

HUME FERGUS

MADAME

MIDAS

Fergus Hume
Madame Midas

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Fergus Hume

Madame Midas

PROLOGUE – CAST UP BY THE SEA

A wild bleak-looking coast, with huge water-worn promontories jutting out into the sea, daring the tempestuous fury of the waves, which dashed furiously in sheets of seething foam against the iron rocks. Two of these headlands ran out for a considerable distance, and at the base of each, ragged cruel-looking rocks stretched still further out into the ocean until they entirely disappeared beneath the heaving waste of waters, and only the sudden line of white foam every now and then streaking the dark green waves betrayed their treacherous presence to the idle eye. Between these two headlands there was about half a mile of yellow sandy beach on which the waves rolled with a dull roar, fringing the wet sands with many coloured wreaths of sea-weed and delicate shells. At the back the cliffs rose in a kind of semi-circle, black and precipitous, to the height of about a hundred feet, and flocks of white seagulls who had their nests therein were constantly circling round, or flying seaward with steadily expanded wings and discordant cries. At the top of these inhospitable-looking cliffs a line of pale green betrayed the presence of vegetation, and from thence it spread inland into vast-rolling pastures ending far away at the outskirts of the bush, above which could be seen giant mountains with snow-covered ranges. Over all this strange contrast of savage arid coast and peaceful upland there was a glaring red sky – not the delicate evanescent pink of an ordinary sunset – but a fierce angry crimson which turned the wet sands and dark expanse of ocean into the colour of blood. Far away westward, where the sun – a molten ball of fire – was sinking behind the snow-clad peaks, frowned long lines of gloomy clouds – like prison bars through which the sinking orb glowed fiercely. Rising from the east to the zenith of the sky was a huge black cloud bearing a curious resemblance to a gigantic hand, the long lean fingers of which were stretched threateningly out as if to grasp the land and drag it back into the lurid sea of blood; altogether a cruel, weird-looking scene, fantastic, unreal, and bizarre as one of Dore's marvellous conceptions. Suddenly on the red waters there appeared a black speck, rising and falling with the restless waves, and ever drawing nearer and nearer to the gloomy cliffs and sandy beach. When within a quarter of a mile of the shore, the speck resolved itself into a boat, a mere shallop, painted a dingy white, and much battered by the waves as it tossed lightly on the crimson waters. It had one mast and a small sail all torn and patched, which by some miracle held together, and swelling out to the wind drew the boat nearer to the land. In this frail craft were two men, one of whom was kneeling in the prow of the boat shading his eyes from the sunlight with his hands and gazing eagerly at the cliffs, while the other sat in the centre with bowed head, in an attitude of sullen resignation, holding the straining sail by a stout rope twisted round his arm. Neither of them spoke a word till within a short distance of the beach, when the man at the look-out arose, tall and gaunt, and stretched out his hands to the inhospitable-looking coast with a harsh, exulting laugh.

‘At last,’ he cried, in a hoarse, strained voice, and in a foreign tongue; ‘freedom at last.’

The other man made no comment on this outburst of his companion, but kept his eyes steadfastly on the bottom of the boat, where lay a small barrel and a bag of mouldy biscuits, the remnants of their provisions on the voyage.

The man who had spoken evidently did not expect an answer from his companion, for he did not even turn his head to look at him, but stood with folded arms gazing eagerly ahead, until, with a sudden rush, the boat drove up high and dry on the shore, sending him head-over-heels into the wet sand. He struggled to his feet quickly, and, running up the beach a little way, turned to see how his companion had fared. The other had fallen into the sea, but had picked himself up, and was busily engaged in wringing the water from his coarse clothing. There was a smooth water-worn boulder on

the beach, and, seeing this, the man who had spoken went up to it and sat down thereon, while his companion, evidently of a more practical turn of mind, collected the stale biscuits which had fallen out of the bag, then, taking the barrel carefully on his shoulder, walked up to where the other was sitting, and threw both biscuits and barrel at his feet.

