prompt and straightforward, soon made known the object of his visit, prefacing it by a word of apology.

He found, quite unexpectedly, that he must absent himself

from the city, setting out at once. He might be gone two weeks or more, and he very much wished to take Mrs. Paget with him. As for Leah, they, of course, could not leave her at home with only the servants, and so he had come to ask could Mrs. Volney be induced to go to his house and keep Leah company during their absence?

Mrs. Volney looked very sympathetic, but hesitated a little, and Talfourd *pere* broke in upon their conference in his hearty way.

"Paget, why didn't you think of us, of Mrs. Talfourd? Don't you know what a boon the presence of Leah would be to us all? Of course, Sara can't go, and shut her door in all our faces. I protest against it. I value my evenings in these rooms, sir."

"And I, too, value them, Mr. Talfourd," said Mrs. Volney, smiling up at him, for in the earnestness of his appeal Talfourd *pere* had risen, "and must protest likewise. With Leah in your house, how many of your evenings would I get, I wonder? Let us compromise. Bring Leah to me, Mr. Paget. It would make me very happy if she would come."

And so it was settled. Leah Paget became a member of Sara Volney's household. The drama played by Francis Ferrars had begun.

When Abner Paget came home and reported to his wife and daughter the success of his mission, and Sara Volney's reply, he said with a somewhat mystified look:

"I don't quite see through that detective's plan." And then he added, "Mr. Talfourd was there, and that new Englishman, Lord Barham. Talfourd, by the way, actually asked Leah to come to his house."

"Oh," said his wife, "and you do not understand that?"

"I suppose the detective sent him there. At any rate, Sara was prompt in asking Leah to come to her."

"She thinks I will refuse," said Leah, and she exchanged a swift glance with her mother.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE SECRETARY SPEAKS.

Perhaps much of the success which had waited upon the career of the English detective may have been traced to his fine eye for details, his never-failing memory, and his keen perception of little things. Nothing was too small to be weighed and noted, no trivial circumstance was allowed to pass from his thoughts until it had been tested, compared, studied by different lights and from different points of view. He did not content himself with the one hearing of a story, nor with the version of one individual.

Once a Scotland Yards detective had said of him, "Ferrars has no system; he works by inspiration." But this was not true, at least of the system. Ferrars had not one system, but many, and out of the many he adapted one to each individual with whom he dealt.

He had held, it would seem, an exhaustive interview with Frederick Quinlan. But he sought him again, in his own rooms, as at first, and asked of him a repetition of his history of Hortense Novalis. On this occasion Mr. Quinlan found

his task more difficult. Ferrars was burdened with no note-book and pencil, but he interrupted the narrative unpleasantly, often by sharp and unexpected questions, allowing no smallest detail to pass him without scrutiny.

When he arose to go, Ferrars turned abruptly upon his host.

"Do you feel convinced that I am doing all that can be done? am taking the right course to solve this mystery?" he asked.

Quinlan laughed. "If I didn't before, I do now. I feel as if I had been winnowed."

"Then you are not inclined to accept the overtures of the 'Star Detective Bureau?'"

Quinlan started and stared.

"Good Heavens, man! do you know everything?"

"If I did," retorted Ferrars, "I should not be here questioning you. It does not need clairvoyant power to know that this Agency has been making overtures to you."

Quinlan smiled bitterly, while he drew a breath of relief.

"Then I am absolved," he said, "if you have investigated, as no doubt you have. I think you must know that, whatever else I may be, I am a man of my word among men."

Ferrars bowed.

"I have been approached by these people, and declined to deal with them, even to hear them. They asked me to keep the matter quiet, and I did so."

"Quite right, as to keeping the promise. But did they impress you as able to accomplish this work?"

"Frankly, I don't know. They have struck out upon a line quite at antipodes with yours, I should say."

Ferrars smiled.

"If I thought them equal to the task, I would most willingly

turn it over to them," he said. "Let me give you a hint, Mr. Quinlan. The gentlemen of the 'Star Agency' are keeping you under surveillance."

Quinlan laughed scornfully. "So, I dare say, are the emissaries of Mr. Ferrars," he said. "Forewarned—you know."

Frederick Quinlan was not alone in this inquisitorial experience.

Over again, Max Talfourd repeated, as he thought, all that he knew, and then answered questions which convinced him that much had been forgotten.

Over and over, did Talfourd senior review the ground with Ferrars, each time finding it, somehow, fresh.

Again and yet again the detective found pretext for consulting Abner Paget, Mrs. Paget, Leah.

As for Sir Felix Wyntoun, he became so fluent in rehearsing all that he knew of La Belle Fabrice, of Madam Congreve—even of the maid, their attendant, that he could have told the story, or so he declared, in his sleep.

"I call this sort of thing very unfair, Frank," Sir Felix remonstrated, at the close of one of their rehearsals, when he had told his story and been politely dismissed. "But I would forgive you all, everything, if in return you would tell me just one little thing."

"And that is?"

"And that is—where may I find La Belle Fabrice?"

Ferrars smiled indulgently upon his friend.

"My dear fellow," he remonstrated, "you are asking, perhaps, something for nothing."

"Nonsense. When Frank Ferrars displays so much interest as to wish to hear again and again the same story, it's something he has on his mind. Now, if I could peer into

that note-book of yours, which you never look into yourself, except in private or very slyly—"

"Stop," broke in Ferrars, with sudden gravity, and turning to resume his seat at the round table, "and sit down again, dear boy. First, let me assure you that you have not been telling me the same story. You have been making the thing clearer with every repetition, and today, for the first time, I feel quite sure that you really have nothing more to tell. Your memory, at last, is fully unburdened."

He drew from his pocket a small leather-covered book.

"I do not want to be unnecessarily mysterious with you, my boy. So now I am going to let you peep into this note-book, and I want you to see, as I think you will, that, until the problems here set forth are solved, the questions answered, it is best that you do not see La Belle Fabrice."

He placed the note-book upon the table between them, and opened it at a certain paragraph.

Sir Felix bent over it and read with some surprise. "Mem.: La Belle Fabrice. To learn her antecedents, her real name, nationality, etc."

Here followed a minute description of the little Comedienne.

"Item: La Belle Fabrice arrived in New York from London on steamer 'Albatross,' date————————, accompanied by Madam Congreve and maid. Took rooms at the————————. Stranger in City, yet on————————called at rooms of Hortense Novalis," etc., etc.

"Good Heavens!" ejaculated Sir Felix.

"Go on," said the detective.

"Item: On the day following the disappearance of Miss Leah Paget, and while listening to the news of said disappearance, La Belle Fabrice faints for no cause apparent. Mem.:

To have copies of all newspapers of that date, also files of same dating back indefinitely, examined immediately."

Again Sir Felix looked up. "And has that been done?"

"It will be done."

"Mem.: To learn the connection between La Belle Fabrice and Hortense Novalis. Item: To learn the true reason for the *contretemps* at the dinner projected by Hortense Novalis. Item: Why did La Belle at first refuse to appear upon the stage with Hortense Novalis and afterward consent? Why did she flee on the night before the first appearance, and whither?"

"Umph!" Sir Felix lifted his face and the detective closed the book. "According to that I needn't anticipate seeing La Belle soon?"

"Why?"

"Because it's a huge undertaking even to learn where she is, and as for the rest—"

"My dear fellow," said Ferrars, pocketing the book and again rising, "let every man stick to his calling. I expect to have all the knowledge I need, within the week. No, don't stare; I've said enough. Be patient, my dear fellow, and get thee gone."

When Sir Felix had betaken himself to other scenes, the detective sat down again at the table, reproduced from his pocket the note-book, re-inforced it with other note-books, and began by the aid of these to write out something that looked much like a 'property list,' meant for the use of some stage manager, but more statistical. When this was completed he went with it to the door of an inner room, tapped lightly, and without waiting for a response or bidding, entered.

Seated upon a stool before a tall desk was the same busy, elderly man who had reigned over one of the offices in Cap-

tain Connor's domain. He was as alert and methodical here as there. He was writing when Ferrars, now his Chief, entered, and he finished his sentence and put away his pen as usual before giving that individual the least attention.

With a twinkle of amusement in his eye Ferrars waited, paper in hand.

"Here is the list of catch words," he said, when at last his secretary turned toward him. "Look them over and form any new combinations that may suggest themselves. I will see that the files come promptly now." He put down the list and turned away. "I leave you in charge," he added; "I shall be gone probably all the afternoon."

Not long after, Francis Ferrars, divested of all disguise, and dressed like the thoroughly English gentleman he was, was making the rounds of the city newspaper offices.

He went about in a cab for convenience and time's sake, and his calls were always brief. In every case he asked to see the chief of the staff, and to him presented the letter of introduction given him by Chief of Police Connors.

The letter worked its magic, and the detective was welcomed at every editorial door. He asked of each only one or two questions, and from every office a huge file of newspapers soon found their way to his headquarters, where they were received by the methodical secretary and duly arranged as seemed to him best.

Upon the round Ferrars had made one omission; he had not visited the office of the "*Call*."

It was late in the afternoon when he returned, and he seemed in some haste. He summoned his secretary to him as he sat at his table in the outer room, with his note-books again before him, and he spoke without looking up.

"I want you to go to the office of the "*Evening Call*," he said, "and get a file of their papers. I have not visited that office. Do you understand?"

"I think so." The secretary stood close beside him and held a slip of paper in his hand. "Can you spare me a moment, sir?"

Ferrars looked up quickly.

"Certainly, if it is needful. What is it?"

The old man laid down the paper, and Ferrars saw that it was his list of "catch words."

"It's only a coincidence, perhaps," said the secretary, slowly, "but I find here, upon this list, some words, names, that are quite familiar to me."

"Ah!" Ferrars turned quickly so as to face him. "What are they?"

"There are two or three. South Brandon, for instance—"

"Do you know South Brandon?"

"I have been there."

"Good; and when?"

"More than six years ago, for the first time; four years, for the last."

"What other words do you recognize?"

"Only one that I connect with South Brandon."

"And that?"

"Is a name. The Widow Holly."

Ferrars sprang to his feet. The secretary was still standing. "Sit down," said the listener, "and tell me what you know of South Brandon and the Widow Holly."

But the methodical scribe did not at once accept the seat so promptly indicated by the detective. He placed a finger upon the chair-back, and said,

"What I know of South Brandon is not much. Holly—that brought to my memory a little drama, or maybe a tragedy in the end, which happened while I was recreating there for a week or two; taking my summer vacation, in fact."

"Was the Widow Holly a figure in that drama?" broke in Ferrars, quickly.

"Yes."

"Tell me your drama. Tell me all you know of the woman Holly."

Again he motioned the old man to be seated, and this time the chair was promptly occupied.

"Well," said the old man, depreciatingly, as if he were about to confess a crime, or at the least an almost unpardonable indiscretion, "this drama, or possible tragedy, made a deep impression upon my mind. In fact," and he almost blushed, "it took such hold of me that I wrote it out, in form of a narrative, and intended to send it to some story paper for publication, thinking it would be given space as entertaining fiction, and that its hidden meaning, as fact, would reveal itself to the parties interested, if it should happen to meet their eyes. But I never sent it to any publisher"—this with the air of one tempted to burglary, but who had successfully resisted the enticement. "When I found the words 'South Brandon' and 'Widow Holly' on your list, I hunted up my never-used but preserved story. It tells all the facts as clearly and, perhaps, as concisely as I could tell them now. Shall I read it to you, or shall I give you a summary of the matter?"

"Read it," said Ferrars, promptly. "In this case I want all the details that can be had, and, above everything, the impressions they made upon you at the time, rather than your present estimate of them."

CHAPTER LXVI.

THE SCRIBE'S ONE LITERARY OFFSPRING.

Ferrars settled back in his chair, an intent look upon his face, and the scribe essayed his new role of "giving a reading."

"I called my little story," said he, with a true reader's premonitory cough,

"THE MYSTERY OF SOUTH BRANDON."

"Of all dull, dead, monotonous things or places, country life, in a country hotel, is the dullest, the deadest, the most monotonous!" quoth a summer boarder, who stood yawning upon the piazza of the only hotel of South Brandon. "Did anything ever happen here, Freckles?"

The city boarder was an old bachelor accountant, obliged to "manage" his modest salary in order to secure for himself even this brief and unfashionable outing, and he never took to himself airs, except upon these holiday occasions.

("Of course," interpolated the reader, "this old bachelor was myself." "I see," said Ferrars, with a smile of indulged amusement. "I see; go on.")

"Freckles," sitting upon the upper step of the flight of five, said gruffly:

"Why don't you go to Saratogy if you don't like S'th Brandon?"

"Oh!" said the city boarder, "Saratoga, eh! What do you know about Saratoga?"

Freckles arose slowly. "I guess I can read the newspapers," he replied, sulkily, as he went down the steps.

"You do? When do you—" The question, undoubtedly meant to be a facetious one, was checked in the utterance by a series of shrill exclamations and sharp feminine cries, coming evidently from a side "stoop" where the landlady and two or three "helps" were busy about some household employment.

"That's old Mother Gregory a-talkin' so fast an' splutterin'. She's the biggest bag o' news in town. You hold on a minit; mebbe something's happened just on *your* account. I'll see if I can't git it fer yer breakfast."

"All right, Freckles—" Here shrill cries of "Pete, Pete, Pe—ter" came from the direction of the side porch, and as Freckles accelerated his speed and disappeared around the nearest corner, the summer boarder lighted a cigar and sauntered away for his morning constitutional.

Half an hour later, returning from his morning walk, he came suddenly upon Freckles, who emerged from the gate of a small brown cottage, and held it open for a woman arrayed in a faded calico dress and with her face quite hidden in a sunbonnet. She passed them with a slow dragging step, and, as the boy closed the gate, he placed a finger upon his lips, and, with a gesture, halted the other until the woman had gone a little beyond them. Then he broke out in a breathless undertone—

"Wal, I guess you'll be satisfied *now!* If what's happened this morning or last night, or whenever 'twas, ain't enough to give folks like you an appetite I don't know what you want,

anyhow. I knew old Catty Gregory had somethin' bad on her mind when I heard her splutterin' so."

"Look here, boy, what are *you* 'spluttering' about?" He took the lad by the shoulder and gave him a gentle shake.

"Quit, I say! Ain't I a-tellin' ye as fast as I can? My! don't I wish I was a detective, though!"

"So, you read detective stories, do you, as well as fashion gossip? You won't make much of a detective till you learn to talk more to the point, I can tell you. Now, what has happened?"

"D'ye remember that little girl who brought the eggs, night before last? I heard ye sayin' to somebody on the stoop that she was mighty pretty. Wal, she's gone!"

"Gone where?"

"Clean gone. Her and two more—the very prettiest girls in town, too, every one of them!"

"Pshaw!" ejaculated the summer boarder, "they'll come back."

"No, they won't—not any!" The boy stopped suddenly. The woman going on before them had halted and was looking back. "You'll have to find out the rest for yerself," he said. "There's plenty more. She 'pears to want me. I'm comin'" he called to the waiting woman.

