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MY LADY'S MONEY

By WILKIE COLLINS.

AN EPISODE IN THE LIFE OF A YOUNG GIRL.

PART THE FIRST.

THE DISAPPEARANCE.

CHAPTER XII.

The conference between Lady Lydiard and Mr. Troy, on the way back to London, led to some practical results.

Hearing from her legal adviser that the inquiry after the missing money was for the moment at a standstill, Lady Lydiard made one of those bold suggestions with which she was accustomed to startle her friends in cases of emergency. She had heard favorable reports of the extraordinary ingenuity of the French police, and she now proposed sending to Paris for assistance, after first consulting her nephew, Mr. Felix Sweetsir. "Felix knows Paris as well as he knows London," she remarked. "He is an idle man, and it is quite likely that he will relieve us of all trouble by taking the matter into his own hands. In any case, he is sure to know who are the right people to address in our present necessity. What do you say?"

Mr. Troy, in reply, expressed his doubts as to the wisdom of employing foreigners in a delicate investigation which required an accurate knowledge of English customs and English character. Waiving this objection, he approved of the idea of consulting her ladyship's nephew. "Mr. Sweetsir is a man of the world," he said. "In putting the case before him, we are sure to have it presented to us from a new point of view." Acting on this favorable expression of opinion, Lady Lydiard wrote to her nephew. On the day after the visit to Miss Pink the proposed council of three was held at Lady Lydiard's house.

Felix, never punctual in keeping an appointment, was even later than usual on this occasion. He made his apologies with his hand pressed on his forehead, and his voice expressive of the languor and discouragement of a suffering man.

"The beastly English climate is telling on my nerves," said Mr. Sweetsir; "the horrid weight of the atmosphere, after the exhilarating air of Paris; the intolerable dirt and dullness of London, you know. I was in bed, my dear aunt, when I received your letter. You may imagine the completely demoralized state I was in, when I tell you of the effect which the news of the robbery produced on me. I fell back on my pillow as if I had been shot. Your ladyship should really be a little more careful in communicating these disagreeable surprises to a sensitively organized man. Never mind, my valet is a perfect treasure; he brought me some drops of ether on a lump of sugar. I said, 'Alfred' (his name is Alfred), 'put me into my clothes.' Alfred put me in. I assure you it reminded me of my young days, when I was put into my first pair of trousers. Has Alfred forgotten anything? Have I got my braces on? Have I come out in my shirt sleeves? Well, dear aunt! well, Mr. Troy! what can I say? what can I do?"

Lady Lydiard, entirely without sympathy for nervous suffering, nodded to the lawyer "You tell him," she said.

"I believe I speak for her ladyship," Mr. Troy began, "when I say that we should like to hear, in the first place, how the whole case strikes you, Mr. Sweetsir."

"Tell it me all over again," said Felix.

Patient Mr. Troy told it all over again, and waited for the result.

"Well?" said Felix.

"Well!" said Mr. Troy. "Where does the suspicion of robbery rest, in your opinion? You look at the theft of the bank note with a fresh eye."

"You mentioned a clergyman just now," said Felix. "The man, you know, to whom the money was sent. What was his name?"

"The Reverend Samuel Bradstock."

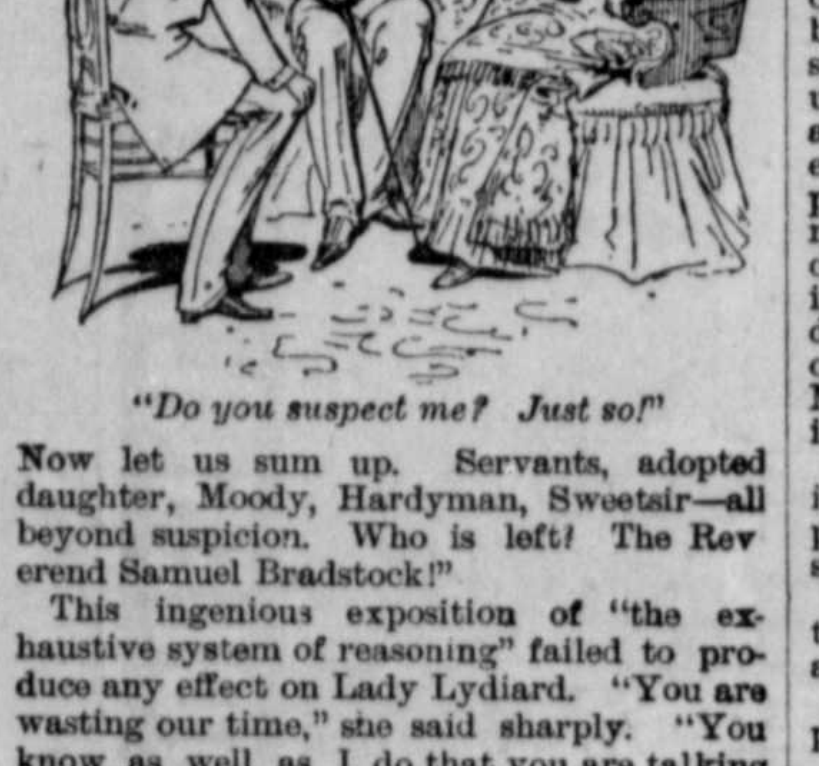
"You want me to name the person whom I suspect?"

"Yes, if you please," said Mrs. Troy.

"I suspect the Reverend Samuel Bradstock," said Felix.

"If you have come here to make stupid jokes," interposed Lady Lydiard, "you had better go back to your bed again. We want a serious opinion."

"You *have* a serious opinion," Felix coolly rejoined. "I never was more in earnest in my life. Your ladyship is not aware of the first principle to be adopted in cases of suspicion. One proceeds on what I call the exhaustive system of reasoning. Thus: Does suspicion point to the honest servants down stairs? No. To your ladyship's adopted daughter? Appearances are against the poor girl; but you know her better than to trust to appearances. Are you suspicious of Moody? No. Of Hardyman, who was in the house at the time? Ridiculous! But I was in the house at the time too. Do you suspect me? Just so! That idea is ridiculous, too.



"Do you suspect me? Just so!"

Now let us sum up. Servants, adopted daughter, Moody, Hardyman, Sweetsir—all beyond suspicion. Who is left? The Reverend Samuel Bradstock!"

This ingenious exposition of "the exhaustive system of reasoning" failed to produce any effect on Lady Lydiard. "You are wasting our time," she said sharply. "You know as well as I do that you are talking nonsense."