He then flung himself wearily on the sand, and picking up a biscuit began to munch it steadily. The other drew a tin pannikin from the bosom of his shirt, and nodded his head towards the barrel, upon which the eater laid down his biscuit, and, taking up the barrel, drew the bung, and let a few drops of water trickle into the tin dish. The man on the boulder drank every drop, then threw the pannikin down on the sand, while his companion, who had exhausted the contents of the barrel, looked wolfishly at him. The other, however, did not take the slightest notice of his friend's lowering looks, but began to eat a biscuit and look around him. There was a strong contrast between these two waifs of the sea which the ocean had just thrown up on the desolate coast. The man on the boulder was a tall, slightly-built young fellow, apparently about thirty years of age, with leonine masses of reddish-coloured hair, and a short, stubbly beard of the same tint. His face, pale and attenuated by famine, looked sharp and clever; and his eyes, forming a strong contrast to his hair, were quite black, with thin, delicately-drawn eyebrows above them. They scintillated with a peculiar light which, though not offensive, yet gave anyone looking at him an uncomfortable feeling of insecurity. The young man's hands, though hardened and discoloured, were yet finely formed, while even the coarse, heavy boots he wore could not disguise the delicacy of his feet. He was dressed in a rough blue suit of clothes, all torn and much stained by sea water, and his head was covered with a red cap of wool-work which rested lightly on his tangled masses of hair. After a time he tossed aside the biscuit he was eating, and looked down at his companion with a cynical smile. The man at his feet was a rough, heavy-looking fellow, squarely and massively built, with black hair and a heavy beard of the same sombre hue. His hands were long and sinewy; his feet – which were bare – large and ungainly: and his whole appearance was that of a man in a low station of life. No one could have told the colour of his eyes, for he looked obstinately at the ground; and the expression of his face was so sullen and forbidding that altogether he appeared to be an exceedingly unpleasant individual. His companion eyed him for a short time in a cool, calculating manner, and then rose painfully to his feet.

'So,' he said rapidly in French, waving his hand towards the frowning cliffs, 'so, my Pierre, we are in the land of promise; though I must confess' – with a disparaging shrug of the shoulders – 'it certainly does not look very promising: still, we are on dry land, and that is something after tossing about so long in that stupid boat, with only a plank between us and death. Bah!' – with another expressive shrug – 'why should I call it stupid? It has carried us all the way from New Caledonia, that hell upon earth, and landed us safely in what may turn out Paradise. We must not be ungrateful to the bridge that carried us over – eh, my friend?'

The man addressed as Pierre nodded an assent, then pointed towards the boat; the other looked up and saw that the tide had risen, and that the boat was drifting slowly away from the land.

'It goes,' he said coolly, 'back again to its proper owner, I suppose. Well, let it. We have no further need of it, for, like Caesar, we have now crossed the Rubicon. We are no longer convicts from a French prison, my friend, but shipwrecked sailors; you hear?' – with a sudden scintillation from his black eyes – 'shipwrecked sailors; and I will tell the story of the wreck. Luckily, I can depend on your discretion, as you have not even a tongue to contradict, which you wouldn't do if you had.'

The dumb man rose slowly to his feet, and pointed to the cliffs frowning above them. The other answered his thought with a careless shrug of the shoulders.

'We must climb,' he said lightly, 'and let us hope the top will prove less inhospitable than this place. Where we are I don't know, except that this is Australia; there is gold here, my friend, and we must get our share of it. We will match our Gallic wit against these English fools, and see who comes off best. You have strength, I have brains; so we will do great things; but' – laying his hand impressively on the other's breast – 'no quarter, no yielding, you see!'

The dumb man nodded violently, and rubbed his ungainly hands together in delight.

‘You don’t know Balzac, my friend,’ went on the young man in a conversational tone, ‘or I would tell you that, like Rastignac, war is declared between ourselves and society; but if you have not the knowledge you have the will, and that is enough for me. Come, let us make the first step towards our wealth;’ and without casting a glance behind him, he turned and walked towards the nearest headland, followed by the dumb man with bent head and slouching gait.