These parting words of Freckles were strictly true. There *was* "plenty more." It occupied and interested the city boarder for the remainder of his stay. South Brandon was given over to mystery so dense, so impenetrable, that it absorbed more than the orthodox nine days of wonder and gossip. Other topics, other interests, other occupations almost, were swallowed up in the effort to solve an unsolvable mystery. Village "authorities," county "authorities." "authorities"

from neighboring towns and counties ; detectives, amateur, professional, private ; knowing citizens, practical citizens, philanthropists and cranks,—all turned the light of their reason and unreason, wisdom and foolishness, experience and lack of it, upon the South Brandon mystery—to no purpose.

From the stoop of the South Brandon Hotel could be seen a tall white house, where the green shutters of the narrow front windows were always primly closed, except for a little while on Sunday afternoon, on "company" days, and on days when the minister called ; where the path from the gate to the high, narrow, and steep front steps was overgrown with grass ; where the path around the house to the side stoop and back door was well trodden ; where quiet and prim severity reigned through the week, and severe piety ruled on Sunday.

This was the home of Deacon Amos Sharp, and here lived Amos Sharp and his wife, and Mary Sharp, his adopted daughter.

The house of Deacon Sharp, at the foot of Main Street, marked the street's ending, and the road that began at Deacon Sharp's front gate, and ran in a slanting line to the south-east, was little more than a lane. Upon this lane, not far from the tall white house at its head, stood the cabin—it could not have been dignified by the name of cottage, even—of Seth Hunt, bachelor, farmer, hunter, and fisherman ; lazy, good-humored, and the oracle of the village. With him, installed as housekeeper since her tenth year, lived his niece, his only sister's child—pretty, winsome, fifteen-year-old Betty Gage, an orphan, and the pet of the village.

At the other end of the town, and upon a "back street," stood the cottage of the Widow Holly, and in this cottage lived only the widow and her daughter, Hannie. Mrs Holly was

an Englishwoman of the working class, and her daughter was a very little girl when the widow, not a widow then but the wife of a drunken and boisterous English laborer, came to South Brandon.

It was supposed that the name of the child had been, originally, Anna. But the Hollys were one in their peculiar use of their H's, and the name Hannie, as pronounced by them, grew to be the only name by which she was known.

It was into these three houses, Deacon Sharp's, Seth Hunt's, and the Widow Holly's, that the spirit of mystery had entered.

In a village where bright eyes, rosy cheeks, and sweet faces abounded, none were brighter, or rosier, or sweeter than Hannie Holly's, Betty Gage's, and Mary Sharp's.

At sunset, on the previous evening, these three had laughed and frisked in the Widow Holly's green door-yard. Later, they had mingled their voices in a merry chorus at a church festival. And lastly, they had set out, Hannie and Betty to escort Mary to the Deacon's front gate, and then to return together to the Widow's cottage, where Betty was to pass the night with her friend.

But they never came back to the Widow's cottage. Never; then or after!

Seth Hunt was aware that Betty would not return to his humble cabin until such hour of the following day as suited the pleasure of his little household despot. And the Widow Holly went to her bed, as she had often done before, grumbling to herself, and vowing "Not to let that girl hout again until she had promised not to go running hoff to sleep with some of them 'orrid, wild girls."

It was Deacon Sharp who first raised the hue and cry for

Mary, who, although she had been "adopted," and given the Deacon's name, coupled with that of his wife, occupied in the Deacon's family a position more nearly akin to that of a bound girl than of a daughter.

When at sunrise no Mary was heard tripping about the kitchen, the Deacon arose grumblingly, and bawled up the stairs for Mary to bestir herself. No Mary replied to him. No Mary appeared to him. And then, with lowering brow, the Deacon set out for the Widow Holly's.

"Waal, mebbe the Lord's meant it for a reproof to me," the Deacon said, piously, when, weeks after, the search for the three girls were abandoned by most and pronounced hopeless. "Mebbe the Lord didn't want his servant to snatch such a brand from the burning, and set it up as a daughter in a pious household. Mary never was in the odor of sanctity, nohow. That gal was a sceptic! Born so, most likely. Nobody ever knew what blood was in her, but we hoped she'd be something, my wife and me. She was just left at the door of that 'ere 'Home' in a basket. They give us a sight of the clothes she had on, and no one in South Brandon ever see nothin' like 'em; so fine, some of them; silk, and all covered with lace and ribbons and fixin's. Sure sign that she was from some high-up family, they said, when we took her. Purty sure of good blood on one side, anyhow. And I swan if I didn't used to think there was, too, she used to carry herself so high and mighty. Sech children was likely to be hunted up sometime, even after they was growed up, they said, by rich relations. But I guess that was all talk," sighed the worthy Deacon. "Anyway, we ain't been very well rewarded, and I ain't goin' to try it again. 'Twould be a-flyin' in the face of Prov-

idence to take another waif that, for all anybody knows, might a-been born bad." And in this decision Deacon Sharp and his worthy wife rested.

"It's a blessing to all the little orphans, too!" said Seth Hunt, confidentially, to Mrs. Holly. "I heard little Mary a-talkin' to Betty, and tellin' about her mean bed and cold vittles and hard work. But that warn't the case with my gal, nor yourn, Mrs. Holly; and it don't account for their leavin' us—if they did go of their own accord, which I doubt."

"Oh, it's a judgment on me!" moaned the Widow Holly. And she threw her apron over her head, and wept so long and so bitterly that Seth Hunt crept away silently, and never again spoke to her of their mutual loss.

"It's a judgment upon me!" That was all the Widow Holly would say to those who visited her with consoling words. "Hif ever I find Hannie, it won't be 'ere. She'll never come back to me."

Nevertheless, she waited in patience and silence, perhaps in hope, for two long years. Then she sold her small house and went quietly away, her destination unknown to any, unless, it might have been, Seth Hunt.

As for Seth, he had no word of blame or distrust for the lost Betty.

"I wasn't the one to have the care of a girl like that," he said. "I meant right, but I didn't know how. Betty was as good as gold. She wouldn't hurt a fly. I can't believe she'd run away from her old uncle, but if she did, it was because I didn't know how to please her. How should I? just a rough old man."

This, or something of the sort, he said, standing on the piazza of the little hotel, on the day after the discovery of the myste-

rious disappearance. He was surrounded by the hotel family, most of them summer boarders like our bachelor.

" Dear me !" exclaimed a little black-eyed woman, who was alone in South Brandon—" A little in the literary line," she had explained to the curious, and interested in mission work.

She had been at the hotel a month, and owing to her regular attendance at the village Sabbath school was already upon terms of intimacy, almost, with the Deacon and Mrs. Sharp.

" Dear me, sir ; do you know, have you any idea, what can have happened to those poor children? Why, I quite knew the little girl at Deacon Sharp's ! Poor thing !"

" I don't suspect anybody, marm," Seth Hunt had answered. " And if I should I wouldn't know where to begin."

The vacation of this summer boarder expired, and no trace of the missing maidens had been found. He returned to his desk in the great city, but all its noise and bustle failed to quite obliterate his recollection of the mystery, and so, after three years, our bachelor again turned his holiday steps toward South Brandon.

He found few changes ; but the former landlord of the little hotel had gone " west" with his numerous family, and Freckles was no longer general factotum.

Walking down the village street, on the evening of his arrival, the bachelor found Mrs. Gregory over her gate, just as of yore.

Their greeting was like that of old friends. She was able to tell him everything. And she did.

Deacon Sharp had buried his wife, and had married a spinster of reputed fortune and undisputed temper, who led him, so said Mrs. Gregory, " a life of it !"

Mrs Holly had gone away, nobody knew whither.

"She always would say that it was a judgment on her, her losing Hannie that way," quoth Mrs. Gregory. "And I guess, for my part, that 'twas. I ain't said much to folks about here, but I'd jest as leave tell you what I think. I never did believe that the girl was o' Holly blood. He was stout and red-faced and tow-headed; and she—well, you know what the Widow Holly was—a stub nose, and hair jest no color. Dretful common looking, both of 'em. While Hannie—did you ever happen to see her, when you was here? Wal, she was black-eyed and black-haired and high-stepping. There was some kind of a yarn got out long ago—started from Joe Holly in his cups, 'twas said. I never got the rights of it, but it was something about Mrs. Holly having been servant in some rich English family, and going with them to France, and coming back and being discharged, and taking up with Joe Holly, that she'd mittened onct, and agreeing to marry him if he go to live in the States. I heard Mrs. Holly say that Hannie was born on the ocean, coming across."

"Really!" said our bachelor for want of other words.

"Yes; and Mis' Stebbins, she was the widder's neighbor, told me long ago that Holly, when he was in liquor, used to call Hannie "little Frenchy." And she said she asked the widder onct what he meant, and she turned as red as fire, and said she had heard that French folks were mostly dark and had nice ways, and so Joe called Hannie that because her eyes were black and she put on such a lot of airs. I guess there was some French blood there, myself."

"And Mr. Hunt?"

"Wal, now, that's the strangest part of it all! About a year ago some fellers was trudging around on Seth's little strip of land, a-tapping the rocks. It was jest about all rocks or

Seth wouldn't ever have been able to own it. One fine morning it turned out that they had found something valuable there; some kind o' slate or the like. They offered Seth cheap, but he was too cute for them; and then they offered fair. The upshot of the matter is, that now Seth Hunt is the richest man in South Brandon, and gettin' richer—he wouldn't sell only by shares."

"And he still lives here?"

"Yes, right at the old cabin. It's good enough for him, he says. That man sticks to it that Betty'll come back some day. And then, he says, he's going to build her a fine house. One of the first things that he did was to have a notice printed in about a dozen of the big city papers, one or two in a place, for Betty to come back. And he says that he is going to keep them notices there till they bring her to him. Every day they'll be in them papers, year in and year out. He won't believe no harm of Betty, and he won't believe she's dead."

"And yet he was good to her—and she left him?"

"Betty was young," said the gossip, leniently. "I'll tell you what I've always thought about her. Hannie Holly was a wild, sassy girl, if she was so pretty and dainty in her ways—she warn't no prettier nor daintier than Betty, I can tell ye. And Hannie used to run away from home, and she wouldn't mind her ma a bit. She was full of all sorts of queer notions, and was awful ambitious to be dressed nice and be somebody. But Betty set lots of store by Hannie, and they was awful thick. Then, there was Deacon Sharp's Mary. She was another high-headed and ambitious one. Not that she was wild, like Hannie, nor full of laughter or mischief, like Betty. She was awful soft and slow-spoken and still in her ways, but she had plenty of temper. Anybody could tell

that by her reddish hair and her sleepy-looking yellow eyes, when she'd open 'em wide. But nobody knows what bad blood there was in her. Now, I think that them two girls, being such friends of Betty's, mebbe coaxed or tempted her into something; and poor little Betty, who warn't so strong-willed as them, mebbe, was jest led away by 'em. Mightn't that be so, hey?"

Might it not have been? Our bachelor looked away down the street to where the Deacon's dwelling gleamed white at its foot, and then suddenly back, and asked:

"Do you remember that little black-eyed woman who was at the hotel at the time this happened?"

Mrs. Gregory reflected a moment.

"Her? oh, yes. I do remember her, the way she left the very next night after them girls went, and she had paid her board to the end of the week. I recollect it plain enough, now you mention it. She said she'd been called away on account of a friend being took sudden. Land! we were all that worked-up at the time with them girls' disappearance, that nobody had no time to bother with her. But come to think of it, it *was* kind of funny. Pete, he always brought the mail from the Post Office, and I remember now he said that was all bosh. He said the woman didn't get no letter."

And so the bachelor boarder once more went back to his desk, and the fate of Hannie and Betty and Mary, the mystery of South Brandon, only became more of a mystery, darker and deeper, and more and more doubtful of solution, as years rolled on.

Before the end was reached, the detective was pacing up and down the room, his hands burrowing his pockets for very rest-

lessness, his eyes growing intent and eager, a red spot coming and going on either cheek—sure sign that he was deeply moved or interested.

When the old man had finished, Ferrars turned sharply about and faced him.

"Do you know, Murtagh, that what you have been telling me is of vital importance," he said. And then without waiting for a reply, "Is that all? Was there no clue, no suspicion?"

"None, to my knowledge."

Ferrars eyed him keenly. "You have told this story graphically, minutely," he said. "You must have been interested in it, at the time?"

"I was—yes. I was."

"And you—you are a thinking man, a man of the world—had you no suspicions, no theory, even?"

The old man started and a flush crossed his face. He was silent a moment, then he looked up and met the gaze of the detective squarely.

"It was the strangest thing I ever had knowledge of. And—yes, I did harbor an idea, a suspicion or theory. But it was vague, and, so far as proof or lack of proof could make it, groundless. I had a thought, and was once or twice strongly tempted to hint it to Seth Hunt or some of the village officials, but—"

"Well?" came sharply from Ferrars. Then, seeing the distress in the old man's face, he seated himself again and spoke more calmly. "Tell me your thought, please."

But now it was the old man who was upon his feet, flushing and restless.

"I have had moments," he began, slowly, when I have

felt the responsibility of a fearful wrong heavy upon me, and yet, at the time, I could not have done otherwise. Another man might; I couldn't. When I went to South Brandon for my poor little holiday, I was an accountant dependent upon my health, which was beginning to break a little, and my salary. I didn't call myself an old man then, although I dare say others did, and I didn't feel particularly old, and I did look upon myself as a man of the world, as compared to the South Brandon people. I felt very worldly-wise no doubt, but not woman-wise."

Ferrars laughed and his face softened. The tall, thin old man before him, pale and stooping from much desk work, looked amusingly unlike the man he was describing as himself a few years younger. "Sit down," he said, "and take your time."

"Thank you." The old man resumed his seat and his reminiscences. "I was not woman-wise. My mother died when I was a child. I had no sisters. I have always lived among men, and I have always been shy of women. When the three girls vanished so suddenly from South Brandon, there was one other city boarder besides myself at the little hotel. It was a woman. She was there before me; had been there, I think, for several weeks. She assumed to be doing something 'literary.' When I learned that, I kept as far away from her as possible. But the house was not large, and sometimes I was forced to hear bits of her conversation. This woman's literature must have been frequently at odds with grammar, if she wrote as she talked. She interested herself very much in the young people, gushed over them in fact, and was always a light at Sunday-school, and at all the little pic-nics and village gatherings. Well, when these girls disappeared, somehow the idea

that this woman might have had a hand in the business came into my mind, and has stayed there."

Ferrars drew his chair closer and leaned toward the speaker. "Describe her," he said.

"A small, darked-skinned woman, with coarse black hair, always a little untidy. She was thin and sharp-featured, with beady black eyes. She must have been past middle age, and dressed rather youthfully and none too tidily. I got into the way of calling her—to myself, of course—'the shabby genteel.'"

Ferrars was once more manifesting unusual excitement. "Her name?" he said.

"I don't recall it, if I ever heard it. She was called 'the lady,' or the 'city lady,' usually, when spoken of.

"Would you know her if you saw her?"

"I think so. Those beady black eyes and sharp features—yes, I would know her."

"Would she know you?"

Murtagh glanced down at his person.