"I don't," said Felix. "Taking the gentlemanly professions all round, I know of no men who are so eager to get money, and who have so few scruples about how they get it, as the parsons. Where is there a man in any other profession who perpetually worries you for money? who holds the bag under your nose for money? who sends his clerk round from door to door to beg a few shillings of you, and calls it an 'Easter offering?' The parson does all this. Bradstock is a parson. I put it logically. Bowl me over if you can."

Mr. Troy attempted to "bowl him over," nevertheless. Lady Lydiard wisely interposed.

"When a man persists in talking nonsense," she said, "silence is the best answer; anything else only encourages him." She turned to Felix. "I have a question to ask you," she went on. "You will either give me a serious reply, or wish me good morning." With this brief preface, she made her inquiry as to the wisdom and possibility of engaging the services of the French police.

Felix took exactly the view of the matter which had been already expressed by Mr. Troy. "Superior in intelligence," he said, "but not superior in courage to the English police. Capable of performing wonders on their own ground and among their own people. But, my dear aunt, the two most dissimilar nations on the face of the earth are the English and French. The French police may speak our language, but they are incapable of understanding our national character and our national manners. Set them to work on a private inquiry in the city of Pekin and they would get on in time with the Chinese people. Set them to work in the city of London and the English people would remain, from first to last, the same impenetrable mystery to them. In my belief, the London Sunday would be enough of itself to drive them back to Paris in despair. No balls, no concerts, no theatres, not even a museum or a picture gallery open; every shop shut up but the gin shop, and nothing moving but the church bells and the men who sell the penny ices. Hundreds of Frenchmen come to see me on their first arrival in England. Every man of them rushes back to Paris on the second Saturday of his visit, rather than confront the horrors of a second Sunday in London. However, you can try it, if you like. Send me a written abstract of the case, and I will forward it to one of the official people in the Rue Jerusalem, who will do anything he can to oblige me. Of course," said Felix, turning to Mr. Troy, "some of you have got the number of the lost bank note. If the thief has tried to pass it in Paris, my man may be of some use to you."

"Three of us have got the number of the note," answered Mr. Troy, "Miss Isabel Miller, Mr. Moody and myself."

"Very good," said Felix. "Send me the number, with the abstract of the case. Is there anything else I can do towards recovering the money?" he asked, turning to his aunt. "There is one lucky circumstance in connection with this loss, isn't there? It has fallen on a person who is rich enough to take it easy. Good heavens! suppose it had been *my* loss!"

"It has fallen doubly on me," said Lady Lydiard; "and I am certainly not rich enough to take *that* easy. The money was destined to a charitable purpose, and I have felt it my duty to pay it again."

Felix rose and approached his aunt's chair with faltering steps, as became a suffering man. He took Lady Lydiard's hand and kissed it with enthusiastic admiration.

"You excellent creature!" he said. "You may not think it, but you reconcile me to human nature. How generous! how noble! I think I'll go to bed again, Mr. Troy, if you really don't want any more of me. My head feels giddy, and my legs tremble under me. It doesn't matter; I shall feel easier when Alfred has taken me out of my clothes again. God bless you, my dear aunt! I never felt so proud of being related to you as I do to-day. Good morning, Mr. Troy. Don't forget the abstract of the case, and don't trouble yourself to see me to the door. I dare say I shan't tumble down stairs, and if I do, there's the porter in the hall to pick me up again. Enviable porter! as fat as butter, and as idle as a pig! Au revoir! au revoir!" He kissed his hand and drifted feebly out of the room. Sweetsir, one might say, in a state of eclipse; but still the serviceable Sweetsir, who was never consulted in vain by the fortunate people privileged to call him friend.

"Is he really ill, do you think?" Mr. Troy asked.

"My nephew has turned fifty," Lady Lydiard answered, "and he persists in living as if he were a young man. Every now and then Nature says to him, 'Felix, you are old!' And Felix goes to bed, and says it's his nerves."

"I suppose he is to be trusted to keep his word about writing to Paris?" pursued the lawyer.

"Oh, yes. He may delay doing it, but he will do it. In spite of his lackadaisical manner, he has moments of energy that would surprise you. Talking of surprises, I have something to tell you about Moody. Within the last day or two there has been a marked change in him—a change for the worse."

"You astonish me, Lady Lydiard. In what way has Moody deteriorated?"

"You shall hear. Yesterday was Friday. You took him out with you, on business, early in the morning."

Mr. Troy bowed, and said nothing. He had not thought it desirable to mention the interview at which Old Sharon had cheated him out of his guinea.

"In the course of the afternoon," pursued Lady Lydiard, "I happened to want him, and I was informed that Moody had gone out again. Where had he gone? Nobody knew. Had he left word when he would be back? He had left no message of any sort. Of course he is not in the position of an ordinary servant. I don't expect him to ask permission to go out, but I do expect him to leave word down stairs of the time at which he is likely to return. When he did come back, after an absence of some hours, I naturally asked for an explanation. Would you believe it? he simply informed me that he had been away on business of his own, expressed no regret, and offered no explanation—in short, spoke as if he were an independent gentleman. You may not think it, but I kept my temper. I merely remarked that I hoped it would not happen again. He made me a bow, and he said: 'My business is not completed yet, my lady. I cannot guarantee that it may not call me away again at a moment's notice.' What do you think of that? Nine people out of ten would have given him warning to leave their service. I begin to think I am a wonderful woman; I only pointed to the door. One does hear sometimes of men's brains softening in the most unexpected manner. I have my suspicions of Moody's brains, I can tell you."

Mr. Troy's suspicions took a different direction; they pointed along the line of streets which led to Old Sharon's lodgings. Discreetly silent as to the turn which his thoughts had taken, he merely expressed himself as feeling too much surprise to offer any opinion at all.

"Wait a little," said Lady Lydiard; "I haven't done surprising you yet. You have seen a boy here in a page's livery, I think. Well, he is a good boy, and he has gone home for a week's holiday with his friends. The proper person to supply his place with the boots and shoes and other small employments is, of course, the youngest footman, a lad of only a few years older than himself. What do you think Moody does? Engages a stranger, with the house full of idle men servants already, to fill the page's place. At intervals this morning I heard them wonderfully merry in the servant's hall—so merry that the noise and laughter found its way up stairs to the breakfast room. I like my servants to be in good spirits, but it certainly did strike me that they were getting beyond reasonable limits. I questioned my maid, and was informed that the noise was all due to the jokes of the strangest old man that ever was seen. In other words, to the person whom my steward had taken it on himself to engage in the page's absence. I spoke to Moody on the subject. He answered in an odd, confused way, that he had exercised his discretion to the best of his judgment, and that (if I wished it) he would tell the old man to keep his good spirits under better control. I asked him how he came to hear of the man. He only answered, 'By accident, my lady,' and not one word more could I get out of him, good or bad. Moody engages the servants, as you know; but on every other occasion he has invariably consulted me before an engagement was settled. I really don't feel at all sure about this person who has been so strangely introduced into the house; he may be a drunkard or a thief. I wish you would speak to Moody yourself, Mr. Troy. Do you mind ringing the bell?"