The rain and wind had been at work on this promontory, and their combined action had broken off great masses of rock, which lay in rugged confusion at the base. This offered painful but secure foothold, and the two adventurers, with much labour – for they were weak with the privations endured on the voyage from New Caledonia – managed to climb half way up the cliff, when they stopped to take breath and look around them. They were now in a perilous position, for, hanging as they were on a narrow ledge of rock midway between earth and sky, the least slip would have cost them their lives. The great mass of rock which frowned above them was nearly perpendicular, yet offered here and there certain facilities for climbing, though to do so looked like certain death. The men, however, were quite reckless, and knew if they could get to the top they would be safe, so they determined to attempt the rest of the ascent.

‘As we have not the wings of eagles, friend Pierre,’ said the younger man, glancing around, ‘we must climb where we can find foothold. God will protect us; if not,’ with a sneer, ‘the Devil always looks after his own.’

He crept along the narrow ledge and scrambled with great difficulty into a niche above, holding on by the weeds and sparse grass which grew out of the crannies of the barren crag. Followed by his companion, he went steadily up, clinging to projecting rocks – long trails of tough grass and anything else he could hold on to. Every now and then some seabird would dash out into their faces with wild cries, and nearly cause them to lose their foothold in the sudden start. Then the herbage began to get more luxurious, and the cliff to slope in an easy incline, which made the latter part of their ascent much easier. At last, after half an hour’s hard work, they managed to get to the top, and threw themselves breathlessly on the short dry grass which fringed the rough cliff. Lying there half fainting with fatigue and hunger, they could hear, as in a confused dream, the drowsy thunder of the waves below, and the discordant cries of the sea-gulls circling round their nests, to which they had not yet returned. The rest did them good, and in a short time they were able to rise to their feet and survey the situation. In front was the sea, and at the back the grassy undulating country, dotted here and there with clumps of trees now becoming faint and indistinct in the rapidly falling shadows of the night. They could also see horses and cattle moving in the distant fields, which showed that there must be some human habitation near, and suddenly from a far distant house which they had not observed shone a bright light, which became to these weary waifs of the ocean a star of hope.

They looked at one another in silence, and then the young man turned towards the ocean again.

‘Behind,’ he said, pointing to the east, ‘lies a French prison and two ruined lives – yours and mine – but in front,’ swinging round to the rich fields, ‘there is fortune, food, and freedom. Come, my friend, let us follow that light, which is our star of hope, and who knows what glory may await us. The old life is dead, and we start our lives in this new world with all the bitter experiences of the old to teach us wisdom – come!’ And without another word he walked slowly down the slope towards the inland, followed by the dumb man with his head still bent and his air of sullen resignation.

The sun disappeared behind the snowy ranges – night drew a grey veil over the sky as the red light died out, and here and there the stars were shining. The seabirds sought their nests again and ceased their discordant cries – the boat which had brought the adventurers to shore drifted slowly out to sea, while the great black hand that rose from the eastward stretched out threateningly towards the two men tramping steadily onward through the dewy grass, as though it would have drawn them back again to the prison from whence they had so miraculously escaped.

PART I

CHAPTER I. – THE PACTOLUS CLAIM

In the early days of Australia, when the gold fever was at its height, and the marvellous Melbourne of to-day was more like an enlarged camp than anything else, there was a man called Robert Curtis, who arrived in the new land of Ophir with many others to seek his fortune. Mr Curtis was of good family, but having been expelled from Oxford for holding certain unorthodox opinions quite at variance with the accepted theological tenets of the University, he had added to his crime by marrying a pretty girl, whose face was her fortune, and who was born, as the story books say, of poor but honest parents. Poverty and honesty, however, were not sufficient recommendations in the eyes of Mr Curtis, senior, to excuse such a match; so he promptly followed the precedent set by Oxford, and expelled his son from the family circle. That young gentleman and his wife came out to Australia filled with ambitious dreams of acquiring a fortune, and then of returning to heap coals of fire on the heads of those who had turned them out.