"I was slightly grey then," he said. "Now, my hair is white. My face was florid then and my figure portly. Now, I am pale and thin. No, I don't think she would recognize me."

Ferrars got up again, no longer trying to keep down the manifestations of his interest and impatience.

"I may as well say to you," he said, "that, what you are telling me may be of gravest importance. Up to this point it has not been needful for you to know more of the work we are engaged in than Captain Connors told you when he sent you to me, and that was—"

"Almost nothing," the old man said, and smiled. "Only, that you were Francis Ferrars, the famous London detective;

that you were engaged upon the Novalis murder case, and were in need of an amanuensis, a searcher of records and newspaper files; a machine, in short, like myself."

"Well, you are likely to turn out more than a machine. Now, tell me what aroused your suspicion of this black-eyed woman?"

"At first, I suppose it must have been my natural aversion; next, the fact that she was so fond of these girls; and lastly, she went away on the second day after the girls vanished. She pretended to have received a summons to the bedside of a sick friend, and that she was coming back; but she did not come back."

"And you never named your suspicion to any one?"

"How could I, with no proof? I, myself, was a stranger. The woman was odious to me. I believed her to be an adventuress, but—she was a woman, and I might have done her a great wrong. I was not in a position to follow up or to verify my suspicions. The matter was on my mind more or less, however, for two years. And when my next summer's holiday came around, I went again to South Brandon. I had an idea it would quiet my scruples to learn whether the woman had returned. I made inquiry in a careless fashion, and then I regretted more than ever that I had not spoken of my notion at the proper time, for the woman was never seen again."

"What else did you learn?"

"I picked up a good deal of gossip about the lost girls, and one incident that was very pathetic. It has been my one little romance ever since, a sort of link that has always kept South Brandon before my mind, until, one day—only a short time ago—that came to an end."

"What are you talking about, man?"

"When the search for the lost girls was given up by all, Seth Hunt, a fine, honest, big-hearted fellow, inserted an advertisement in a number of city papers, east and west. It was addressed to little Bettie Gage, begging her to come back to him, and worded as if it were he who had done the wrong. I have looked for that advertisement, and found it day after day. One morning, not long ago, it was missing. It has never appeared since."

"We must find that date," said Ferrars, quickly. "Tell me, did you ever see those three girls?"

"One of them only—Bettie Gage."

For some moments Ferrars stood silent, intently looking at nothing, and thinking hard and fast. Then he put a hand upon the old man's shoulder.

"By your aid I think we shall clear up more than one mystery soon. I know from Captain Connors how trustworthy you are, and I intend to take you into my confidence. But not now." He looked at his watch. "I am going out. I am going in person to bring into your presence a woman who may turn out to be your shabby genteel friend of South Brandon. Draw that screen before your door, and be ready to see, without being seen; to hear without being heard."

CHAPTER LXVII.

THE "PALMIST."

The first movement of the detective, after leaving the secretary thus abruptly, was to send a message to Mr. Talfourd, asking him to come at a given hour to his rooms. Then he took a cab, and was now standing before a dark door up two flights of darker stairs, tapping sharply for admittance.

Upon the door was tacked a card bearing the name of "Madam Van Horn," and below the name, in quaint Italicized type, the word "Palmist."

It was the palmist in person who admitted him, with a glance of chill welcome, and the palmist was no other than the woman whose journey to South Brandon had been so ruthlessly interrupted by the man before her.

It was not yet dusk, but the little room into which she admitted him was dimly lighted. With its dark hangings and grotesque arrangements it was well calculated to strike the seeker after truth with a wholesome awe of the seeress who inhabited it.

The seeress was arrayed in loose-hanging, sombre garments, and a fantastic turban upon her head served to emphasize the effect of many and heavy waves of snow-white hair beneath. She greeted her early visitor with a silent stare, and he, with scant ceremony, stepped within and closed the door.

"Get off that toggery at once," he said, curtly, "and come with me."

"But it's my business hour, it's the very time—"

He made a quick movement toward her.

"Your business is to do just what I tell you. Don't waste words. I want you."

A moment the palmist stood sullenly eyeing him, then she turned slowly and went behind the dark curtain. When she came out she was no more Madam Van Horn, the palmist. She was simply the old woman with beady black eyes, sharp features, and sullen face, following reluctantly at the heels of her master.

Arrived at his own door once more, Ferrars opened it with a latch-key, and bade the woman enter, closing and locking it, and hastily drawing down the blinds.

"Sit there."

He pointed to a chair close beside the table, and so placed that she faced the screen at the other end of the room. Without a word she seated herself, and Ferrars lighted the gas above her head, flooding the room with a strong light. Then he sat down near her, and looked at her in silence for a moment. Finally, he said, very quietly,

"Your career has been a strange one, but I cannot think that you have murder upon your soul."

"I!" the woman started and turned ghastly pale. "I!"—She could say no more.

"And yet," Ferrars went on, still as if half to himself, "it looks as if you might."

The woman actually wrung her hands. "I—I don't understand."

Suddenly Ferrars drew himself up and his face became stern.

"Do you know that you are likely to be arrested, at any time, as an accomplice in the murder of Hortense Novalis and her maid Virginie?"

"I! My God! why?"

"Well, for one thing, you are thought to be in communication with La Belle Fabrice, and La Belle Fabrice, it is pretty clearly proven, is the one who killed, or instigated the killing, of the two women."

The woman sprang up. "It's a lie," she cried, hoarsely. "It's a foul lie!"

"What, that La Belle—"

"I don't know anything about La Belle Fabrice." She uttered the name venomously. "I never was her accomplice. I—"

"Softly, softly," said Ferrars. "Listen to plain facts. Listen to what we know. First, La Belle Fabrice and Hortense Novalis were enemies—we won't go into the reasons why. They were enemies. They were also rivals. You would better sit down, Madam. On the night of the murder, La Belle disappeared. Now, it is known that you visited both of these rival actresses, probably as a go-between."

"It's a lie!" she burst forth again.

"Careful! Here comes the clincher. We know La Belle Fabrice to be in South Brandon." He was watching the woman's face through half-closed eyes. "And we know that you, too, would be there, but for—well, say but for me."

A great change had crossed the woman's face. The fear had gone out of it; a look of relief, of malicious triumph, had taken its place.

"If you know where to find her," she said, "why don't you have her arrested?"

"What? You say that? Are you then so willing to give up your *protégée?*"

"She's no *protégée* of mine," said she, sullenly.

"No? Well, so much the better. Wait here a moment."

He arose and went behind the screen, where, just in the doorway, the secretary was sitting. He did not need to speak, for the old man held out to him a slip of paper, upon which was written, "It is the woman beyond a doubt."

Ferrars nodded and went back to his place.

"I am going to put you in new quarters," he said, coolly, taking up his hat. "Madam Van Horn's shop must close for the present. When this murderer is arrested you will become a valuable witness, and you will do well to turn State's evidence. Otherwise, it may fare ill with you. Come, Madam, no repining at fate. When you dragged Bettie Gage, the Widow Holly's black-eyed girl, and Deacon Sharp's Mary away from South Brandon, a few years ago, you never anticipated this. Now, did you?"

He was busy with hat and gloves as he spoke, and he uttered the last words as he unlocked the door.

"I must leave you for a little time," he continued. "It's for your own comfort that I go. Content yourself, Madam."

He bowed and went out, locking the door behind him, and seeming oblivious to the fact that he left her pale as ashes, and trembling in every limb.

Left alone, the look of terror slowly turned to resentment, and she began to look about her. She sprang up and began to move about the room. She went to the windows, drew aside the curtains, peered out into the growing darkness, and tried their fastenings. Then, with a sniff, she went to the door of entrance. For a moment she bent down and examined the

lock. Putting her hand in her pocket, she drew forth a bunch of keys and began trying them. One, two, three keys were tried and found useless, and she was about to test the fourth.

"If I were you, I wouldn't do that," said a voice behind her.

She turned sharply and confronted the secretary, who bowed and quietly took the keys from her hand.

"Who are you?" she asked, wrathfully.

"I?" he said. "Is it possible you have forgotten me? My name is Murtagh. We had the pleasure of meeting, years ago —have you forgotten?—at South Brandon."

CHAPTER LXVIII.

FERRARS DECLARES HIS OPINION.

That night, at a late hour, Ferrars and Mr. Talfourd awaited the coming of Captain Connors, who arrived finally, an hour behind the time appointed, and who showed, as he seated himself near them, signs of considerable haste, anxiety and excitement.

"I'm glad you have called a council tonight," he said to Ferrars. "I suppose it is something important, but I wish you would let me unburden myself before we begin." He looked quickly from one to the other now. "It won't take long."

"Proceed," said Ferrars, who was looking very grave and somewhat weary.

"First, then, Cousin has paid me a visit, very much as you predicted. He talked a good deal of the murder, and resents the idea of its being Quinlan who did it."

"Yes," assented Ferrars, as if he had expected this.

"He dwelt for some time upon Fabrice, and the probability of her guilt. He believes in it. He hinted that he would not mind lending a hand again if only to help unearth her."

"He is very good," said Ferrars, grimly. "How did he appear to you?"

"Do you mean in person, or—"

"In every way. Was he his usual self? the Cousin you have known?"

"Not he. The fellow has 'gone off' terribly in looks. He seems preoccupied and nervous."

"I dare say. What was the object of his visit?"

"He didn't name one. I think he wanted to learn something of our progress, wanted to post up a little. Of course, I had nothing to tell him."

"That fellow must be a queer combination," said Mr. Talfourd, speaking for the first time. "I've met him once or twice at Mrs. Volney's. I don't quite understand his intimacy there." He broke off and glanced at Ferrars, who did not speak but seemed to be thinking—intently.

"I've had a visit from the Coroner, too. Those 'Star Agency' fellows are flying high and urging him to take up the case again." Here he turned squarely upon Ferrars. "I'll tell it all in a nutshell," he said. "My information came through my men, who had been looking after Quinlan and the 'Star' fellows; and the Coroner's story verifies their reports. It appears that they began by shadowing Quinlan, and they sent to London for all manner of information."

"Yes," said Ferrars. "Go on."

"Well, in this way they struck upon a new trail. They found that there was a young Englishman who was greatly enamored of Hortense Novalis, at the time of her London *debut.* He was wild about her, so the story goes, but the affair was broken off by his friends. Well, it appears that the young fellow has followed her to this city. He got here, they pretend to say, at about the time of the murder. The 'Stars' are looking after him hot-footed. They have theorized themselves, and the Coroner too, I fancy, into the belief that it was a case of jealousy. They say that Quinlan denies all knowledge of him; and that he, the Englishman, is never seen upon the streets, except in a carriage or mounted; that he is a favorite in certain society, but avoids all crowds and acts queerly altogether. What's the matter?"

It was a sudden movement upon the part of Talfourd senior, which called out this abrupt question. The face of this gentleman had turned scarlet, and he went off into a sudden fit of coughing. But Ferrars was as calm as possible.

"Do you mean that they have cast an eye upon Wyntoun?" he asked, quietly.

"Pshaw! No; it's the other swell—Barham. They are shadowing him closely."

"Gracious goodness!" blurted out Talfourd *pere,* now quite recovered from his fit of coughing. "Why, Lord Barham, when he is in town, is my guest."

"I know it."

There was a moment of profound silence. Then Ferrars spoke.

"You say that the 'Star' people are urging the Coroner to re-open the investigation. Is he likely to be influenced by them?"

"I think so. Of course, I might interfere. I'm only waiting for the word."

"Gentlemen," said Ferrars, gravely, "this news is very opportune. It confirms me in the decision I have made today. It is time to act. But in order to act to any purpose, I must have your lively co-operation. And, before you can give it, you must hear the result of my six or seven weeks of burrowing. I am going to take you over the ground as I have been over it, from my point of view. I shall have to go back to the beginning, and I hope you can hear me patiently. My rehearsal may weary you, and I am quite sure it will surprise you."

Captain Connors started and jerked his chair nearer to that occupied by Ferrars. Mr. Talfourd settled himself in a comfortable attitude.

"You may wonder a little, at this moment, why Mr. Max Talfourd and Sir Felix are not with us here. You will know soon why it is best that they should not be. I wish to be as brief as possible, and so I will not dwell upon details. You both are aware that I came to New York upon the very urgent request of Sir Felix Wyntoun, and to serve Mr. Max Talfourd."

"Of course," said Captain Connors, while Mr. Talfourd simply nodded.

"Now, I ask you to keep this in mind. Before calling upon you, Captain, I was put in possession of such facts as were then known concerning the missing girl and the manner of her disappearance. Upon being presented to you, you kindly gave me all the information in your possession. Just as we were about to enter upon a grave discussion of the pros and cons of the business, a messenger comes, breathless and excited, and you are informed that the lost is found."

"I recall that occurrence distinctly," said the Captain, drily.

"And so do I. But for a different reason. Every man, they say, has his hobby, and every detective, they say, has his system, his fad. Some men claim to be physiognomists, and to read guilt or innocence in a face. Some men may do this; to a certain extent, I believe, it can be done. But that is not my fad. To me the human face tells little or nothing; but the human voice—ah! there you have *my* fad. I do believe in the human voice as an indication of character, an index to feelings, moods, and more. When your messenger came, to tell of Miss Paget's sudden return, I did not see him, I did not, of course, know who he was. But in his voice I heard fear, anxiety—that Leah Paget's coming was not a triumph, but a terror to him. Judge, then, of my surprise upon being told that this agitated messenger was an assistant in the case so suddenly brought to a climax; that he was a clever reporter, a friend to Captain Connors, a stranger to the Pagets, an amateur detective. Now, Captain, consult your memory. When you and I went over the Leah Paget case together, we differed as to the value of the work your men had done. Because they had not found Miss Paget, you argued that they had accomplished nothing; while I—well, if I had taken up the work where I found it then, I must have succeeded. Your men had traversed the ground, scaled the rocks, let down the bars, yes, and opened the door. I had only to walk in."

"By Jove!" burst out Mr. Talfourd, "I would like to hear your idea—how you would have accomplished this walk-over?"

"It's very simple," said Ferrars. "If you could go into the case as I did, you would see it as I do. These reports convinced me that Miss Paget had not left the city, had not been abducted for ransom, had not made way with herself,

and had not been murdered. But that was not all. Before I had finished reviewing the operations of the Captain's detectives, I was quite convinced that there was a flaw in the work, a broken link in the chain."

"What do you mean?" asked Connors, quickly.

"I mean this: Among all that mass of good and faithful work done, there was one bit of very bad work, one weak point, where a little pressure, a little more light upon it, would have changed everything. In short, I felt sure that one of your men was trifling, was not running true."

"Why didn't you say so?" asked Connors, sharply.

"Because I expected to take the case up, and my first business would have been to find the man who was hedging. You would have been enlightened then. But we will not linger over this dead issue. When your Mr. Cousin came with his announcement, and I learned that he had been working upon the case, I felt sure that I had found my man."

Captain Connors muttered something that sounded like an anathema upon himself, but Ferrars went on without heeding him.

"Now, sirs, please note this: I was still pondering over this queer case, and my mind was full of its details. I was a stranger to all New York, and could have no prejudices, but names were firmly fixed in my mind from having read so much of them in those reports—"

"What names?" asked Connors, half bewildered.