Mr. Troy rose, as a matter of course, and rang the bell.

He was by this time, it is needless to say, convinced that Moody had not only gone back to consult Old Sharon on his own responsibility, but, worse still, had taken the unwarrantable liberty of introducing him as a spy into the house. To communicate this explanation to Lady Lydiard would, in her present humor, be simply to produce the dismissal of the steward from her service. The only other alternative was to ask leave to interrogate Moody privately, and, after duly reproving him, to insist on the departure of Old Sharon as the one condition on which Mr. Troy would consent to keep Lady Lydiard in ignorance of the truth.

"I think I shall manage better with Moody if your ladyship will permit me to see him in private," the lawyer said. "Shall I go down stairs and speak to him in his own room?"

"Why should you trouble yourself to do that?" said her ladyship. "See him here, and I will go into the boudoir."

As she made that reply the footman appeared at the drawing room door.

"Send Moody here," said Lady Lydiard.

The footman's answer, delivered at that moment, assumed an importance which was not expressed in the footman's words. "My lady," he said, "Mr. Moody has gone out."

CHAPTER XIII.

While the strange proceedings of the steward were the subject of conversation between Lady Lydiard and Mr. Troy, Moody was alone in his room, occupied in writing to Isabel. Being unwilling that any eyes but his own should see the address, he had himself posted his letter, the time that he had chosen for leaving the house proving, unfortunately, to be also the time proposed by her ladyship for his interview with the lawyer. In ten minutes after the footman had reported his absence, Moody returned. It was then too late to present himself in the drawing room. In the interval Mr. Troy had taken his leave, and Moody's position had dropped a degree lower in Lady Lydiard's estimation.

Isabel received her letter by the next morning's post. If any justification of Mr. Troy's suspicions had been needed, the terms in which Moody wrote would have amply supplied it.

"DEAR ISABEL (I hope I may call you 'Isabel' without offending you in your present trouble)—I have a proposal to make, which, whether you accept it or not, I beg you will keep a secret from every living creature but ourselves. You will understand my request when I add that these lines relate to the matter of tracing the stolen bank note.

"I have been privately in communication with a person in London who is, as I believe, the one person competent to help us in gaining our end. He has already made many inquiries in private. With some of them I am acquainted; the rest he has thus far kept to himself. The person to whom I allude particularly wishes to have half an hour's conversation with you—in my presence. I am bound to warn you that he is a very strange and very ugly old man, and I can only hope that you will look over his personal appearance in consideration of what he is likely to do for you.

"Can you conveniently meet us at the farther end of the row of villas in which your aunt lives, the day after to-morrow, at four o'clock? Let me have one line to say if you will keep the appointment, and if the hour named will suit you. And believe me your devoted friend and servant,

"ROBERT MOODY."

The lawyer's warning to her to be careful how she yielded too readily to any proposal of Moody's recurred to Isabel's mind while she read those lines. Being pledged to secrecy, she could not consult Mr. Troy—she was left to decide for herself.

No obstacle stood in the way of her free choice of alternatives. After their early dinner, at three o'clock, Miss Pink habitually retired to her own room, "to meditate," as she expressed it. Her "meditations" invariably ended in a sound sleep of some hours; and during that interval Isabel was at liberty to do as she pleased. After considerable hesitation, her implicit belief in Moody's truth and devotion, assisted by a strong feeling of curiosity to see the companion with whom the steward had associated himself, decided Isabel on consenting to keep the appointment.

Taking up her position beyond the houses, on the day and at the hour mentioned by Moody, she believed herself to be fully prepared for the most unfavorable impression which the most disagreeable of all possible strangers could produce.

But the first appearance of Old Sharon—as dirty as ever, clothed in a long, frowzy, gray overcoat, with his pug dog at his heels, and his smoke-blackened pipe in his mouth, with a tall white hat on his head, which looked as if it had been picked up in a gutter, a hideous leer in his eyes, and a jaunty trip in his walk—took her so completely by surprise that she could only return Moody's friendly greeting by silently pressing his hand. As for Moody's companion, to look at him for a second time was more than she had resolution to do. She kept her eyes fixed on the pug dog, and with good reason; so far as appearances went, he was indisputably the nobler animal of the two.

Under the circumstances, the interview threatened to begin in a very embarrassing manner. Moody, disheartened by Isabel's silence, made no attempt to set the conversation going; he looked as if he meditated a hasty retreat to the railroad station which he had just left. Fortunately he had at his side the right man (for once) in the right place. Old Sharon's effrontery was equal to any emergency.

"I am not a nice-looking old man, my dear, am I?" he said, leering at Isabel with cunning, half-closed eyes. "Bless your heart! you'll soon get used to me. You see, I am the sort of color, as they say at the linen drapers', that doesn't wash well. It's all through love; upon my life it is! Early in this present century I had my young affections blighted, and I've neglected myself ever since. Disappointment takes different forms, miss, in different men. I don't think I have had heart enough to brush my hair for the last fifty years. She was a magnificent woman, Mr. Moody, and she dropped me like a hot potato. Dreadful! dreadful! Let us pursue this painful subject no further. Ha! here's a pretty country! Here's a nice blue sky! I admire the country, miss; I see so little of it, you know. Have you any objection to walk along into the fields? The fields, my dear, bring out all the poetry of my nature. Where's the dog? Here, Puggy! Puggy! hunt about, my man, and find some dog grass. Does his inside good, you know, after a meat diet in London. Lord! how I feel my spirits rising in this fine air! Does my complexion look any brighter, miss? Will you run a race with me, Mr. Moody, or will you oblige me with a back at leap frog? I'm not mad, my dear young lady; I'm only merry. I live, you see, in the London stink, and the smell of the hedges and the wild flowers is too much for me at first. It gets into my head, it does. I'm drunk! As I live by bread, I'm drunk on fresh air! Oh! what a jolly day! Oh! how young and innocent I do feel!" Here his innocence got the better of him, and he began to sing: "I wish I was a little fly, in my love's bosom for to lie!" "Hullo! here we are on the nice soft grass! and, oh, my gracious! there's a bank running down into a hollow! I can't stand that, you know. Mr. Moody, hold my hat, and take the greatest care of it. Here goes for a roll down the bank!"