These dreams, however, were destined never to be realised, for within a year after their arrival in Melbourne Mrs Curtis died giving birth to a little girl, and Robert Curtis found himself once more alone in the world with the encumbrance of a small child. He, however, was not a man who wore his heart on his sleeve, and did not show much outward grief, though, no doubt, he sorrowed deeply enough for the loss of the pretty girl for whom he had sacrificed so much. At all events, he made up his mind at once what to do: so, placing his child under the care of an old lady, he went to Ballarat, and set to work to make his fortune.

While there his luck became proverbial, and he soon found himself a rich man; but this did not satisfy him, for, being of a far-seeing nature, he saw the important part Australia would play in the world's history. So with the gold won by his pick he bought land everywhere, and especially in Melbourne, which was even then becoming metropolitan. After fifteen years of a varied life he returned to Melbourne to settle down, and found that his daughter had grown up to be a charming young girl, the very image of his late wife. Curtis built a house, went in for politics, and soon became a famous man in his adopted country. He settled a large sum of money on his daughter absolutely, which no one, not even her future husband, could touch, and introduced her to society.

Miss Curtis became the belle of Melbourne, and her charming face, together with the more substantial beauties of wealth, soon brought crowds of suitors around her. Her father, however, determined to find a husband for her whom he could trust, and was looking for one when he suddenly died of heart disease, leaving his daughter an orphan and a wealthy woman.

After Mr Curtis had been buried by the side of his dead wife, the heiress went home to her richly-furnished house, and after passing a certain period in mourning, engaged a companion, and once more took her position in society.

Her suitors – numerous and persistent as those of Penelope – soon returned to her feet, and she found she could choose a husband from men of all kinds – rich and poor, handsome and ugly, old and young. One of these, a penniless young Englishman, called Randolph Villiers, payed her such marked attention, that in the end Miss Curtis, contrary to the wishes of her friends, married him.

Mr Villiers had a handsome face and figure, a varied and extensive wardrobe, and a bad character. He, however, suppressed his real tastes until he became the husband of Miss Curtis, and holder of the purse – for such was the love his wife bore him that she unhesitatingly gave him full control of all her property, excepting that which was settled on herself by her father, which was, of course, beyond marital control. In vain her friends urged some settlement should be made before marriage. Miss Curtis argued that to take any steps to protect her fortune would show a want of

faith in the honesty of the man she loved, so went to the altar and reversed the marriage service by endowing Mr Randolph Villiers with all her worldly goods.

The result of this blind confidence justified the warnings of her friends – for as soon as Villiers found himself in full possession of his wife's fortune, he immediately proceeded to spend all the money he could lay his hands on. He gambled away large sums at his club, betted extensively on the turf, kept open house, and finally became entangled with a lady whose looks were much better than her morals, and whose capacity for spending money so far exceeded his own that in two years she completely ruined him. Mrs Villiers put up with this conduct for some time, as she was too proud to acknowledge she had made a mistake in her choice of a husband; but when Villiers, after spending all her wealth in riotous living, actually proceeded to ill-treat her in order to force her to give up the money her father had settled on her, she rebelled. She tore off her wedding-ring, threw it at his feet, renounced his name, and went off to Ballarat with her old nurse and the remnants of her fortune.

Mr Villiers, however, was not displeased at this step; in fact, he was rather glad to get rid of a wife who could no longer supply him with money, and whose presence was a constant rebuke. He sold up the house and furniture, and converted all available property into cash, which cash he then converted into drink for himself and jewellery for his lady friend. The end soon came to the fresh supply of money, and his lady friend went off with his dearest companion, to whose purse she had taken a sudden liking. Villiers, deserted by all his acquaintances, sank lower and lower in the social scale, and the once brilliant butterfly of fashion became a billiard marker, then a tout at races, and finally a bar loafer with no visible means of support.

Meantime Mrs Villiers was prospering in Ballarat, and gaining the respect and good opinion of everyone, while her husband was earning the contempt of not only his former friends but even of the creatures with whom he now associated. When Mrs Villiers went up to Ballarat after her short but brilliant life in Melbourne she felt crushed. She had given all the wealth of her girlish affection to her husband, and had endowed him with all kinds of chivalrous attributes, only to find out, as many a woman has done before and since, that her idol had feet of clay. The sudden shock of the discovery of his baseness altered the whole of her life, and from being a bright, trustful girl, she became a cold suspicious woman who disbelieved in everyone and in everything.