"These: Leah Paget, Max Talfourd, Frederick Quinlan. With these names fresh in my memory, I went with Captain Connors to the scene of the tragedy in the Dresden Flats. We need not dwell upon that. You know it all. Fancy me, now, coming into the presence of that dead actress, gorgeous even in

death—I knew the woman ; I had seen her in London—but I was not there to tell what I knew. While overlooking the disordered rooms, searching for a clue to the crime, I was saying to myself that this was a strange thing, my being brought there to see that dangerous woman thus—I, who had known her in life."

"Oh !" broke involuntarily from the lips of both his listeners.

"Yes, Captain, your 'Star Agency' was rightly informed. It was Lord Louis Barham who came so near wrecking his life for the sake of Hortense Novalis, and it was I who extricated him and prevailed upon her to leave London."

"By Jove !" cried Talfourd again. It was his favorite expletive.

"Well, there were other odd things in store for me. Almost the first name I heard in connection with Hortense was that of Frederick Quinlan. And then—you know how it came about—there in the possession of the dead woman, or so it seemed, we found a blood-stained letter—a love-letter, signed Max. Beside it, as if to leave no doubt as to the identity of the writer, was a picture—the picture of Max Talfourd. To complete this amazing series of coincidences, an envelope, corresponding in size and texture with the paper upon which the letter was written, was found in the grate. The envelope bore the name of Leah Paget. Is it any wonder that I, with these facts before me, should say to myself: In the disappearance of Miss Paget, and the murder of Hortense Novalis and her maid, there is certainly a very close connection. Two courses were before me. I could follow up the investigation already half done, and, in spite of Miss Paget's return, ferret out the secret of her absence. Or I could begin here, and find out who

killed Hortense Novalis. At whichever end I began, the result would be the same. There is but one solution for both mysteries."

"Great Heavens!" Mr. Talfourd cried. "Is it possible! Can you mean that Leah Paget—"

Ferrars stopped him by a gesture.

"Patience, sir," he said, gently. "Remember, I had just been hearing the story of the search for Miss Paget. Names, dates, everything, was fresh in my mind. Two things were overlooked, in the haste of that investigation; at least it would seem so." He turned upon Captain Connors. "When I found that letter beneath the pillow, I observed the date."

"Eh?"

"The date of that letter and the date of Leah Paget's disappearance were the same."

"Blockhead!" cried the Captain. "I *was* a blockhead!"

"Not at all, Captain. I did not call your attention to it, that was all. You were quick enough to note other things."

"Yes," assented the Captain, in fierce self-scorn, "I was able to note that Leah Paget's home-coming was upon the date of the murder."

"When I found this note or letter," resumed Ferrars, addressing himself now to Mr. Talfourd, "my first thought was of your son. I had seen him, and I considered myself, in a measure, bound to serve him if possible. Miss Paget was his *fiancée*. With that letter and picture in my possession, my position was strangely unpleasant. To give myself a little time for thought, and in the hope that I might by some bit of good luck get a glimpse of Miss Paget herself, I set out for their house, ostensibly to warn Miss Paget. On the way I reasoned with myself thus: If Leah Paget is guilty, or im-

plicated in any way, my warning will startle her into some act of self-betrayal, and then I shall know what to do. But on that day nothing but the unexpected occurred. I found that Miss Paget had returned indeed, and that she had simply refused to explain her absence. It was an evil day for Miss Paget, and I should probably have been forced to make known all my thoughts and discoveries to the Captain here, if Mr. Quinlan had not thrown himself into the breach with characteristic recklessness and haste. After looking him over carefully, I decided to accept him, as he seemed to expect. If Mr. Quinlan considered himself a fit subject for suspicion, there must be something to justify such suspicion. I would accept him. It would give me time. It would save Miss Paget, perhaps, if she were innocent. It could not harm Quinlan, if he were guilty."

"Do you mean to say," burst out Captain Connors, "that you never believed Quinlan guilty?"

"I never believed Mr. Quinlan guilty, sir, not for one moment."

"My God!" It was Mr. Talfourd's cry. "Did you begin by suspecting my son?"

"No, sir. Neither first nor last did I suspect Max Talfourd."

"In the name of all that's mysterious then," urged Connors, "what *did* you think? Whom *did* you suspect?"

"Before the Coroner had opened his inquiry—before we had finished our search of the rooms, in fact—I had formed the opinion which I hold at this moment. There was evidence, circumstantial evidence, against Frederick Quinlan and against Max Talfourd. But I could not accept it because—"

"Because—?"

"Because Hortense Novalis was murdered by a woman."

"Ah—horrible!"

"A woman!" Captain Connors bent eagerly toward the detective. "Ferrars," he said, excitedly, "are we to understand—do you mean to say that while we, you and I, were still searching the rooms, before the name of La Belle Fabrice was breathed to us, that you then decided it was a woman's deed?"

"I did."

The Captain fell back in his place. "I'm all at sea," he said. "What kind of a dance have you been leading us?"

CHAPTER LXIX.

THE LOST LINK.

"Captain," said the detective, "you are taking an oblique view of the affair. Your thoughts went naturally from a bloody deed to a brutal assassin. I, who have very little to do with ordinary crime—that is, with these murders which are happening every day; which nine times out of ten are the deeds of tramps or other hardened wretches of the lower grade—I was not so ready. In fact, I followed my usual method in trying to keep my mind a blank, as to opinion, until I had looked about me."

"True," assented the Captain; "I never even thought of a woman as the possible guilty one."

"Naturally."

"But tell me: had you decided it was a woman's work before you found that letter?"

"Yes. That letter, you must remember, Captain, bore no woman's name. It was signed but not addressed. There was nothing to indicate that it was not meant for Hortense Novalis, until you found that envelope matching the paper and addressed in the same hand."

"True."

"Now, go back with me to the scene of the murder, and try to see it with my eyes. Here we find the beautiful woman, richly robed and gleaming with jewels, lying dead in the midst of her splendor. All about her is confusion, wreck, the signs of a struggle fierce and desperate. From the condition of the two rooms, it must have begun in the inner one, and ended in the boudoir, where she was conquered and fell, struggling with her latest breath, her last atom of strength. Now, consider: Hortense Novalis was tall and lithe, but she was not muscular. Can you imagine her battling with a *man* like that? The evidences of the struggle were proof, to me, that victim and slayer were nearly matched in strength. Perhaps, Hortense may have been the stronger. I fancy so. But she was taken unawares, and the other struck with the strength born of fury, hatred, desperation. Would a man have battled so? Frederick Quinlan is a trained athlete. So is Max Talfourd."

The father of Max shuddered.

"The hired assassin is usually chosen from the strong. And then, would a paid assassin do such work, and leave all that booty behind him?"

"Not he," said the Captain, promptly.

"No. Men do not slay so. It was the work of a woman; and a woman furious, desperate, maddened by some terrible fear, or dread, or wrong."

"My God!" said Talfourd. "I can see it all! You are right; it must have been a woman."

"Of course he's right. I can see it clearly, now," cried Connors. "Gad! I'll resign tomorrow.'

"If you do," said Ferrars, "so will I. But let us get on and dispose of Mr. Quinlan at once."

"By all means," said Mr. Talfourd.

"Now, will you try to fancy my position. I have crossed the ocean to serve a friend, to seek a lost sweetheart, and here I stand surrounded by death, mystery, tragedy. And the names of those I had hoped to serve, confront me in a new light. Here comes in the use of what, to the Captain, seemed useless—just time thrown away. I mean the records of the good work done by his men in the Leah Paget case. Thanks to those documents, instead of groping blindly, I have a clear and excellent point of view. Instead of beginning this new work at the beginning, I begin it in the middle. I do not need to ask who is Quinlan. I know already, and all my knowledge is drawn from these reports. Standing beside the body of Hortense Novalis, I reason thus: The slayer is a woman, and woman slays oftenest from motives of revenge or jealousy. Frederick Quinlan, a man of the world, a man likely to have been mixed up in many intrigues, is the friend of the dead woman. Now, if we can find anywhere a woman whom he has, perhaps, abandoned for the sake of Hortense Novalis, we have gone a long way toward solving the problem." He looked from one to the other in silence for a moment. "Gentlemen, there is no such woman to be found. That Frederick Quinlan did not commit the murder, I was sure from the first. I was not sure that he did not instigate the deed, or, if he did not instigate, at least, held some knowledge or suspicion. But

my doubts were soon set at rest. Quinlan, directly or indirectly, had no part nor lot in that murder."

"And yet," began Mr. Talfourd, "he has borne the brunt of the suspicion, the public obloquy."

Ferrars threw back his head with an impatient gesture.

"Allow me to proceed," he said. "Quinlan saw readily that he, as the one most intimately associated with the dead girl, would naturally fall under suspicion, and knowing this he applied to me. Mr. Quinlan is by no means thin-skinned. He saw that notoriety was inevitable, but what then? In one way or another, he has been courting notoriety of a certain sort, ever since he became a fully fledged worldling. The man has pride, and keen common-sense of a hardy sort. His yachts, his horses, his mistresses, have been the talk of the town. He did not mind, for a time, being a man suspected of murder. Only, he must be fully vindicated at the end. After a long interview with him, I decided to use him at need. To mislead the public, and while the eye of suspicion was occupied with Quinlan and his probable guilt, I hoped to draw out the real criminal, who would probably be emboldened by the fact that the finger of suspicion was pointing another way. Besides, I wanted to gain time to study Max Talfourd and Leah Paget, and the murder of Hortense and the woman, Virginie." He paused a moment.

"Well," said Captain Connors, "did you find it, the missing link?"

"I did."

"Oh—what—who?"

"It is known," said the detective, slowly—"it is known to you by the name of Polly Cousin."

"Polly—Cousin!" ejaculated Connors, in amazement. "And the woman? You suspect some woman?"

"Suspect—I don't know."

"What! You don't know? Surely you have your eye upon some woman whom—"

"I have my eye upon three women," said Ferrars.

"And may we know—"

"You may know very soon all that I know, but you must not ask for details and particulars now. I have an eye, first, upon Leah Paget."

"Good Heavens!" cried Talfourd. "You don't believe her guilty?"

"Observe this: On a certain day and date, a young lady leaves her home. Upon this same day, a little earlier, a young man writes her a love-letter and sends her his picture. On that same day, later, he goes by appointment to the house of an adventuress. On a certain night this adventuress is murdered. On that same night, only an hour or so later, the young woman who went away so mysteriously, returns yet more mysteriously—comes back with sealed lips, refusing to speak of the weeks that have intervened since her going; refusing to see her lover, and then seeing him to send him from her, to declare all at an end between them. Don't you comprehend, my friends, that I must either doubt and hold this young woman under surveillance as a possible murderer, or, I must, in some way, clear up the mystery which envelopes these weeks of absence, whether she will or not?"

"Can you?" cried Talfourd senior. "Can you do this?"

"I have spent some time and labor trying," said the detective, grimly. And then, as if to prevent further interruption or questioning, he hurried on. "Next, there is La Belle Fabrice."

"Poor Wyntoun!" fell involuntarily from the lips of Mr. Talfourd.

"Yes. It has been rather hard upon Sir Felix," said the detective. "But you heard the evidence at the inquest. We must know why she so loathed and dreaded the name of Hortense Novalis; what took her to the Dresden Flats on that evening; and why she was so anxious to have the thing consigned to oblivion. Above all, we need to know why she left her Manager in the lurch at the last moment. Now, I'll tell you the little I chance to know."

He told them of the meeting of Quinlan and Sir Felix, in the apartments of Fabrice, on the day before the departure of Leah Paget was first made public; how Fabrice had fainted, with a morning paper in her hand; how, at the request of Fabrice, Sir Felix had presented her to Mr. Clarkson, the lawyer. And then he told the story of South Brandon, and the strange disappearance of three young girls, and then on and on until all was told that in any way concerned La Belle Fabrice.

It was growing day-light when at last their counsel broke up, and the faces of all looked weary, anxious, and very grave.

"I believe we understand each other now," said Ferrars, as they stood for a moment at the door.

"I do, I think," said Captain Connors. "You may safely leave my share of the work to me."

"And I think I do, also," said Mr. Talfourd, "and wish with all my heart it were well over."

"Amen to that!" said Ferrars.

Early in the morning, Mr. Talfourd tapped sharply at his son's door, and was promptly admitted.

"I have a note for you," the father said. "It's from Ferrars."

"Ah!" Max promptly broke the seal.

"Is Sir Felix in the house?"

"Yes, and sound asleep, no doubt. Why, what is this?"

"Eh?" Mr. Talfourd did not seem over-curious.

"Ferrars says he has reasons for believing that La Belle Fabrice went from this city to a place called South Brandon, a two hundred mile ride from here, and he wants us—Sir Felix and myself—to go there at once, by this morning's express."

"Well?"

"We can go and return, he says, within three days. He adds further instructions in case we find Fabrice."

"Shall you go, my son?"

"Go? Certainly; and so will Sir Felix. I'll stir him up at once. Train goes at eight o'clock, he says."

As the young man began a hasty toilet, the old man went slowly and thoughtfully toward his own room."

"It's a rather grim practical joke," he said to himself, "but better so, better so. Before they come back I hope this wretched business will be well over."

CHAPTER LXX

NICKERSON.

Near the fine building where Captain Connors held sway, stands a dingy pile, as nondescript in use as in appearance. It is a House of Detention; a place where unwilling witnesses, persons under suspicion, and a variety of small offenders are

housed and fed at the expense of the city. It is in charge of a matron and an assistant, and it was here that Ferrars had brought the old woman who had been identified by Murtagh as one of the figures in the South Brandon mystery, leaving to Captain Connors the task of looking after her as seemed needful.

The Captain's method was peculiar. He sent for the matron, who seemed quite at ease in his presence, and to understand him perfectly.

"I want you to take special charge of that woman," the Captain said. "She's an old fox and needs delicate handling. I want you to make friends with her, to sympathize with her."

"How far?"

"Oh! that's business-like. Well, I think she'll be likely to want to send a letter to some one, or perhaps to see a friend. She may even wish to bribe you into letting her escape."

"Well, shall I do it?"

"At the right time, perhaps; and after you have reported to me."

"All right," said the matron, briskly; "I'll manage it."

When they found time to compare notes, days afterward, it was discovered that neither Ferrars, Connors, or Mr. Talfourd had sought their pillows after the breaking-up of their late conference, and this fact may help to account for the surprisingly early hour at which Captain Connors called upon the matron in charge of that unique and dismal hostelry, the House of Detention.

"My goodness!" grumbled the matron, hastening into his

presence after some moments of delay, "I hope you didn't sit up all night jest for the fun of routing me out at this unearthly hour. Why, it ain't seven yet."

"I'm regulated by the moon, just at present, Mrs. Broot," said the Captain, amiably. "How about our old woman?"

"Mrs. Harris?"

"Yes, if that's her name."

"It's what she calls herself. It's all in train."

"Well, be on the lookout this morning. Can't you tell her you're willing to take her note yourself?"