He handed his horrible hat to the astonished Moody, laid himself flat on the top of the bank, and deliberately rolled down it, exactly as he might have done when he was a boy. The tails of his long gray coat flew madly in the wind; the dog pursued him, jumping over him, and barking with delight; he shouted and screamed in answer to the dog, as he rolled over and over faster and faster; and when he got up on the level ground and called out cheerfully to his companions standing above him, "I say, you two, I feel twenty years younger already!" human gravity could hold out no longer. The sad and silent Moody smiled, and Isabel burst into fits of laughter.

"There," he said, "didn't I tell you you would get used to me, miss? There's a great deal of life left in the old man yet—isn't there? Shy me down my hat, Mr. Moody. And now we'll get to business!" He turned round to the dog still barking at his heels. "Business, Puggy!" he called out, sharply, and Puggy instantly shut his mouth, and said no more.

"Well, now," Old Sharon resumed, when he had joined his friends and had got his breath again, "let's have a little talk about yourself, miss. Has Mr. Moody told you who I am, and what I want with you? Very good. May I offer you my arm? No! You like to be independent, don't you? All right—I don't object. I am an amiable old man, I am. About this Lady Lydiard, now? Suppose you tell me how you first got acquainted with her?"

In some surprise at this question, Isabel told her little story. Observing Sharon's face while she was speaking, Moody saw that he was not paying the smallest attention to the narrative. His sharp, shameless black eyes watched the girl's face absently; his gross lips curled upward in a sardonic and self-satisfied smile. He was evidently setting a trap for her of some kind. Without a word of warning—while Isabel was in the middle of a sentence—the trap opened, with the opening of Old Sharon's lips.

"I say!" he burst out, "how came *you* to seal her ladyship's letter—eh?"

The question bore no sort of relation, direct or indirect, to what Isabel happened to be saying at the moment. In the sudden surprise of hearing it, she started and fixed her eyes in astonishment on Sharon's face. The old vagabond chuckled to himself. "Did you see that?" he whispered to Moody. "I beg your pardon, miss," he went on; "I won't interrupt you again. Lord, how interesting it is!—ain't it, Mr. Moody? Please to go on, miss."

But Isabel, though she spoke with perfect sweetness and temper, declined to go on.

"I had better tell you, sir, how I came to seal her ladyship's letter," she said. "If I may venture on giving my opinion, *that* part of my story seems to be the only part of it which relates to your business with me to-day."

Without further preface she described the circumstances which had led to her assuming the perilous responsibilty of sealing the letter. Old Sharon's wandering attention began to wander again; he was evidently occupied in setting another trap. For the second time he interrupted Isabel in the middle of a sentence. Suddenly stopping short he pointed to some sheep at the farther end of the field through which they happened to be passing at the moment.

"There's a pretty sight!" he said. "There are the innocent sheep a-feeding—all following each other as usual; and there's the sly dog waiting behind the gate till the sheep want his services. Reminds me of Old Sharon and the public." He chuckled over his discovery of the remarkable similarity between the sheep dog and himself, and the sheep and the public, and then burst upon Isabel with a second question: "I say! didn't you look at the letter before you sealed it?"

"Certainly not," Isabel answered.

"Not even at the address?"

"No."

"Thinking of something else—eh?"

"Very likely," said Isabel.

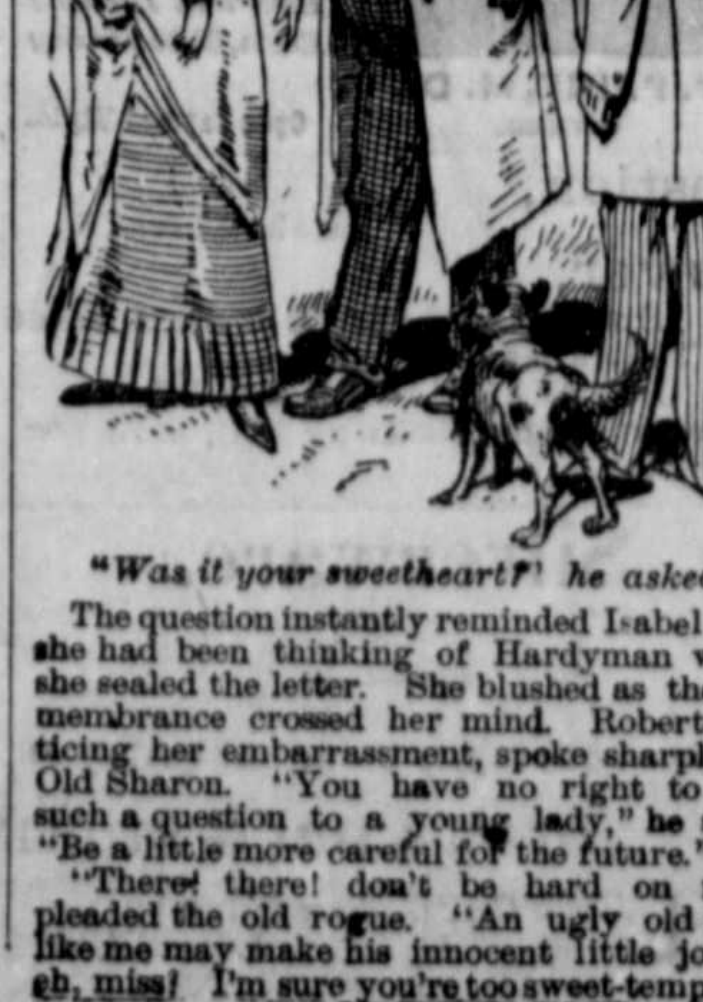
"Was it your new bonnet, my dear?"

Isabel laughed. "Women are not always thinking of their new bonnets," she answered.

Old Sharon, to all appearance, dropped the subject there. He lifted his lean, brown forefinger and pointed again, this time to a house at a short distance from them. "That's a farm house, surely," he said. "I'm thirsty, after my roll down the hill. Do you think, miss, they would give me a drink of milk?"

"I am sure they would," said Isabel. "I know the people. Shall I go and ask them?"

"Thank you, my dear. One word more before you go. About the sealing of that letter; what *could* you have been thinking of while you were doing it?" He looked hard at her, and took her suddenly by the arm "Was it your sweetheart?" he asked, in a whisper.