But she was of too restless and ambitious a nature to be content with an idle life, and although the money she still possessed was sufficient to support her in comfort, yet she felt that she must do something, if only to keep her thoughts from dwelling on those bitter years of married life. The most obvious thing to do in Ballarat was to go in for gold-mining, and chance having thrown in her way a mate of her father's, she determined to devote herself to that, being influenced in her decision by the old digger. This man, by name Archibald McIntosh, was a shrewd, hard-headed Scotchman, who had been in Ballarat when the diggings were in the height of their fame, and who knew all about the lie of the country and where the richest leads had been in the old days. He told Mrs Villiers that her father and himself had worked together on a lead then known as the Devil's Lead, which was one of the richest ever discovered in the district. It had been found by five men, who had agreed with one another to keep silent as to the richness of the lead, and were rapidly making their fortunes when the troubles of the Eureka stockade intervened, and, in the encounter between the miners and the military, three of the company working the lead were killed, and only two men were left who knew the whereabouts of the claim and the value of it. These were McIntosh and Curtis, who were the original holders. Mr Curtis, went down to Melbourne, and, as previously related, died of heart disease, so the only man left of the five who had worked the lead was Archibald McIntosh. He had been too poor to work it himself, and, having failed to induce any speculator to go in with him to acquire the land, he had kept silent about it, only staying up at Ballarat and guarding the claim lest someone else should chance on it. Fortunately the place where it was situated had not been renowned for gold in the early days, and it had passed into the hands of a man who used it as pasture land, quite ignorant of the wealth which lay beneath. When Mrs Villiers came up to Ballarat, this man wanted to

sell the land, as he was going to Europe; so, acting under the urgent advice of McIntosh, she sold out of all the investments which she had and purchased the whole tract of country where the old miner assured her solemnly the Devil's Lead was to be found.

Then she built a house near the mine, and taking her old nurse, Selina Sprotts, and Archibald McIntosh to live with her, sank a shaft in the place indicated by the latter. She also engaged miners, and gave McIntosh full control over the mine, while she herself kept the books, paid the accounts, and proved herself to be a first-class woman of business. She had now been working the mine for two years, but as yet had not been fortunate enough to strike the lead. The gutter, however, proved remunerative enough to keep the mine going, pay all the men, and support Mrs Villiers herself, so she was quite content to wait till fortune should smile on her, and the long-looked-for Devil's Lead turned up. People who had heard of her taking the land were astonished at first, and disposed to scoff, but they soon begun to admire the plucky way in which she fought down her ill-luck for the first year of her venture. All at once matters changed; she made a lucky speculation in the share market, and the Pactolus claim began to pay. Mrs Villiers became mixed up in mining matters, and bought and sold on 'Change with such foresight and promptitude of action that she soon began to make a lot of money. Stockbrokers are not, as a rule, romantic, but one of the fraternity was so struck with her persistent good fortune that he christened her Madame Midas, after that Greek King whose touch turned everything into gold. This name tickled the fancy of others, and in a short time she was called nothing but Madame Midas all over the country, which title she accepted complacently enough as a forecast of her success in finding the Devil's Lead, which idea had grown into a mania with her as it already was with her faithful henchman, McIntosh.

When Mr Villiers therefore arrived in Ballarat, he found his wife universally respected and widely known as Madame Midas, so he went to see her, expecting to be kept in luxurious ease for the rest of his life. He soon, however, found himself mistaken, for his wife told him plainly she would have nothing to do with him, and that if he dared to show his face at the Pactolus claim she would have him turned off by her men. He threatened to bring the law into force to make her live with him, but she laughed in his face, and said she would bring a divorce suit against him if he did so; and as Mr Villiers' character could hardly bear the light of day, he retreated, leaving Madame in full possession of the field.