"Why, no; 'twouldn't do at all. I've told her I'm waiting for a niece of mine, or one of my nephews, that I can trust, and that live a good way out. It wouldn't do at all," with a sly leer, "to let her think I could leave my post, or that I'd trust any one about here."

"Have your niece or nephew in waiting at nine o'clock sharp."

"All right, Captain."

"And I hope that a person will visit her."

"So does she, sir."

"Ah! Good; very good! If this visitor comes, you understand—"

"Oh, perfectly; I've got it all planned, sir."

"Very well, Mrs. Broot," he said. And he muttered as he turned away, "I only hope it won't fall through."

For half an hour after Mr. Talfourd and Captain Connors took leave of him, Francis Ferrars paced the floor with clouded brow, and sombre eyes fixed upon nothing outward. Then he sat down and wrote the following note:

MISS LEAH PAGET: The time is at hand. Be ready for any strange disclosure that may come today. Above all, remember your promise;

be calm. And remember this also: To spare the one who has wronged you will be to injure the innocent and the wronged. If your enemy is revealed to you, denounce that enemy at once, wherever you are and in the presence of whoever may be at hand. Above all, do not refuse yourself to any who may call, and be in the drawing-room early. F.F.

The hour was not late enough to send this note, and Ferrars had just settled himself to wait for one more, more reasonable, when a sharp rap at his door brought him to his feet.

"Who knocks?" he asked.

"Nickerson," said a low voice outside.

Instantly the door was flung open and Nickerson entered.

"Nickerson!" said Ferrars, in surprise. "What has happened?"

Nickerson smiled. "Nothing disastrous. We have returned to the city, that's all."

"We?"

"Yes; all of us—La Belle Fabrice, Madam Congreve, and the maid." He came a step nearer. "Why, sir, what's wrong? You don't look pleased."

"I'm not sure that I am pleased. However, sit down, man. What brought them, do you know?"

"I think it was a letter from Clarkson, the lawyer."

"Ah, yes." Ferrars flung himself into a chair, and Nickerson at once followed his example. "Where are they now?"

"Clarkson was waiting for them at the station, and took them at once to his house."

"He did! Well, that tells us something. We have had an eye on Clarkson."

"So I supposed."

"Do you know what they intend to do?"

"I managed to overhear a little. Fabrice is going to the Chief of Police in the morning."

"Alone?"

"No; under Clarkson's escort." Nickerson got up suddenly. "Shall I go to my post?"

"No," jumping up and beginning to move about rapidly. "Go at once to Captain Connors; he left here less than an hour ago. You'll find him in his office, I dare say. Tell him just what you have told me, and say that he must manage for me to see and hear his interview with the lady. When you have seen the Captain, get some rest. We're trying to draw this business to a close, Nickerson."

"I fancied so, from your last letter," said Nickerson, gravely. And after a moment of hesitation, he asked, "Are you likely to be successful, sir?"

Ferrars' face was grave.

"I hardly know how to answer you, Nickerson. If we do succeed, we shall owe much of it to your good work."

"I don't plume myself much on such work as I've done of late," said Nickerson, ruefully.

"I don't mean that," interposed Ferrars, "although you did well in South Brandon. I'm thinking of your work in the Paget case."

Over Nickerson's face swept a hot flush. "Oh, that!" he said, in a tone of disgust. "I didn't know you were chaffing."

"Nor am I. When I have time I will convince you. What you did in that matter has helped me to success in this. Waters, too, has lent a hand."

"You forget Cousin."

"Nickerson," said Ferrars, slowly, and laying a hand on his shoulder, "but for this Mr. Cousin you would have found Leah Paget. Come, let us go."

CHAPTER LXXI.

COUSIN TAKES THE ALARM.

At half-past seven Max Talfourd tapped on his father's door. He was equipped for a journey ; he held in his hand an open railway guide, and he looked perplexed.

"So you are going ?" said Mr. Talfourd.

"Of course I am going. But Ferrars is not as definite as usual ; he says South Brandon, but not what route."

His father caught the book from his hand.

"The eight o'clock train, isn't it ?" beginning to turn the leaves.

"Yes, but—"

"Hadn't you better look for a train leaving any station at that hour, that has South Brandon or Brandon on its station list ?"

"Of course," putting out his hand for the guide. "I'm only half awake yet. I had found two or three Brandons, and felt mixed up in consequence. If you go to Sara's tell them—"

"I am going to take your mother there today. I'll tell them that you have gone out of town."

Sir Felix came down the hall at this, watch in hand. "I should say we hadn't much time," he said. When they were well out of the house, he added, "Your governor looks glum, Talfourd. Never saw him look so sober. Don't he like this ?"

"I'm sure I don't know, my dear fellow. I don't half like it myself."

A couple hours later, Mr. Talfourd and his wife stood upon their own threshold awaiting the tardy coming of their carriage. Just as it appeared, two men, plainly dressed and quiet in appearance, halted before them and bowed respectfully.

"Pardon me, is this Mr. Talfourd?" asked one.

"It is."

"I believe you have a guest in your house?"

"Two of them."

"A guest named Sir Felix Barham?"

"Ah!"

"Excuse me, but it is necessary that we should see him. If you will ask him to step to the door, we should rather not intrude upon you."

"Unfortunately," said Mr. Talfourd, with a touch of asperity, "Sir Felix is not in." He turned and put out his hand to his wife, who stood a step above him. "Will you be so good as to stand aside while I put my wife in the carriage?" When Mrs. Talfourd was seated, he turned again toward the two men. "Is there anything further, gentlemen?"

"Will you tell us where the gentleman may be found?"

"I think Sir Felix might be found, at this moment, in a railway carriage. He left town, in company with my son, early this morning. I cannot tell you the direction of their travels, but they expect to be gone about three days, perhaps four."

He had finished his sentence with a foot upon the carriage-step and he signalled to the coachman, who drove rapidly away, before the seekers after Lord Barham could utter a word to detain him.

"My dear," said Mrs. Talfourd, "didn't you observe

that the man made a mistake? He asked for Sir Felix Barham?"

"I am quite aware of it, wife."

"It must have been Lord Barham that they wished to see?"

"Probably. Didn't you observe, my dear, that I was careful to give them information about Sir Felix only?"

Mrs. Talfourd pondered a moment. "After all, they may have meant Wyntoun instead of Barham. They have confused the names."

"Yes; I am feeling very much obliged to them."

"But why, dear? Who were they, do you think?"

"I think that they were detectives."

"Detectives?"

"Yes; detectives from the 'Star Detective Bureau.'"

A little later, on this same eventful morning, a small group were gathered in Sara Volney's luxurious rear drawing-room. The day, toward noon hour, had grown gloomy, and, although it was fairly summer time, there was a chill in the air which made the crackling wood-fire, that Mrs. Volney had ordered "more for cheer than warmth," very cozy and welcome.

In a low lounging-chair, a little apart from the others, sat Lord Louis Barham, and, in spite of the fact just made known to him by his host, that two anxious men had been in search of him, he looked very composed and comfortable.

Mr. Talfourd and his wife were sitting near Leah Paget, who was standing beside the mantle; and Mrs. Volney, sitting close to Mrs. Talfourd, was giving that lady all her attention, or so it seemed.

Leah was looking very grave, but quite at ease, and she was

giving her fullest attention to the conversation of Lord Barham and Mr. Talfourd, when the door opened and Mr. Cousin was announced.

There was a little stir about the grate, and, as Cousin slowly traversed the long front drawing-room, Mrs. Volney arose and went quickly to meet him, stopping just over the threshold of the inner room, and beyond the hearing of the others, if one spoke in a low tone.

Cousin's face looked worn and anxious, and, as she put out her hand to him, Mrs. Volney said, softly, "What is it? You look really ill."

"I am very anxious." He glanced toward the group beyond. "Contrive to give me ten minutes alone with you."

"Soon—I will manage it. Is it—" She broke off and looked at him keenly and then her face paled.

"Hush!" he said. "Some one in your house is being watched. Sara, you must get rid of that Leah!" Then he made toward the others, who had not grown quite accustomed to his frequent presence here, uttering some commonplaces, with an effort to appear at ease which was not a success.

As the stream of talk flowed on, somewhat sluggishly, Cousin murmured something about too much heat, and walked carelessly into the front drawing-room, taking his stand near one of the windows. In a moment, Lord Barham followed him, dropping into a seat by a second window and then pushing his chair back into the shadow of the curtain.

Leah Paget, who was a keen observer, had noticed that Lord Barham was seldom talkative in the presence of Cousin, and that he always seemed to avoid a too close proximity. She had noted the movements of both, and watched them, after a listless fashion, as they kept their places at the window.

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They were not inclined to talk, she observed. Suddenly she saw Lord Barham draw back from the window, and address some remark to Cousin, who withdrew his gaze from the street, and fixed it upon the speaker. A moment later, a servant entered and said something in a low tone to Mrs. Volney, who looked up in seeming surprise, hesitated a moment, and then arose, with a word of apology to Mrs. Talfourd, and left the room.

A little later, Mrs. Volney came back, and going up to Mrs. Talfourd, said, in her lowest, sweetest, most persuasive tone :

"Will you pardon me for doing a very rude thing? One of my pensioners, a poor old woman, has sent for me. She is in some sort of trouble or distress, and begs me to come to her at once. I cannot make out anything more from the messenger, but the place is not far away. I feel as if I must go to her."

"By all means!" interposed Mrs. Talfourd, and the rest echoed her words.

"You will wait for me? You will stop for luncheon?" Mrs. Volney urged. "If you refuse, I shall not go."

"My dear Sara, we are not strangers," said Mr. Talfourd. "There need be no ceremony with us. Yes, go ; go at once."

And so, after a few more words and pretty apologies, Sara Volney went. Lord Barham and Cousin, who had both returned to their windows, saw her go swiftly down the walk, out at the gate and around the corner, following closely in the footsteps of a girl whose figure, as it moved in advance of the lady, they could hardly see. They turned at the corner, and then both watchers caught a glimpse of a girl, small of stature, clad like a nurse-maid, and wearing her long flaxen hair in two braided tails down her back. As if to give them a better glimpse of her

figure, for her face was veiled, the girl paused exactly at the corner, turned slowly around and looked back, standing thus, it seemed, for a full minute.

A sharp exclamation broke from Cousin's lips, and Lord Barham turned quickly, to see that he was hurrying toward the door, and that his face, already pale and worn, was now absolutely ghastly.

"What—aw, weally, my dear fel—" Here Barham broke off abruptly and sprang back to his place by the window, for Cousin had shut the door between himself and all question or remonstrance, quite as if Lord Louis Barham had been only a common and somewhat impertinent mortal.

In another instant the outer door closed heavily, as though shut by a hasty and nervous hand, and Lord Barham, from his post at the window, saw Cousin hurrying down the paved walk and out at the gate. Then, with another swift spring, Lord Barham had crossed to a side window, which afforded a view of the street down which Mrs. Volney and her guide had turned. At a little distance from the corner, a cab stood in waiting, and a second glance showed him a glimpse of a flowing black garment, as Mrs. Volney seated herself within, and then a whisk of two flaxen braids, as the maid followed. As the cab drove rapidly away, he saw Cousin come swiftly around the corner, stop short at the sight of the receding cab, look about him anxiously as if hoping to find another vehicle at hand, lift a clinched hand as if in a gesture of rage or despair, and turn a pale face toward the house he had just left. Then he set off at a rapid pace, not in the direction taken by Mrs. Volney's cab, which was already out of sight amid a crowd of vehicles, but straight on, in the way that led to the nearest cab-stand.

When he had seen Cousin out of sight, Lord Barham returned to the inner room, and was at once conscious that Leah, still standing upon the hearth rug, was watching him intently, and with a look of surprise gathering in her face.

In the meantime, Cousin, hurrying town-ward, had hailed an empty cab, flung himself within, and gasped to the driver, "To the Star Detective Agency, and be quick!"

CHAPTER LXXII.

LEAH SPEAKS.

The hasty departure of Cousin scarcely drew a comment from the loungers in Mrs. Volney's drawing-room, and the conversation flagged somewhat, and finally fell altogether into the hands of the ladies.

Both felt, and had reason to feel, quite at home in Sara Volney's house, and it is probable the two would have exchanged a few confidences concerning Mrs. Volney's strange and unaccountable friendship for this plain-faced young reporter who was nobody in particular, and not even in society. Indeed, such thoughts were flitting through Mrs. Talfourd's head and checked her speech for a moment. Then she noticed that Lord Barham had taken up a handful of photographs of "places," and that Mr. Talfourd and he had begun a low-toned conversation upon the subject of architecture. It was a subject in which she felt a keen interest, and the lady made a sign to

Leah, and drew her chair nearer to the table where Lord Barham stood.

"Speaking of city homes and old houses," said Mr. Talfourd, with his face turned toward the street, "I suppose this house is about the oldest in this vicinity. It has been in the Volney family for three generations. I thought it must come down or be renovated when Gregory Volney's father took possession, for it had been a sort of unlucky place for years, and still more gruesome associations were added in the earlier years of his tenancy. But no. When he was free to do so, he just closed the place and went abroad, leaving Gregory in school, just at the age when he needed home training most."

"Why, Mr. Talfourd," said Leah, smiling, "one would suppose the house was haunted."

"My dear,"—Mr. Talfourd turned his gaze upon Leah for just a moment—"for ten years this house stood with locked doors and boarded-up windows, and it was called the 'Haunted House' by all the neighborhood."

"Mercy!" said Leah, "I never heard of that."

"You were rather young in those days, my dear," smiled Mrs. Talfourd, and she added: "You know that Gregory, during his years of ownership, never really lived in the house, and did no more than to open the windows and make it look a little less uninviting from the outside. To save his credit as a property owner, and for the sake of the street, he used to say."

"Yes," said Leah, thoughtfully, "I think I remember something of that."

Lord Barham moved back from the table, where he had already deposited the handful of photographs, and took out his watch.

Mr Talfourd got up and walked once or twice the length

of the room. Mrs. Talfourd alone remained sitting, and a long moment of silence followed Leah's words. It was Lord Barham who spoke first.

"Aw—I didn't fancy you kept much of that sort of thing here—haunted houses, you know; and all that. How came it to be haunted—weally?"

"I'll tell you. Mr. Talfourd turned in his promenade and halted a little behind Leah, who was standing beside his wife's chair and directly facing Lord Barham, but with Mrs. Talfourd and the little table between them. "I'll tell you. The story has not been circulated much for a good many years; people do not seek to perpetuate family misfortunes. Gregory Volney's mother was a very strange woman in her best days, and she died a maniac. At first she was not difficult to deal with, and she was kept at home, with a trained nurse, whom she considered a maid. After a time she began to grow violent, and, to drown her screams, which at times were horrible to hear, Volney evoked from his brain a novel scheme. The mansard was in one big bare room, and a large square in the center was built up; the walls were padded thickly, and a big square cut out of the roof, in which a skylight was set. As the ceiling was none too high, the skylight was elevated a foot and a half or so, and a net-work of slender iron bars was arranged below it. Then, upon the roof a fanciful railing was arranged about the skylight, and carried up padoga-fashion, so that from the outside it had the appearance of a small observatory. The observatory, viewed from the street, is in the center of the roof, but the room in not squarely under it."