"Was it your sweetheart?" he asked.

The question instantly reminded Isabel that she had been thinking of Hardyman while she sealed the letter. She blushed as the remembrance crossed her mind. Robert, noticing her embarrassment, spoke sharply to Old Sharon. "You have no right to put such a question to a young lady," he said. "Be a little more careful for the future."

"There! there! don't be hard on me," pleaded the old rogue. "An ugly old man like me may make his innocent little joke—eh, miss? I'm sure you're too sweet-tempered to be angry when I meant no offense. Show me that you bear no malice. Go, like a forgiving young angel, and ask for the milk."

Nobody appealed to Isabel's sweetness of temper in vain. "I will do it with pleasure," she said, and hastened away to the farm house.

CHAPTER XIV.

The instant Isabel was out of hearing Old Sharon slapped Moody on the shoulder to rouse his attention. "I've got her out of the way," he said; "now listen to me. My business with the young angel is done; I may go back to London."

Moody looked at him in astonishment.

"Lord! how little you know of thieves!" exclaimed Old Sharon. "Why, man alive, I have tried her with two plain tests. If you wanted a proof of her innocence, there it was, as plain as the nose on your face. Did you hear me ask her how she came to seal the letter, just when her mind was running on something else?"

"I heard you," said Moody.

"Did you see how she started and stared at me?"

"I did."

"Well, I can tell you this: If she *had* stolen the money she would neither have started nor stared. She would have had her answer ready beforehand in her own mind, in case of accidents. There's only one thing, in my experience, that you can never do with a thief, when the thief happens to be a woman—you can never take her by surprise. Put that remark by in your mind; one day you may find a use for remembering it. Did you see her blush, and look quite hurt in her feelings, pretty dear, when I asked about her sweetheart? Do you think a thief, in her place, would have shown such a face as that? Not she! The thief would have been relieved. The thief would have said to herself: 'All right; the more the old fool talks about sweethearts the further he is from tracing the robbery to me.' Yes! yes! the ground's cleared now, Master Moody. I've reckoned up the servants; I've questioned Miss Isabel; I've made my inquiries in all the other quarters that may be useful to us—and what's the result? The advice I gave, when you and the lawyer first came to me—I hate that fellow!—remains as sound and good advice as ever. I have got the thief in my mind," said Old Sharon, closing his cunning eyes and then opening them again, "as plain as I've got you in my eye at this minute. No more of that now," he went on, looking round sharply at the path that led to the farm house; "I've something particular to say to you, and there's barely time to say it before that nice girl comes back. Look here! do you happen to be acquainted with Mr. Hardyman's valet?"

Moody's eyes rested on Old Sharon with a searching and doubtful look.

"Mr. Hardyman's valet?" he repeated. "I wasn't prepared to hear Mr. Hardyman's name."

Old Sharon looked at Moody, in his turn, with a flash of sardonic triumph.

"Oho!" he said; "has my good boy learned his lesson? Do you see the thief through my spectacles already?"

"I began to see him," Moody answered, "when you gave us the guinea opinion at your lodgings."

"Will you whisper his name?" asked Old Sharon.

"Not yet. I distrust my own judgment. I'll wait till time proves that you're right."

Old Sharon knitted his shaggy brows and shook his head. "If you only had a little more dash and go in you," he said, "you would be a clever fellow. As it is—" He finished the sentence by snapping his fingers with a grin of contempt. "Let's get to business. Are you going back by the next train along with me, or are you going to stop with the young lady?"

"I will follow you by a later train," Moody answered.

"Then I must give you your instructions at once," Sharon continued. "You get better acquainted with Hardyman's valet. Lend him money if he wants it; stick at nothing to make a bosom friend of him. I can't do that part of it; my appearance would be against me. *You* are the man; you are respectable from the top of your hat to the tips of your boots; nobody would suspect you. Don't make objections! Can you fix the valet? Or can't you?"

"I can try," said Moody. "And what then?"

Old Sharon put his gross lips disagreeably close to Moody's ear.

"Your friend the valet can tell you who his master's bankers are," he said; "and he can supply you with a specimen of his master's handwriting."

Moody drew back as suddenly as if his vagabond companion had put a knife at his throat. "You old villain!" he said; "are you tempting me to forgery?"

"You infernal fool!" retorted Old Sharon. "*Will* you hold that long tongue of yours, and hear what I have to say? You go to Hardyman's bankers, with a note in Hardyman's handwriting (exactly imitated by me) to this effect: Mr. H. presents his compliments to Messrs. So-and-So, and is not quite certain whether a payment of five hundred pounds has been made within the last week to his account. He will be much obliged if Messrs. So-and-So will inform him by a line in reply whether there is such an entry to his credit in their books, and by whom the payment has been made. You wait for the banker's answer, and bring it to me. It's just possible that the name you're afraid to whisper may appear in the letter. If it does, we've caught our man. Is *that* forgery, Mr. Muddlehead Moody? I'll tell you what—if I had lived to be your age, and knew no more of the world than you do, I'd go and hang myself. Steady! here's our charming friend with the milk. Remember your instructions, and don't lose heart if my notion of the payment to the bankers comes to nothing. I know what to do next, in that case—and, what's more, I'll take all the risk and trouble on my own shoulders. Oh, Lord! I'm afraid I shall be obliged to drink the milk, now it's come."

With this apprehension in his mind, he advanced to relieve Isabel of the jug she carried.

"Here's a treat!" he burst out, with an affectation of joy which was completely belied by the expression of his dirty face. "Here's a kind and dear young lady, to help an old man to a drink with her own pretty hands." He paused, and looked at the milk very much as he might have looked at a dose of physic. "Will any one take a drink first?" he asked, offering the jug piteously to Isabel and Moody. "You see, I'm not used to genuine milk; I'm used to chalk and water. I don't know what effect the unadulterated cow might have on my poor old inside." He tasted the milk with the greatest caution. "Upon my soul, this is too rich for me! The unadulterated cow is a deal too strong to be drunk alone. If you'll allow me, I'll qualify it with a drop of gin. Here, Puggy! Puggy!" He set the milk down before the dog, and taking a flask out of his pocket, emptied it at a draught. "That's something like!" he said, smacking his lips with an air of infinite relief. "So sorry, miss, to have given you all your trouble for nothing; it's my ignorance that's to blame, not me. I couldn't know I was unworthy of genuine milk till I tried—could I? And do you know?" he proceeded, with his eye directed slyly on the way back to the station, "I begin to think I'm not worthy of the fresh air, either. A kind of a longing seems to come over me for the London stink. I'm homesick already for the soot of my happy childhood and my own dear native mud. The air here is too thin for me, and the sky too clear; and—oh, Lord!—when you're used to the roar of the traffic—the 'busses and the cabs and what not—the silence in these parts is downright awful. I'll wish you good evening, miss, and get back to London."