He stayed, however, in Ballarat, and took up stockbroking – living a kind of hand-to-mouth existence, bragging of his former splendour, and swearing at his wife for what he was pleased to call – her cruelty. Every now and then he would pay a visit to the Pactolus, and try to see her, but McIntosh was a vigilant guard, and the miserable creature was always compelled to go back to his Bohemian life without accomplishing his object of getting money from the wife he had deserted.

People talked, of course, but Madame did not mind. She had tried married life, and had been disappointed; her old ideas of belief in human nature had passed away; in short, the girl who had been the belle of Melbourne as Miss Curtis and Mrs Villiers had disappeared, and the stern, clever, cynical woman who managed the Pactolus claim was a new being called 'Madame Midas'.

CHAPTER II. – SLIVERS

Everyone has heard of the oldest inhabitant – that wonderful piece of antiquity, with white hair, garrulous tongue, and cast-iron memory, – who was born with the present century – very often before it – and remembers George III, the Battle of Waterloo, and the invention of the steam-engine. But in Australia, the oldest inhabitant is localized, and rechristened an early settler. He remembers Melbourne before Melbourne was; he distinctly recollects sailing up the Yarra Yarra with Batman, and talks wildly about the then crystalline purity of its waters – an assertion which we of to-day feel is open to considerable doubt. His wealth is unbounded, his memory marvellous, and his acquaintances of a somewhat mixed character, comprising as they do a series of persons ranging from a member of Parliament down to a larrikin.

Ballarat, no doubt, possesses many of these precious pieces of antiquity hidden in obscure corners, but one especially was known, not only in the Golden City, but throughout Victoria. His name was Slivers – plain Slivers, as he said himself – and, from a physical point of view, he certainly spoke the truth. What his Christian name was no one ever knew; he called himself Slivers, and so did everyone else, without even an Esquire or a Mister to it – neither a head nor a tail to add dignity to the name.

Slivers was as well known in Sturt Street and at ‘The Corner’ as the town clock, and his tongue very much resembled that timepiece, inasmuch as it was always going. He was a very early settler; in fact, so remarkably early that it was currently reported the first white men who came to Ballarat found Slivers had already taken up his abode there, and lived in friendly relations with the local blacks. He had achieved this amicable relationship by the trifling loss of a leg, an arm, and an eye, all of which portions of his body were taken off the right side, and consequently gave him rather a lop-sided appearance. But what was left of Slivers possessed an abundant vitality, and it seemed probable he would go on living in the same damaged condition for the next twenty years.

The Ballarat folk were fond of pointing him out as a specimen of the healthy climate, but this was rather a flight of fancy, as Slivers was one of those exasperating individuals who, if they lived in a swamp or a desert, would still continue to feel their digestions good and their lungs strong.

Slivers was reputed rich, and Arabian-Night-like stories were told of his boundless wealth, but no one ever knew the exact amount of money he had, and as Slivers never volunteered any information on the subject, no one ever did know. He was a small, wizen-looking little man, who usually wore a suit of clothes a size too large for him, wherein scandal-mongers averred his body rattled like a dried pea in a pod. His hair was white, and fringed the lower portion of his yellow little scalp in a most deceptive fashion. With his hat on Slivers looked sixty; take it off and his bald head immediately added ten years to his existence. His one eye was bright and sharp, of a greyish colour, and the loss of the other was replaced by a greasy black patch, which gave him a sinister appearance. He was cleaned shaved, and had no teeth, but notwithstanding this want, his lips gripped the stem of his long pipe in a wonderfully tenacious and obstinate manner. He carried on the business of a mining agent, and knowing all about the country and the intricacies of the mines, he was one of the cleverest speculators in Ballarat.

The office of Slivers was in Sturt Street, in a dirty, tumble-down cottage wedged between two handsome modern buildings. It was a remnant of old Ballarat which had survived the rage for new houses and highly ornamented terraces. Slivers had been offered money for that rickety little shanty, but he declined to sell it, averring that as a snail grew to fit his house his house had grown to fit him.