"How—how—is the skylight placed?" asked Leah, almost gaspingly, and clutching hard at the back of Mrs. Talfourd's chair with both hands.

"At the front of the room, directly above the door. It was so arranged because of the stairway, which goes up almost in the center of the mansard. In fact, there is but a step between the top stair and the door of the enclosed room."

"And—the room?" asked the girl, huskily. "Describe it, please?"

"Why, it's a long time ago since I saw it. I think it was walled or boarded up when Sara took possession. I advised her to take it down—the big mansard was meant for a ball-room—but she said she had not the heart to make any change then, so soon after poor Gregory's death."

"Describe it." Leah was trembling so violently that Mrs. Talfourd looked up at her in astonishment.

"A square room," began Mr. Talfourd; "padded walls, overlaid with brown leather, a low bed, two or three easy-chairs, some shelves to hold books, dishes, etc., and every article of furniture fastened securely to the floor."

A moment Leah Paget stood bolt upright, with her hands pressed against her temples. She took a step forward, and an inarticulate cry burst from her lips. Then her hands dropped; she lifted her head and her slender form was drawn to its fullest height; her face was colorless, but her eyes glowed with the light of a sudden illumination. With a few quick steps she was at the door, and there she turned with an impetuous gesture.

"Wait," she said, and was outside of the room in a moment. With a foot upon the lowest stair she turned, at a sound behind her. It was Lord Barham, and he held out a bright new door-key.

"You will need this," was all he said.

She paused on the step above him, and, for a moment,

looked steadily into the eyes from which he had that moment snatched the gold-rimmed glasses. Then she caught the key from his hand and sped on up the broad stairs. At the top she turned. He was still standing at the foot. "You may as well come," and she hastened on.

Up the second flight she flew breathlessly. And the third, narrower, steeper, darker. Half-way up she paused, as if by some instinct, and looked over the slender hand-rail, down upon the second flight and the floor below.

When she stopped, at the top of the last flight, Lord Barham was close beside her, and, directly before them, with a scant two feet of space between it and the stairway, was a heavy door doubly bolted.

She was trembling violently now, and he bent forward and threw back the bolts. They worked smoothly, as if they had been well oiled and in recent use.

He opened the heavy door, drawing back a little, as he stood at the top of the flight, to give it room to swing, and another door confronted them. In this door was a sliding panel, and two or three small orifices, that were protected by little revolving covers.

And now Leah was panting and clinging to the slender hand-rail for support.

He took the key from her hand, unlocked the second door, which swung inward, and taking her arm, gently drew her in. But only so far as the threshold. There the girl stopped, as if paralyzed, and cast a quick sweeping glance all about her—at the padded walls, that had been over-draped for the most part in gaudy chintz, at the stationary bed and table, and then up to the barred skylight above her head.

Lord Barham, leaving the door wide open, had advanced to

the center of the room, and, after her startled survey and another moment of silent, horror-stricken calm, Leah Paget moved slowly toward him.

"My God! what does it mean?" she said, flinging out both her hands in a frantic gesture. "This room—it has been my prison for long, long weeks! In this room, in this very room—Sara Volney's house!—is this a trick, or—"

"No," said the man at her side, "it is no trick; only an exposure. So it was as I thought—this place has been your prison? Do you know why? Try to think, try to be calm. There is much at stake."

Again for a moment she stood, shivering as if with cold, and all the fire gone out of her eyes. Then she drew herself up and a splendid rage seemed to possess her and drive out all other feeling.

"Do I know why? Yes! Now; now, for the first time, I do know why! That dreadful day, I went out at dusk to post some letters. I walked slowly down a quiet street to put them into a box. Because it was pleasant, and I wanted the walk, I passed two or three boxes, saying to myself each time, "The next, and then turn back." When I did stop at a corner it was growing duskier and the street seemed deserted. I dropped my letters and was turning away when a cab came up very quietly, and I was seized by two men. That is all I know. Something was pressed against my face. When I became conscious, I was here, *in this room!*

There was the sound of light footsteps hastening up the stairs. As if fearful of being again shut up in that padded dungeon, Leah sprang to the door. Then suddenly she drew herself up, and with flashing eyes confronted the one who stood on the stairs a step below her.

"Sara Volney," she cried, "look me in the face and say, if you dare, why you have done a thing too base to be named! why you are my enemy!"

The cry of rage that could not be kept back, and the look of terror that for a moment flitted across her face, were the only signs that Sara Volney had heard her words.

Then she said sharply to some one just behind her, "Quick! Help me! She must not come down!"

What happened next? It could never be quite understood.

The woman behind Mrs. Volney made a sudden forward rush, and as both sought to reach and detain Leah, a man stepped in between them, hurled the old woman aside and put out a hand to grasp the arm of the other.

"Madam, would you commit another murder? *Hortense Novalis is not yet avenged!*"

Then a scream echoed from the roof to the floors below; there was a frantic struggle on that tiny landing at the very top of the stairs; a sudden wrench, a crash, a dull, sickening thud, and a woman's form was stretched senseless across the threshold of that prison room, while another lay, a crushed heap, upon the floor below!

CHAPTER LXIII.

THE EXIT OF THE STARS.

Such scenes defy description. After one moveless, horror-stricken moment, Lord Barham became astonishingly active. He lifted the head of the fainting girl away from the thresh-

"MADAM, WOULD YOU COMMIT ANOTHER MURDER? *Hortense Novalis is not yet avenged!* Page 528.

old of the prison room, and, without so much as glancing at the old woman just inside, drew the inner door shut and turned the key upon her. Then he caught up the senseless form and carried it carefully but rapidly down the stairs, past the place where Sara Volney lay, and still down to the rear drawing-room, where Mrs. Talfourd, with white, scared face, threw open the door, and bade him lay her upon a low divan.

Very gently he laid her down. "It's only a swoon," he said. "I leave her to you, Mrs. Talfourd." At the door he encountered Mr. Talfourd. "This is very bad," he said. "Send the trustiest servant for a physician. And there ought to be an officer here at once. I think you can find one not far off."

At that moment they heard the street door open and close, and then Cousin appeared.

"What is it?" he cried, sharply, after one look at their faces.

"An accident," said Lord Barham, quickly. "Come and see."

Sara Volney was lying in a strangely cramped and unnatural attitude. She had struck against the hand-rail in falling, with such force as to save her by the rebound from striking upon the stairs themselves, lower down. She was senseless and her face was drawn and ashen.

For a moment the two men bent above her, Cousin with his whole frame shaken and great drops of sweat standing out upon his forehead.

"She is certainly much injured," said Lord Barham, drawing back a little. "I think we should not move her before a surgeon comes."

Cousin knelt beside the still form with a strange, dazed look

upon his face. He lifted one limp white hand and then laid it tenderly down again. He looked for a long moment into the white, unconscious face, and then up to the man now standing erect opposite him.

Suddenly, with eyes that gleamed fiercely, he sprang up, confronting the other across that still form.

"Curse you!" he cried, hoarsely. "*You* have brought this about. Ah! I wish I could kill you!"

There was a moment of silence, and then the other spoke, with no trace of resentment in his low tones.

"And I wish I could spare you a little of this horror, and of that which is to come." He made a movement as if to go, but turned back.

"I believe you are an honest man," he said, "and you have erred, like many others, for the sake of a woman you loved and believed. Before you leave this house you must know the truth concerning—many things."

An hour later, and Cousin knew the truth from the lips of Mr. Talfourd, who told it mercifully, but without naming Ferrars.

Cousin was silent for a space, then: "For God's sake!" he cried, "who is that man who calls himself Lord Barham?"

"That man is Francis Ferrars, the English detective!"

In this strange world, comedy and tragedy walk hand in hand.

While Mr. Talfourd and Cousin still stood near the drawing-room window, a carriage dashed up to the gate, closely followed by another. From the first, two men sprang out. From the second, one, and that one Captain Connors.

Then the two at the window saw the pantomime of a conver-

sation, in which the Captain was energetic, and the two others seemed to be listeners.

Suddenly Cousin turned from the window and hurried out, hatless, to the street; and again Talfourd saw a brief pantomime, in which Cousin took a part.

It was all over in a moment. The two men re-entered their cab and drove away, and Captain Connors and Cousin came in together.

"Those gentlemen of the 'Star Agency' are deeply disappointed," the Captain said to Mr. Talfourd. "They were after Lord Louis Barham. I didn't want a scene or a long parley, so I told them the truth. They'll keep it close enough."

"I am glad to be so well out of that," Ferrars said, while in company with Captain Connors and Mr. Talfourd, they awaited in the drawing-room the verdict of the surgeons. "It would have been an ugly *on dit* to attach to the name of such a good fellow as Lord Barham."

"How came you to adopt that role?" inquired Connors.

"It was Wyntoun's idea. When he wrote begging me to come to the rescue he suggested it. I fancied the boy thought he might take a hand with me. He had got hold of the notion that some one must get behind the social scenes in order to succeed. And then my resemblance to Lord Barham is really striking. Of course, no one could foresee such a complication as we found from the very first.

Suddenly the Captain turned upon Ferrars.

"By Jove! that fellow Cousin is coming out strong. It was he, it seems, who warned them at the 'Star.' One of my shadows came tearing in, to tell me that Cousin had driven up to the 'Star' office in hot haste, and fairly dashed up stairs. And then, in a few minutes, Cousin rushed down upon me

with the news that La Belle Fabrice was in the city. He had seen her in a cab, disguised as a servant, driving down town."

"I do not understand all of this," said Talfourd *pere.*

"Allow me," said Ferrars. "The old woman—Mrs. Harris, as she calls herself—has been in the care of the Captain here. I felt sure that she had been in communication with Mrs. Volney, who, we believed, was none other than Mary Sharp, of South Brandon fame; the adopted, and lost, daughter of Deacon Sharp. So, in order to identify her, La Belle Fabrice put on a servant's attire, and came here as the bearer of a note from Mrs. Harris. Fabrice recognized Mrs. Volney as Mary Sharp, and gave me the signal to that effect. It appears that Fabrice once had an encounter with Cousin when she was in this same servant disguise, flaxen braids and all, and I couldn't keep Cousin away from the window. He saw the flaxen braids and away he went, killing two birds with one stone—setting those fellows upon me and giving the Captain here, timely information."

"Good Heavens!" said Leah, "what a coil! But who is that terrible old woman?"

Ferrars looked up quickly. "You know her?" he asked.

Leah shuddered. "I never saw her face, but she was my jailor!"

"I guessed something like that. We had her in custody and allowed her to escape, Mrs. Volney bribing the matron in charge. You see now, Miss Paget, what our plan was, and on what uncertain ground we stood. Up to this morning, although morally certain that Mrs. Volney was your enemy and this house your jail, that she was Mary Sharp and the murderess of Hortense Novalis, we had positively no proof. If you, La Belle Fabrice, or the woman Harris, had failed in

the role we expected each to play, we would have been in a sad predicament, and might have done more harm than good. Of course, we did not anticipate such a strange *denouement.*"

Leah shivered again. "What did it mean?"

"I suppose Mrs. Harris must have told Mrs. Volney that she was in danger of being used as a witness; and Mrs. Volney, having bribed the matron, was about to secrete the old woman in your late prison."

Leah covered her face with her hands. "It was horrible!" she cried. "I see it every moment!"

"It *was* horrible," assented the detective. "But, after all, since justice must be done, it is best. Miss Paget, I wish you would tell me now, why you so steadfastly refused to explain your imprisonment."

The girl flushed rosily and half turned away. Then she answered,

"I dare say it will seem folly to you, and to all others now; still," her face paling again, "it is horrible, as it all comes back to me. A long time ago she, Mrs. Volney, and I, were talking of some *mesalliance.* I forget just what, but the discussion turned upon fairness or honesty of marriage when there must be a secret between husband and wife, or any act that could not be fully explained and might appear questionable. Not long after, the newspapers had much to say of a young girl who had disappeared, and who came home, after a time, telling very much such a story as I would have told had I told the truth. Nobody believed the girl's story, and the newspapers ridiculed it most horribly. Sitting alone in that hideous room, day after day, I suppose I grew morbid, and I promised myself if I ever escaped, I would at least preserve my dignity and keep silent. I might have saved myself the

trouble, though. That old woman made me take a solemn oath never to tell what befell me, nor speak of that padded prison." She was silent a moment, and then added: "Of course, when I saw that room, and the key in your possession, I knew you had unearthed the secret, and felt myself absolved." And now she was looking at him curiously. "I never guessed, though, until you dropped off your affectations and resumed your natural tones, that you were not Lord Barham."

Sara Volney was hurt unto death. Nothing could save her, a council of doctors said. There were spinal injuries that must in themselves prove fatal, ending, as they surely would, in paralysis. But there were other hurts, "internal injuries," threatening to cut the thread of life even shorter.

At midnight she was suffering frightfully. She lay in her darkened room, raving wildly and living over again the varied scenes of a strange career. The lips that had guarded her secrets so closely, were pouring them forth freely now, but in a strange confusion that made them worth little more than silence would have been, to those who hoped for something better—some word of penitence or reparation—before Death claimed his victim.

When the councils of physicians had dispersed, Ferrars told the surgeon who remained in close attendance, as much as was needful of Sara Volney, and of the tragedy in which she had borne so sinister a part, adding,

"You see, of course, why we must dispense, if possible, with the services of a trained nurse. None of these ravings—which contain more fact than fancy, I fear—must get beyond the walls of this room. Everything will be kept from publicity, for the present."

Late in the afternoon, two ladies, under the escort of Captain Connors, came, and Ferrars was called down to the drawing-room, where they awaited him.

He found La Belle Fabrice and Madam Congreve.

Fabrice came toward him and put out her hand.

"I have come to offer my services," she said. "Indeed, to force them upon you." And then, in a hushed tone, "Captain Connors has told us—it is horrible—and I—I feel as if I had done it myself! She has no friends, or at least none who have known her so long. I have good nerves, and am not a bad nurse—ask Madam Congreve there. I felt sure you wouldn't want a stranger, and Madam will stay with me, of course.

And so it was arranged.

Abner Paget and his wife had been waiting the turn of events in a little suburban town, not two hours' ride from their own home. A telegram from Ferrars, who seemed to think of everything, brought them back that evening, and they hastened to take Leah away from the place where all the suffering her fair life had known, had been planned and executed upon her.

At the first opportunity, the detective consulted Fabrice as to the best way to dispose of Mrs. Harris, who was still a prisoner in the mansard cell.

"That dreadful old woman is truly devoted to Mary—to Mrs. Volney," said Fabrice, promptly. "Release her, and she will be of much use in the sick-room. She won't run away, you may be sure, while her idol is in danger."

Ferrars seemed to hesitate.

"I know what I am saying," urged Fabrice. "There is no love between us, I assure you; but that avaricious, unprin-

cipled old woman, who would have sold Hannie Holly or myself into any evil bondage, made an idol of Mary from the first."

"And she—Mary, as you call her?"