Isabel turned to Moody with disappointment plainly expressed in her face and manner.

"Is that all he has to say?" she asked. "You told me he could help us. You led me to suppose he could find the guilty person."

Sharon heard her. "I could name the guilty person," he answered, "as easily, miss, as I could name you."

"Why don't you do it, then?" Isabel inquired, not very patiently.

"Because the time's not ripe for it yet, miss—that's one reason. Because, if I mentioned the thief's name, as things are now, you, Miss Isabel, would think me mad; and you would tell Mr. Moody I had cheated him out of his money—that's another reason. The matter's in train, if you will only wait a little longer."

"So you say," Isabel rejoined. "If you really could name the thief, I believe you would do it now."

She turned away with a frown on her pretty face. Old Sharon followed her. Even his coarse sensibilities appeared to feel the irresistible ascendency of beauty and youth.

"I say!" he began, "we must part friends, you know, or I shall break my heart over it. They have got milk at the farm house. Do you think they have got pen, ink and paper, too?"

Isabel answered, without turning to look at him, "Of course they have."

"And a bit of sealing-wax?"

"I dare say."

Old Sharon laid his dirty claws on her shoulder, and forced her to face him as the best means of shaking them off.

"Come along!" he said. "I am going to pacify you with some information in writing."

"Why should you write it?" Isabel asked, suspiciously.

"Because I mean to make my own conditions, my dear, before I let you into the secret."

In ten minutes more they were all three in the farm house parlor. Nobody but the farmer's wife was at home. The good woman trembled from head to foot at the sight of Old Sharon. In all her harmless life she had never yet seen humanity under the aspect in which it was now presented to her. "Mercy preserve us, miss!" she whispered to Isabel, "how come you to be in such company as *that*?" Instructed by Isabel, she produced the necessary materials for writing and sealing, and, that done, she shrank away to the door. "Please to excuse me, miss," she said, with a last horrified look at her venerable visitor; "I really can't stand the sight of such a blot of dirt as that in my nice, clean parlor." With these words she disappeared, and was seen no more.

Perfectly indifferent to his reception, Old Sharon wrote, inclosed what he had written in an envelope, and sealed it (in the absence of anything better fitted for his purpose) with the mouthpiece of his pipe.

"Now, miss," he said, "you give me your word of honor"—he stopped and looked round at Moody, with a grin—"and you give me yours, that you won't either of you break the seal on this envelope till the expiration of one week from the present day. These are the conditions, Miss Isabel, on which I'll give you your information. If you stop to dispute with me, the candle's alight, and I'll burn the letter."

It was useless to contend with him. Isabel and Moody gave him the promise that he required. He handed the sealed envelope to Isabel with a low bow. "When the week's out," he said, "you will own I'm a cleverer fellow than you think me now. Wish you good evening, miss. Come along, Puggy! Farewell to the horrid, clean country, and back again to the nice London stink!"

He nodded to Moody—he leered at Isabel—he chuckled to himself—he left the farm house.

CHAPTER XV.

Isabel looked down at the letter in her hand, considered it in silence, and turned to Moody. "I feel tempted to open it already," she said.

"After giving your promise?" Moody gently remonstrated.

Isabel met that objection with a woman's logic.

"Does a promise matter," she asked, "when one gives it to a dirty, disreputable, presuming old wretch like Mr. Sharon? It's a wonder to me that you trust such a creature. *I* wouldn't!"

"I doubted him just as you do," Moody answered, "when I first saw him in company with Mr. Troy. But there was something in the advice he gave us at the first consultation which altered my opinion of him for the better. I dislike his appearance and his manners as much as you do—I may even say I felt ashamed of bringing such a person to see you. And yet I can't think that I have acted unwisely in employing Mr. Sharon."

Isabel listened absently. She had something more to say, and she was considering how she should say it. "May I ask you a bold question?" she began.

"Any question you like."

"Have you—" She hesitated and looked embarrassed. "Have you paid Mr. Sharon much money?" she resumed, suddenly rallying her courage. Instead of answering, Moody suggested that it was time to think of returning to Miss Pink's villa. "Your aunt may be getting anxious about you," he said.

Isabel led the way out of the farm house in silence. She reverted to Mr. Sharon and the money, however, as they returned by the path across the fields.

"I am sure you will not be offended with me," she said, gently, "if I own that I am uneasy about the expenses. I am allowing you to use your purse as if it were mine, and I have hardly any savings of my own."

Moody entreated her not to speak of it. "How can I put my money to a better use than in serving your interests?" he asked. "My one object in life is to relieve you of your present anxieties. I shall be the happiest man living if you only owe a moment's happiness to my exertions."

Isabel took his hand, and looked at him with grateful tears in her eyes.

"How good you are to me, Mr. Moody!" she said. "I wish I could tell you how deeply I feel your kindness."

"You can do it easily," he answered, with a smile. "Call me 'Robert;' don't call me 'Mr. Moody.'"

She took his arm with a sudden familiarity that charmed him. "If you had been my brother I should have called you 'Robert,'" she said; "and no brother could have been more devoted to me than you are."

He looked eagerly at her bright face turned up to his. "May I never hope to be something nearer and dearer to you than a brother?" he asked, timidly.

She hung her head and said nothing. Moody's memory recalled Sharon's coarse reference to her "sweetheart." She had blushed when he put the question. What had she done when Moody put *his* question? Her face answered for her—she had turned pale; she was looking more serious than usual. Ignorant as he was of the ways of women, his instinct told him that this was a bad sign. Surely her rising color would have confessed it, if time and gratitude together were teaching her to love him? He sighed as the inevitable conclusion forced itself on his mind.

"I hope I have not offended you?" he said, sadly.

"Oh, no."

"I wish I had not spoken. Pray don't think that I am serving you with any selfish motive."

"I don't think that, Robert. I never could think it of *you*."

He was not quite satisfied yet. "Even if you were to marry some other man," he went on, earnestly, "it would make no difference in what I am trying to do for you. No matter what I might suffer, I should still go on—for your sake."

"Why do you talk so?" she burst out, passionately. "No other man has such a claim as yours to my gratitude and regard. How can you let such thoughts come to you? I have done nothing in secret. I have no friends who are not known to you. Be satisfied with that, Robert, and let us drop the subject."