So there it stood – a dingy shingle roof overgrown with moss – a quaint little porch and two numerous paned windows on each side. On top of the porch a sign-board – done by Slivers in the early days, and looking like it – bore the legend ‘Slivers, mining agent.’ The door did not shut – something was wrong with it, so it always stood ajar in a hospitable sort of manner. Entering this,

a stranger would find himself in a dark low-roofed passage, with a door at the end leading to the kitchen, another on the right leading to the bedroom, and a third on the left leading to the office, where most of Slivers' indoor life was spent. He used to stop here nearly all day doing business, with the small table before him covered with scrip, and the mantelpiece behind him covered with specimens of quartz, all labelled with the name of the place whence they came. The inkstand was dirty, the ink thick and the pens rusty; yet, in spite of all these disadvantages, Slivers managed to do well and make money. He used to recommend men to different mines round about, and whenever a manager wanted men, or new hands wanted work, they took themselves off to Slivers, and were sure to be satisfied there. Consequently, his office was nearly always full; either of people on business or casual acquaintances dropping in to have a drink – Slivers was generous in the whisky line – or to pump the old man about some new mine, a thing which no one ever managed to do. When the office was empty, Slivers would go on sorting the scrip on his table, drinking his whisky, or talking to Billy. Now Billy was about as well known in Ballarat as Slivers, and was equally as old and garrulous in his own way. He was one of those large white yellow-crested cockatoos who, in their captivity, pass their time like galley-slaves, chained by one leg. Billy, however, never submitted to the indignity of a chain – he mostly sat on Slivers' table or on his shoulder, scratching his poll with his black claw, or chattering to Slivers in a communicative manner. People said Billy was Slivers' evil spirit, and as a matter of fact, there was something uncanny in the wisdom of the bird. He could converse fluently on all occasions, and needed no drawing out, inasmuch as he was always ready to exhibit his powers of conversation. He was not a pious bird – belonging to Slivers, he could hardly be expected to be – and his language was redolent of Billingsgate. So Billy being so clever was quite a character in his way, and, seated on Slivers' shoulder with his black bead of an eye watching his master writing with the rusty pen, they looked a most unholy pair.

The warm sunlight poured through the dingy windows of the office, and filled the dark room with a sort of sombre glory. The atmosphere of Slivers' office was thick and dusty, and the sun made long beams of light through the heavy air. Slivers had pushed all the scrip and loose papers away, and was writing a letter in the little clearing caused by their removal. On the old-fashioned inkstand was a paper full of grains of gold, and on this the sunlight rested, making it glitter in the obscurity of the room. Billy, seated on Slivers' shoulder, was astonished at this, and, inspired by a spirit of adventure, he climbed down and waddled clumsily across the table to the inkstand, where he seized a small nugget in his beak and made off with it. Slivers looked up from his writing suddenly: so, being detected, Billy stopped and looked at him, still carrying the nugget in his beak.

'Drop it,' said Slivers severely, in his rasping little voice. Billy pretended not to understand, and after eyeing Slivers for a moment or two resumed his journey. Slivers stretched out his hand for the ruler, whereupon Billy, becoming alive to his danger, dropped the nugget, and flew down off the table with a discordant shriek.

'Devil! devil! devil!' screamed this amiable bird, flopping up and down on the floor. 'You're a liar! You're a liar! Pickles.'

Having delivered himself of this bad language, Billy waddled to his master's chair, and climbing up by the aid of his claws and beak, soon established himself in his old position. Slivers, however, was not attending to him, as he was leaning back in his chair drumming in an absent sort of way with his lean fingers on the table. His cork arm hung down limply, and his one eye was fixed on a letter lying in front of him. This was a communication from the manager of the Pactolus Mine requesting Slivers to get him more hands, and Slivers' thoughts had wandered away from the letter to the person who wrote it, and from thence to Madame Midas.

'She's a clever woman,' observed Slivers, at length, in a musing sort of tone, 'and she's got a good thing on in that claim if she only strikes the Lead.'

'Devil,' said Billy once more, in a harsh voice.

‘Exactly,’ answered Slivers, ‘the Devil’s Lead. Oh, Lord! what a fool I was not to have collared that ground before she did; but that infernal McIntosh never would tell me where the place was. Never mind, I’ll be even with him yet; curse him.’