"Mary, in those days, loved nothing but herself. All her sweetness and pretty ways were used to further her own aims. When she had done with Mrs. Harris, she cast her aside."

CHAPTER LXXIV.

"ALL ALONE."

On the evening of the third day, the surgeon sought Ferrars.

"The delirium has taken a strange turn," he said. "She seems to be in the condition of a sleep-walker or a mesmerized person. I believe that a familiar voice could lead her on, and keep her memory sufficiently alive by occasional suggestions to get something like a coherent story from her. She is breaking fast, and if there is information of importance in her keeping—"

"Wait," said the detective, and he went in search of Fabrice.

"It is time to make the effort," he said. "Have you got the strength? It's a hideous task, I know."

"Yet we must do it," the girl said. "Yes, I will be your mouthpiece."

In the hall, hovering near the door of the sick-room, they

encountered Cousin, and Ferrars laid a hand upon his arm.

"We are going to make an effort to get at the truth," the detective said, kindly. "Do you wish to be present?"

"Is she rational?" whispered the poor fellow, hoarsely.

"No."

"When she comes to herself, I must see her," Cousin said. "But not now—I can't."

It was, indeed, a weird and strange scene, that closely-curtained, dimly-lighted room, with the low white bed and its still occupant in the center. At the foot the surgeon, his keen eyes watching for the slightest change in that marble-like face—upon which the light had been turned, while all the rest of the room and its occupants lay in shadow—with Fabrice in a low chair drawn close by the bedside, and Ferrars standing just behind, where he might whisper, from time to time, the words she must say.

And then, urged on, or held to her subject, by Fabrice, the shattered mind began to work out a strange story.

At first it was the beautiful bound girl, at war with all her surroundings; with mutinous, restless blood flowing in her veins; with pride and cunning, an inordinate self-confidence, struggling with her bonds; plotting, scheming, urging on the others with fiery scornful words.

"Bessie, come, come! make up your mind. "Come! I wouldn't let poor old uncle work for me! I would never be a burden, like you are. What do you do? Nothing but take his dimes to buy new ribbons, while he sits by the fire and can't smoke because you want so many frills. Bah! you are a coward, Bess Gage."

"My God!" moaned Fabrice. "That is how she used to talk to me. That is how they urged me away!"

"Hush!" whispered Ferrars.

And now it was of Gregory Volney that she babbled; of his wooing, of his wealth. "And he thinks I love him—he, the ugly, sickly thing! But wait; only wait!"

And listening, horror-stricken, they heard dramatized the life and death of an unloved, unhappy invalid, always the slave of her soft cat-like artfulness, dying slowly while she sought pleasure amid other scenes. And then she was a widow. She was in New York. She was her own mistress, Sara Volney—mistress of a proud home and a goodly fortune.

"Now," whispered Ferrars, as he bent over Fabrice; "just the word—"

And Fabrice leaned over the still white figure, and breathed softly a name: "Max!"

And then—ah, Heavens! what a spectacle is a soul laid bare in all its iniquity!

"Max, Max, Max!" It began with a sigh and ended in a wail, and all the wretched story came torrent-like from her lips.

How she had loved him! Loved him from the first, while yet she was Gregory Volney's wife! How all her wiles, her softest looks and tones, her sweetest smiles had been lavished in vain! And then came Leah Paget.

No need to urge her now; no need to prompt or suggest. All is told. Her love, her jealousy, her frenzied last struggles to ensnare a heart that would not heed. All her despair, and then the hatred, growing, growing! The mad determination to win, in spite of everything. Then, the plotting—the idea of abduction—slowly taking form in that passion-maddened brain. And then—Hortense Novalis!

How hideous it was! The accidental meeting of the two, in which Hortense, the adventuress, blithely proffering the right

hand and good-will of an old comrade, is repulsed with stinging words and haughty glances by the aristocrat, the proud society queen! Ah! fatal mistake for Sara Volney!

And now she is living these terrible weeks of her life over again. Faster and faster come the words. There is no break now, no missing links. The soft voice grows strong and shrill, a strange light begins to burn in those beautiful eyes. Listen.

She has learned that Hortense is an enemy to be feared, and, just as she fancies that Max is turning toward her, beginning to feel the spell of her beauty and enticing sweetness, Hortense Novalis lets fly her first arrow. Only a vague whisper as yet, a rumor without a name. Only that there is in society a lady whose career has been exceedingly strange. Ah, but the rest will come; the greed for gossip will never be satisfied until more is told. Hortense Novalis will play with her reputation as she, Sara, has played with the hearts that loved her. Hortense will flaunt it in the public gaze for a time and then tear it to tatters, fling it away.

"And Max!" Oh! the wail that goes up in that darkened room! Max is lost to her now; doubly lost. Max Talfourd must love and wed above reproach! Oh, bitterness!

How silent the room is! And then how filled with the sound of sobbing that is tearless!

Max, Max! Lost to her—but no, no, no! She can prevent *that!* Some one to help her. Who will it be? Ah, Satan furthers the hopes of his own! She knows where to look for Mother Harris. She will aid her. How odd that that rapacious old vulture is always at her call, always her abject slave! Max' wife must be above reproach! It shall not be Leah Paget, then.

"Hush! Speak low! How easy it all is. First, close

the house and move away. Then, that prison room must be opened. Tear away the boards. Now the nest is ready. How easy it is! A carriage at some quiet corner. I know where Leah loves to walk. Ah, Leah Paget, not a hair of your head will be injured. But yet—we'll try it. Go to your friends, after a month's absence, and tell them your story. Ask them to believe it! Will they? Ha, ha! You went out at sunset. You were seized, thrust into a carriage, shut up for weeks in a padded room. And then, presto! you are at home again. You have not been robbed, you have not seen your jailor, you do not know where you were confined. Why were you abducted, why were you brought back? Ha! ha! If I were you, Leah Paget, I would never tell that story. Ah! but stop! This room! She must give her promise; she must tell nothing. I had not thought of that! Bah! how I hate you! If I only knew where to put you, you would *never* go back, Leah Paget. Ah, well! You will never be his wife, Leah Paget; never, never, never!"

The voice sinks to a whisper, the light in the eyes dying out.

The surgeon feels the pulse, and pours a spoonful of liquid between the parted lips. Ferrars breathes a word in the ear of Fabrice.

"Hortense!"

"Ah! will I never have peace? How dare you cross my threshold, woman? How dare you touch his picture with your vile common hands? My Max. What, you too? I don't believe it! It's false as your fair face. He your friend! Take care, Hortense Novalis, as you call yourself. Take care! Not that! Don't cross that line."

Again the voice sinks. How still the room is. Fabrice is

as pale, almost, as that ashen face upon the pillow. The detective proffers her a glass of wine, but she cannot drink it. She moves away, while her lips seem parched.

"Another friend—how fortunate, poor fool! What an easy conquest! Ah, he might have been a dangerous foe. How loyal, though! And he loves me! Yes, and he can love. Plain and awkward creature! If only Max had loved me like that! Oh Max, Max, Max! Well, he is my slave at least. He will do my bidding, and I need such help—yes, yes! I will not cast him away. He is mine, body and soul. He shall remain mine. My slave!"

Fabrice looks up in horror.

"She means Cousin," whispered Ferrars.

"What! again? No, no! you will not do that, Hortense! No, no! you shall not make my name a byword. You *shall* not. I will kill you first. Ah!"

Again the eyes are aflame, a tinge of color begins to glow in the white lips.

"Hush! It must be. Tomorrow might be too late. I will see for myself. I must! Ah, if it should be so! But no; I will not believe it! Softly. All is quiet. No one is to be seen. I am at the door. Hush, it opens; it is not locked. Ah, you are asleep, you grim dragon! God of heaven, it is, it is his voice! His! and he is coming! Ah, he is gone, and she—see—she puts on all her bravery, her jewels, her flowers. How regal! And he has turned from Leah to her. To her, and she will be the queen of the stage tomorrow. What is she doing? Nearer, nearer. Ah, a letter, and she sighs. A picture. She smiles, and holds it before her. Oh, my heart! It is Max, my Max! Ah, curse you! curse you, curse—"

Gracious Heavens! the last word is fairly shrieked. It rings through that still house. And she, the motionless, the dying, springs up and flings her body to and fro; her long fair tresses come loosened, and fall streaming backward over the pillows. As she moves, her blazing eyes and expanded nostrils, her slim white hands swaying swiftly, her writhing body and upward flung arms, present a pantomime that is unmistakable.

With a paroxysm of strength, such as is sometimes lent the dying, Sara Volney, in her last hour, is rehearsing the scene of Hortense Novalis' death.

It is hideous! Fabrice draws away and covers her face with her hands. Even the surgeon turns aside his face. Only Ferrars continues to gaze fixedly, losing no movement, no gesture. And away in a darkened corner an old woman, upon her knees, with face to the wall, grovels and moans in abject misery.

It is over soon, and then comes the relaxation that is inevitable. The dying woman lies panting and pallid, fast sinking back into unconsciousness.

"This will hasten the end," says the surgeon. "You had better go out now. I will summon you at the first sign of change. And I think you would do well to call in your notary and a clergyman."

"They are ready," said Ferrars. And then he gently led Fabrice away.

At the end of half an hour they were again summoned.

Sara Volney had opened her eyes, with the light of reason in them, and she lay for some moments silent, with her gaze

fixed upon the surgeon. Soon she made an effort to move, and then suddenly seemed to comprehend everything.

"Am—I—past help?" she whispered.

"Yes."

"Is there no hope?"

"No hope."

"Am I dying now—now?"

The surgeon nodded. Another long silence. He put a finger upon her wrist.

"Is it—soon?"

"Very soon. Is there anything you wish to say?"

"Yes; a lawyer," she whispered.

Ferrars came forward.

"We have a lawyer and a clergyman at hand. But have you no confession to make? A few words will be enough. You have been raving the truth for three days."

A strange haunted look crossed her face.

"Why are you—Lord Barham—here?" she articulated.

"I am not Lord Barham," said Ferrars, quickly. "I am a detective. Will you say, in the presence of the notary, the bare truth?"

Again her eyes turned toward the surgeon, who interpreted the glance.

"You cannot live until midnight," he said, gently.

Again she looked at Ferrars. "Go—on."

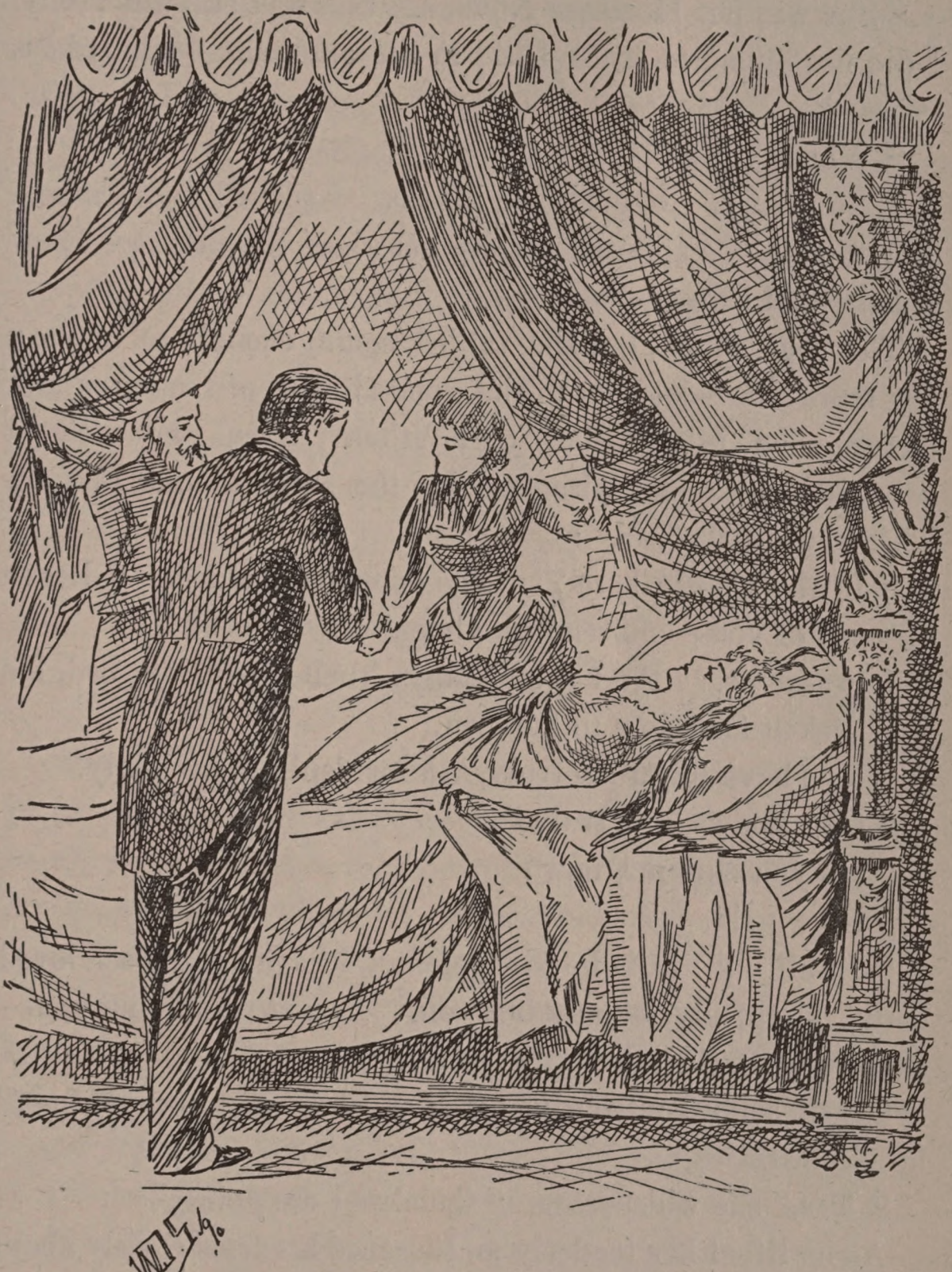
"You are Mary, adopted daughter of Deacon Sharp, of South Brandon?"

"Yes."

"You caused the abduction of Leah Paget?"

"Yes."

"And the death of Hortense Novalis?"



"SARAH VOLNEY, IN HER LAST HOUR, IS REHEARSING THE SCENE OF HORTENSE NOVALIS' DEATH!" Page 543.

"She was not Hortense Novalis. She was Hannie Holly. I did not intend to kill—I hid in the anteroom—I heard his voice—"

"Whose voice?"

"No matter. It made me insane. I picked up a knife—on her table. And—when I saw her kiss—his picture—I flew at her—and killed—"

The eyes closed, but she rallied again, enough to make a few more admissions, as to the concealment of the letter and picture, and to sign her declaration. Then she dictated her will, which was witnessed by the surgeon and Ferrars. Then she asked, feebly:

"Is Mr. Cousin here?" The detective nodded. "Leave me—all of you—and send him here."

It was done. And poor Cousin knelt beside the bed, his wo-stricken face close to her own.

"You have loved me truly," she whispered, brokenly.

"God knows how truly."

"Do you hate me, now?"

"No—no!"