"Never to take it up again?" he asked, with the infatuated pertinacity of a man clinging to his last hope.

At other times and under other circumstances Isabel might have answered him sharply. She spoke with perfect gentleness now.

"Not for the present," she said. "I don't know my own heart. Give me time."

His gratitude caught at those words, as the drowning man is said to catch at the proverbial straw. He lifted her hand, and suddenly and fondly pressed his lips on it. She showed no confusion. Was she sorry for him, poor wretch!—and was that all?

They walked on arm in arm, in silence.

Crossing the last field, they entered again on the high road leading to the row of villas in which Miss Pink lived. The minds of both were preoccupied. Neither of them noticed a gentleman approaching on horseback, followed by a mounted groom. He was advancing slowly, at the walking pace of his horse, and he only observed the two foot passengers when he was close to them.

"Miss Isabel!"

She started, looked up, and discovered—Alfred Hardyman.

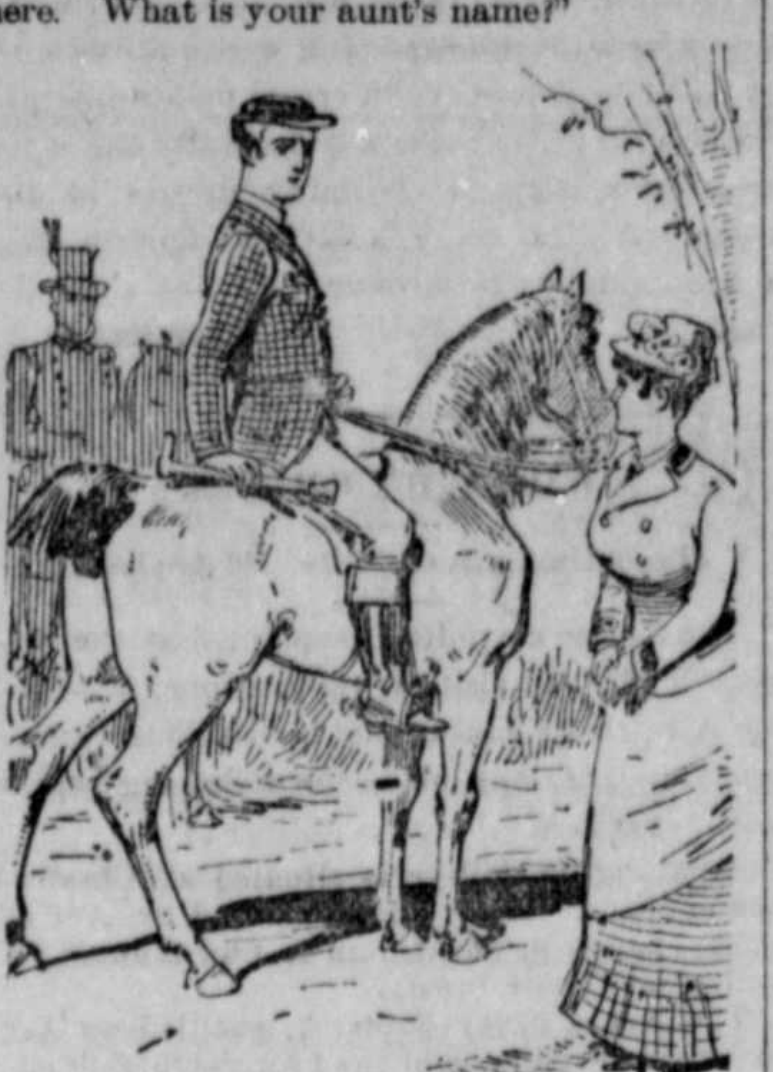
He was dressed in a perfectly made traveling suit of light brown, with a peaked felt hat of a darker shade of the same color, which, in a picturesque sense, greatly improved his personal appearance. His pleasure at discovering Isabel gave the animation to his features which they wanted on ordinary occasions. He sat his horse, a superb hunter, easily and gracefully. His light, amber-colored gloves fitted him perfectly. His obedient servant, on another magnificent horse, waited behind him. He looked the impersonation of rank and breeding, of wealth and prosperity. What a contrast, in a woman's eyes, to the shy, pale, melancholy man in the ill-fitting black clothes, with the wandering, uneasy glance, who stood beneath him and felt, and showed that he felt, his inferior position keenly! In spite of herself, the treacherous blush flew over Isabel's face, in Moody's presence, and with Moody's eyes distrustfully watching her.

"This is a piece of good fortune that I hardly hoped for," said Hardyman, his cool, quiet, dreary way of speaking quickened, as usual, in Isabel's presence. "I only got back from France this morning, and I called on Lady Lydiard in the hope of seeing you. She was not at home, and you were in the country, and the servants didn't know the address. I could get nothing out of them, except that you were on a visit to a relation." He looked at Moody while he was speaking. "Haven't I seen you before?" he said, carelessly. "Yes; at Lady Lydiard's. You're her steward, are you not? How d'ye do?" Moody, with his eyes on the ground, answered silently by a bow. Hardyman, perfectly indifferent whether Lady Lydiard's steward spoke or not, turned on his saddle and looked admiringly at Isabel. "I begin to think my luck has turned at last," he went on, with a smile. "I was jogging along to my farm and despairing of ever seeing Miss Isabel again—and Miss Isabel herself meets me at the roadside! I wonder whether you are as glad to see me as I am to see you? You won't tell me, eh? May I ask you something else?—are you staying in our neighborhood?"

There was no alternative before Isabel but to answer this last question. Hardyman had met her out walking, and had no doubt drawn the inevitable inference, although he was too polite to say so in plain words.

"Yes, sir," she answered, shyly; "I am staying in this neighborhood."

"And who is your relation?" Hardyman proceeded, in his easy, matter-of-course way. "Lady Lydiard told me, when I had the pleasure of meeting you at her house that you had an aunt living in the country. I have a good memory, Miss Isabel, for anything that I hear about you. It's your aunt, isn't it? Yes? I know everybody about here. What is your aunt's name?"



"A piece of good fortune that I hardly hoped for," said Hardyman.

Isabel, still resting her hand on Robert's arm, felt it tremble a little as Hardyman made this last inquiry. If she had been speaking to one of her equals she would have known how to dispose of the question without directly answering it. But what could she say to the magnificent gentleman on the stately horse? He had only to send his servant into the village to ask who the young lady from London was staying with and the answer, in a dozen mouths at least, would direct him to her aunt. She cast one appealing look at Moody, and pronounced the distinguished name of Miss Pink.

"Miss Pink?" Hardyman repeated. "Surely I know Miss Pink." (He had not the faintest remembrance of her.) "Where did I meet her last?" (He ran over in his memory the different local festivals at which strangers had been introduced to him.) "Was it at the archery meeting, or at the grammar school, when the prizes were given? No! It must have been at the flower show, then, surely?"

It *had* been at the flower show. Isabel had heard it from Miss Pink fifty times at least, and was obliged to admit it now.

"I am quite ashamed of never having called," Hardyman proceeded. "The fact is, I have so much to do. I am a bad one at paying visits. Are you on your way home? Let me follow you and make my apologies personally to Miss Pink."

Moody looked at Isabel. It was only a momentary glance, but she perfectly understood it.

"I am afraid, sir, my aunt cannot have the honor of seeing you to-day," she said.

Hardyman was all compliance. He smiled and patted his horse's neck. "To-morrow, then," he said. "My compliments, and I will call in the afternoon. Let me see; Miss Pink lives at—" He waited, as if he expected Isabel to assist his treacherous memory once more. She hesitated again. Hardyman looked round at his groom. The groom could find out the address, even if he did not happen to know it already. Besides, there was the little row of houses visible at the farther end of the road. Isabel pointed to the villas, as a necessary concession to good manners, before the groom could anticipate her. "My aunt lives there, sir, at the house called The Lawn."

"Ah! to be sure," said Hardyman. "I oughtn't to have wanted reminding; but I have so many things to think of at the farm. And I am afraid I must be getting old; my memory isn't as good as it was. I am so glad to have seen you, Miss Isabel. You and your aunt must come and look at my horses. Do you like horses? Are you fond of riding? I have a quiet roan mare that is used to carrying ladies; she would be just the thing for you. Did I beg you to give my best compliments to your aunt? Yes! How well you are looking! our air here agrees with you. I hope I haven't kept you standing too long? I didn't think of it in the pleasure of meeting you. Good-by, Miss Isabel—good-by till to-morrow.

He took off his hat to Isabel, nodded to Moody, and pursued his way to the farm.

Isabel looked at her companion. His eyes were still on the ground. Pale, silent, motionless, he waited by her like a dog, until she gave the signal of walking on again toward the house.

"You are not angry with me for speaking to Mr. Hardyman?" she asked, anxiously.

He lifted his head at the sound of her voice. "Angry with you, my dear! Why should I be angry?"

"You seem so changed, Robert, since we met Mr. Hardyman. I couldn't help speaking to him, could I?"

"Certainly not."

They moved on towards the villa. Isabel was still uneasy. There was something in Moody's silent submission to all that she said and all that she did which pained and humiliated her. "You're not jealous?" she said, smiling timidly.

He tried to speak lightly, on his side. "I have no time to be jealous while I have your affairs to look after," he answered.

She pressed his arm tenderly. "Never fear, Robert, that new friends will make me forget the best and dearest friend who is now at my side." She paused, and looked up at him with a compassionate fondness that was very pretty to see. "I can keep out of the way to-morrow when Mr. Hardyman calls," she said. "It is my aunt he is coming to see, not me."

It was generously meant. But while her mind was only occupied with the present time, Moody's mind was looking into the future. He was learning the hard lesson of self-sacrifice already. "Do what you think right," he said, quietly; "don't think of me."

They reached the gate of the villa. He held out his hand to say good-by.

"Won't you come in?" she asked. "Do come in."

"Not now, my dear. I must get back to London as soon as I can. There is some more work to be done for you, and the sooner I do it the better."

She heard his excuse without heeding it.

"You are not like yourself, Robert," she said. "Why is it? What are you thinking of?"

He was thinking of the bright blush that overspread her face when Hardyman first spoke to her; he was thinking of the invitation to her to see the stud farm, and to ride the roan mare; he was thinking of the utterly powerless position in which he stood toward Isabel and toward the highly born gentleman who admired her. But he kept his doubts and fears to himself. "The train won't wait for me," he said, and held out his hand once more.

She was not only perplexed, she was really distressed. "Don't take leave of me in that cold way!" she pleaded. Her eyes dropped before his, and her lips trembled a little. "Give me a kiss, Robert, at parting." She said those bold words softly and sadly, out of the depth of her pity for him. He started; his face brightened suddenly; his sinking hope rose again. In another moment the change came; in another moment he understood her. As he touched her cheek with his lips he turned pale again. "Don't quite forget me," he said, in low, faltering tones, and left her.

Miss Pink met Isabel in the hall. Refreshed by unbroken repose, the ex-schoolmistress was in the happiest frame of mind for the reception of her niece's news.

Informed that Moody had traveled to South Morden to personally report the progress of the inquiries, Miss Pink highly approved of him as a substitute for Mr. Troy. "Mr. Moody, as a banker's son, is a gentleman by birth," she remarked; "he has condescended in becoming Lady Lydiard's steward. What I saw of him, when he came here with you, prepossessed me in his favor. He has my confidence, Isabel, as well as yours; he is in every respect a superior person to Mr. Troy. Did you meet any friends, my dear, when you were out walking?"

The answer to this question produced a species of transformation in Miss Pink. The rapturous rank-worship of her nature feasted, so to speak, on Hardyman's message. She looked taller and younger than usual; she was all smiles and sweetness. "At last, Isabel, you have seen birth and breeding under their right aspect," she said. "In the society of Lady Lydiard you cannot possibly have formed correct ideas of the English aristocracy. Observe Mr. Hardyman, when he does me the honor to call to-morrow, and you will see the difference."

"Mr. Hardyman is your visitor, aunt, not mine. I was going to ask you to let me remain up stairs in my room."

Miss Pink was unaffectedly shocked. "This is what you learn at Lady Lydiard's," she observed. "No, Isabel, your absence would be a breach of good manners; I cannot possibly permit it. You will be present to receive our distinguished friend with me. And mind this," added Miss Pink, in her most impressive manner. "If Mr. Hardyman should by any chance ask why you have left Lady Lydiard, not one word about those disgraceful circumstances which connect you with the loss of the bank note! I should sink into the earth if the smallest hint of what has really happened should reach Mr. Hardyman's ears. My child, I stand towards you in the place of your lamented mother. I have the right to command your silence on this horrible subject, and I do imperatively command it."

In these words foolish Miss Pink sowed the seed for the harvest of trouble that was soon to come.

This Story to be continued.]

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