"In all my life," she whispered, "I have never been loved truly, unselfishly, by any but you. I want no one but you—beside my death-bed."

Cousin sobbed piteously. "May I hold you in my arms?" he pleaded.

"Yes," she whispered. "Quick—I am going."

As he lifted her tenderly and clasped his arms closely about her, a hollow moan broke from the lips of a bowed figure, in the corner near the door. It was Mrs. Harris, and she came softly forward and knelt by the foot of the bed.

"Sara—my beautiful, my darling—say a word to me!"

Perhaps in that moment of sincere sorrow, the croning old woman realized something of the misery she had brought to others. Her voice seemed to arouse the dying woman.

"Tell her," she whispered to Cousin, "that—I have left the money. She need not fear for that."

Then an awful change came over her face.

"My God!" she moaned, I am going—going—all alone!"

CHAPTER LXXV.

CONCLUSION.

When Sara Volney's body was carried to its last resting-place, the two chief mourners were Cousin and an old woman, to whom he gave his arm courteously and respectfully, "for *her* sake," but to whom he never spoke, and from whom he turned away in silent antipathy at the close.

When Mrs. Volney's will was read, it was found that all her fortune, with the exception of a legacy to Mrs. Harris, was left to "her only friend," Percy Cousin, who she begged to accept it as the only reparation she could make him.

After a long illness—the natural result upon such a temperament of that awful strain of love and fear, grief and passion—he rallied slowly, and came back to the world again, an old young man, with hair as white as silver.

His first act, after entering upon the possession of his fortune, was to erect over the grave of Sara Volney a shaft of

whitest marble; to enclose the ground which covered her, and to fill the enclosure with white flowers. For to him the memory of Sara Volney was sacred. She was the one woman he had loved, and would never forget.

He avoided, as much as possible, his old friend, Captain Connors, and all the actors in the tragedy that had wrought such chaos with his life. The name of Sara Volney never crossed his lips, and after a time, he went abroad, and so vanished, save to memory, from the lives in which he had played so strong a part.

Mrs. Harris, broken and humbled—for she had loved Sara Volney unselfishly—was once more given over to the matron of the "Place of Detention," who welcomed her back quite cordially. There she remained until she had fulfilled her mission as a witness in the clearing-up of the Dresden Flats mystery, which she did, under the judicious management of Francis Ferrars, in a very satisfactory manner. Once more at liberty, and the very comfortable sum which Sara Volney had left, "in payment for services and as a legacy," placed in her hands, she returned to the abode of the palmist, and resumed her robes and turbans, her weird devices and uncanny ways. Perhaps she is still following the "line of life" along the pink palms of maidens or the toil-hardened hands of the "superstitious lower classes."

When those who had been the most interested in the working-out of this strange case came together, and Francis Ferrars made clear the methods by which he had arrived at the truth concerning the double mystery, each found something to wonder at. They then learned, for the first time, that not one of them all had been fully in the confidence of this wonderful Englishman, and great was the amazement when it was found

that he had, from the very beginning, been working toward Sara Volney.

"Yes," he said, "it is quite true and quite simple. When those capital reports in the Paget Case came into my hands, I found some queer contradictions. Under the head of Leah Paget's friends I found the name of Sara Volney, with detailed description, and a sketch of her history. Under the head of 'Possible rivals,' I found again Sara Volney. I found her described as an intimate friend of Max Talfourd's. Then I found that Cousin, already under suspicion as the one who had trifled with his duty, goes from the Chief's office, from the Coroner's inquest, from a round of calls upon newspaper offices—from everywhere, in fact—straight to Sara Volney. I traced the source of their acquaintance, and lo! they met at the house of Abner Paget, where Cousin had gone on business connected with the case of Leah Paget. Then, after seeing Mrs. Volney, I fixed upon her as the cause of Miss Paget's troubles, and the real work began. To see more of Sara Volney, to meet her in society, and, especially, in her own house, I became Lord Barham. I entered society, and I learned many things, among them the history of that padded room in the attic. One evening, when Mrs. Volney was entertaining several people in the drawing-room, I made a point of leaving, sending the servant out after a cab, and then flew up to the mansard roof with a pocket full of skeleton keys. Then I was ready to solve Miss Paget's little problem."

"But how did you connect her with Hortense Novalis?" asked Max Talfourd.

"First, I decided that it was a woman's deed; then that letter—"

"I'd be very glad to know how that letter came there?" said Max.

"For that," said Ferrars, "you have only my theory You dropped the letter in the rooms of Hortense Novalis, instead of posting it; and your abrupt departure probably piqued her into keeping it. Afterwards, to taunt and torture Mrs. Volney, she concealed the envelope and flaunted the letter and picture. Another thing you must take my word for: Mrs. Volney was concealed behind the hangings of the ante-room when Mr. Quinlan left Hortense that night. The voice of Quinlan resembles the voice of Mr. Max Talfourd so closely that a listener, not seeing the speaker, might easily mistake one for the other. Sara Volney thought it was Max Talfourd who was bidding Hortense a playful and affectionate adieu. The maid, I find, was addicted to the use of wine, so she was probably sleeping under its influence when Quinlan entered, and Mrs. Volney helped her on to eternal silence by a liberal dose of chloroform. But that is not all. I found while examining carefully the curtains behind which Mrs. Volney concealed herself, a single long yellow hair. When I saw Mrs. Volney, I saw the head from which it came. Under the hands of a chemist it turned out to be red hair bleached to blonde. And Mary Sharp's hair was red, you remember.

"The thing that brought Mrs. Volney to those rooms that night was this: Hortense Novalis had met and recognized Mrs. Volney, and been cut by her. With the assistance of her maid, Virginie, who was a born plotter, Hortense, to avenge herself, set afloat a rumor—it was published in the '*Call*,' you remember—which threatened to affect the character of a noted society woman. While these ambiguous paragraphs were floating about, she informed Mrs. Volney that her name would appear in connection with these reports, which, of course, would concern her early history. As Fate would have it,

Cousin himself was first to seize upon the *on dit*, and when he came to know Mrs. Volney, and found what he had done, he went about among the newspapers and took heroic measures to suppress the items he had so recently set afloat. I followed him, in this journey, and learned his errand.

"After capturing Mrs. Harris, I sent Nickerson to South Brandon, with orders to keep an eye upon La Belle Fabrice and her party, and to do no more. Consequently, Nickerson asked no questions, and enacted the role of landscape painter in a manner that must have amazed the natives. I even spent a few days there myself, but, like Nickerson, I too kept quiet. Indeed, even if I had heard the old story with the name of the Widow Holly omitted, I might not have seen the connecting link. But when Murtagh gave me all of that story, and identified Mrs. Harris, I felt as if the work was done. Strategy did the rest,—strategy and Providence. Believing that Mrs. Harris would communicate at once with Mrs. Volney, if rightly stirred up, we gave her the chance, and she and Mrs. Volney fell into the trap. Then Fabrice came suddenly to the city, having just been enlightened concerning the real situation. She willingly assumed a servant's disguise and became the messenger of Mrs. Harris, who, of course, did not recognize her in disguise, and the work of identification was complete. Mrs. Harris, who had, in the beginning, discovered the presence of both Fabrice and Hortense in the city, had attempted to blackmail both—with some success where Hortense was concerned. She even appeared in an opera box as *chaperone*—Heaven save us !—to the Novalis. But she served Mrs. Volney in any capacity and without scruple, 'for love alone.'"

Max Talfourd and Sir Felix Wyntoun returned from their

fruitless errand, recalled by a telegram from Talfourd *pere.* And when they demanded of Ferrars his reasons for sending them upon a false chase—for of course they had visited the wrong South Brandon—the reply was brief, while it covered all the ground.

"You were of no earthly use here, and I wanted you out of the way."

A word whispered by his mother went far toward reconciling Max to this cavalier treatment.

"My boy, that man had a part to play, and he has a tender heart. He sent you away, I believe, for Sara's sake—to spare her and you."

There was no barrier, now, between Leah and Max, and he was not slow to seek her. While she, being as frank as she was loyal and tender, welcomed him royally in compensation for his days of pain and suspense.

For these two the clouds had lifted, save for that shadow which darkens the lives of all, "the sorrow of others."

Leah Paget would not have been Leah if her sympathies had not drawn her toward Fabrice, and it "went without saying" that these two should become firm friends. Both had gone through the same fierce trial; both passed under suspicion's cloud, which ever turns its blackest side upon the daughters of Eve. And as neither Leah nor Mrs. Paget were able to do things by halves, it followed naturally that Fabrice became, for a time, the guest of the Pagets.

On the day that saw her installed in a sunny room opening into that occupied by Leah, Sir Felix Wyntoun sought Ferrars, with a very long countenance.

"Old man," he said, gloomily, "you've got to get me out of this. She won't see me, she won't answer my notes. I be-

lieve it's that confounded trip to the wrong South Brandon that's done for me. She thinks I flunked at the last, and means to cut me."

Ferrars smiled. "My dear fellow, have you heard her story?"

"No!" thundered Sir Felix. "She's been vindicated; that is enough, isn't it? Madam Congreve tried to get it off for me, but I wouldn't stay. Fancy it: I *would* be a cad then."

Ferrars pushed his friend into an easy-chair, and stood looking indulgently down at him.

"I am going to tell her story," he said, "and don't you venture to run from me."

"Oh, you?" sighed Sir Felix. "You'll cut it short?"

"That I will," said the detective. "I have had enough of modern history for one time. The little Fabrice and Hannie (later Hortense) ran away from Mrs. Harris in a dudgeon, because of her partiality to Sara Volney (Mary Sharp). They fell into the kind and motherly hands of a retired English actress, who began their training for her own profession. The restraint was too much for Hannie Holly, and she ran away to become what she was. Fabrice persevered. She had left her uncle, not from flightiness, but because she had been wrought upon to think that she was a burden to him. And her girlish ambition was to make a fortune by her profession, and to care for him in his old age. She arrived in her native country full of this pretty scheme. But Hortense Novalis found her out and was, as in the case of Mrs. Volney, repulsed. Fabrice went to her rooms in response to a decoy letter, and was naturally affronted upon finding Hortense well and prosperous, wicked as ever, and full of glee at the success of her

stratagem. Of course, Fabrice declined to remain and dine with Mr. Quinlan and our friend Talfourd, and so the trouble began, Fabrice dreading and fearing to have her name coupled with that of an adventuress, for many reasons, chief of which, I suspect, we might count you. Then, one day, she fainted in your presence, upon seeing that queer, pathetically-framed advertisement of her uncle's. Dreading and hoping, she wrote to him, only to receive back her letter, which she, in her agitation, had misdirected, sending it to Seth Brandon instead of Seth Hunt. Around this time, almost distracted between Manager Horton, Hortense, and her anxiety about her uncle, she appealed to Mr. Clarkson, as you know. Mr. Clarkson wrote for information, and on the very night before the great event—the appearance of the two famous actresses in rival parts—Mr. Clarkson comes to Fabrice with a letter from a South Brandon magistrate. Seth Hunt was alive, but, at that time, very ill. Every other thought or care forsakes Fabrice then, and so excited is she that Mr. Clarkson thinks it wise to go with her on the journey. When he returns to the city he hears of the murder, and of the search for Fabrice. He knows that Fabrice cannot be guilty, and being now in the confidence of the charming little lady, and very much her partisan and adviser, he packs off Madam Congreve and the maid. And, as Seth Hunt is very ill, he plots with Madam to keep all the news away from Fabrice, which is easily done, since she is always at the bedside of her uncle. Here, perhaps, I made another mistake. Instead of contenting myself with keeping the lawyer under surveillance, I ought to have brought him to account. But I knew I would never unmask Sara Volney unless I could keep her mind, as well as Cousin's, at ease. The names of Miss Paget, Fabrice, and Quinlan had been given to the

public before I came into the field actively, and I felt that my only hope of success lay in my ability to keep suspicion pointing the wrong way. Well," as Sir Felix jumped up and caught up his hat, "have you got an idea?"

"I almost think so. I am going to Leah Paget, and shall ask her to help me."

"At last," said his Mentor, heartily, "your brain is expanding. "Go; I give you God speed!"

Manager Horton would not have been the rare caterer to the public that he was if he had not hastened to beg La Belle Fabrice—who, he declared, had treated him very ill—to make her appearance once more in the new play. The invalided juvenile lady had recovered, and would assume the role which was to have been played by Hortense Novalis.

"It would be the engagement of the season," he said, with fervor.

"Not a doubt of it, said the little Comedienne, with a curl of the lip. "If I couldn't act at all, people would flock to see the woman whose name had been connected with such a sensation. I did not leave you without a word of warning, Mr. Horton. I left a note for Madam Congreve upon my dressing-table, because I had not time to go into the reception-room, which was full of visitors. Unfortunately, the note fell behind the case, where I hastily tossed it, and was not found. I shall not appear in public again. My reasons? I decline to name them."

But she did not answer Madam Congreve so cavalierly.

"Conny, dear, I was working for wealth, not fame. I was going to make a fortune for Uncle's sake; and behold, his fortune is ample, and he wishes me to leave the stage. He wishes something else. We are going abroad presently, Conny, and

he wants you to go with us and continue matronizing and scolding me."

Frederick Quinlan had his will. After being an interesting object of suspicion, at last he was vindicated, and then he was more interesting still. He was the observed of all in society, at races and yachting tournaments—everywhere, in fact, where his name was known.

"After all," wrote Max Talfourd to his friend Ferrars, a year later, "there must be a strain of coarseness in the man, for recently, since the sensation has grown old and half-forgotten, he has built a brave yacht and has had the bad taste to name it the 'Hortense Novalis.'"

"Isn't it rather queer," said an employe of the "Star Detective Bureau" one day, "that Lord Barham got himself out of the way so suddenly?"

"Look here," said his superior officer, "I'm not quite a fool. Here's a conundrum for you. At about the time of the double murder, one Lord Louis Barham arrived from over the water, but there's no record that he ever went back. After the murder mystery was fairly disposed of, Mr. Francis Ferrars went back to London, but we never heard how he got here. Blondsberry, of Scotland Yards, writes me that, by some freak of nature, Ferrars and Lord Barham resemble each other quite closely."

"By the Powers!" ejaculated the 'Star' detective, "then Lord Barham was Ferrars!"

Quinlan was as good as his word, and diligent search was made for the Widow Holly, but she was never found.

One day, shortly before his departure, Ferrars entered the office of Captain Connors and placed before him a long slender bundle, which, on being opened, disclosed the little blood-

stained statuette that had been brought by stealth from under the very nose of the Coroner at the rooms of Hortense Novalis.

"I'd like to know," said the Captain, "what use you made of this thing?"

"None at all," replied Ferrars. "I wanted it out of the way for fear some one, after a careful survey of those slim, tapered, bloody finger marks, might jump to the conclusion that they were made by a woman's hand."

"By rights," said the Captain, "the thing belongs to Fred Quinlan, but I believe I will claim it as a reminder of the greatest blunder of my career."

"Man," cried the English detective, "when will you see that these very blunders, by keeping the minds of the true offenders at ease, brought us, in the end, to success."

THE END.

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