His expression of face was not pleasant as he said this, and he grasped the letter in front of him in a violent way, as if he were wishing his long fingers were round the writer’s throat. Tapping with his wooden leg on the floor, he was about to recommence his musings, when he heard a step in the passage, and the door of his office being pushed violently open, a man entered without further ceremony, and flung himself down on a chair near the window.

‘Fire!’ said Billy, on seeing this abrupt entry; ‘how’s your mother! – Ballarat and Bendigo – Bendigo and Ballarat.’

The newcomer was a man short and powerfully built, dressed in a shabby-genteel sort of way, with a massive head covered with black hair, heavy side whiskers and moustache, and a clean shaved chin, which had that blue appearance common to very dark men who shave. His mouth – that is, as much as could be seen of it under the drooping moustache – was weak and undecided, and his dark eyes so shifty and restless that they seemed unable to meet a steady gaze, but always looked at some inanimate object that would not stare them out of countenance.

‘Well, Mr Randolph Villiers,’ croaked Slivers, after contemplating his visitor for a few moments, ‘how’s business?’

‘Infernally bad,’ retorted Mr Villiers, pulling out a cigar and lighting it. ‘I’ve lost twenty pounds on those Moscow shares.’

‘More fool you,’ replied Slivers, courteously, swinging round in his chair so as to face Villiers. ‘I could have told you the mine was no good; but you will go on your own bad judgment.’

‘It’s like getting blood out of a stone to get tips from you,’ growled Villiers, with a sulky air. ‘Come now, old boy,’ in a cajoling manner, ‘tell us something good – I’m nearly stone broke, and I must live.’

‘I’m hanged if I see the necessity,’ malignantly returned Slivers, unconsciously quoting Voltaire; ‘but if you do want to get into a good thing –’

‘Yes! yes!’ said the other, eagerly bending forward.

‘Get an interest in the Pactolus,’ and the agreeable old gentleman leaned back and laughed loudly in a raucous manner at his visitor’s discomfited look.

‘You ass,’ hissed Mr Villiers, between his closed teeth; ‘you know as well as I do that my infernal wife won’t look at me.’

‘Ho, ho!’ laughed the cockatoo, raising his yellow crest in an angry manner; ‘devil take her – rather!’

‘I wish he would!’ muttered Villiers, fervently; then with an uneasy glance at Billy, who sat on the old man’s shoulder complacently ruffling his feathers, he went on: ‘I wish you’d screw that bird’s neck, Slivers; he’s too clever by half.’

Slivers paid no attention to this, but, taking Billy off his shoulder, placed him on the floor, then turned to his visitor and looked at him fixedly with his bright eye in such a penetrating manner that Villiers felt it go through him like a gimlet.

‘I hate your wife,’ said Slivers, after a pause.

‘Why the deuce should you?’ retorted Villiers, sulkily. ‘You ain’t married to her.’

‘I wish I was,’ replied Slivers with a chuckle. ‘A fine woman, my good sir! Why, if I was married to her I wouldn’t sneak away whenever I saw her. I’d go up to the Pactolus claim and there I’d stay.’

‘It’s easy enough talking,’ retorted Villiers crossly, ‘but you don’t know what a fiend she is! Why do you hate her?’

‘Because I do,’ retorted Slivers. ‘I hate her; I hate McIntosh; the whole biling of them; they’ve got the Pactolus claim, and if they find the Devil’s Lead they’ll be millionaires.’

‘Well,’ said the other, quite unmoved, ‘all Ballarat knows that much.’

‘But I might have had it!’ shrieked Slivers, getting up in an excited manner, and stumping up and down the office. ‘I knew Curtis, McIntosh and the rest were making their pile, but I couldn’t find out where; and now they’re all dead but McIntosh, and the prize has slipped through my fingers, devil take them!’

‘Devil take them,’ echoed the cockatoo, who had climbed up again on the table, and was looking complacently at his master.

‘Why don’t you ruin your wife, you fool?’ said Slivers, turning vindictively on Villiers. ‘You ain’t going to let her have all the money while you are starving, are you?’

‘How the deuce am I to do that?’ asked Villiers, sulkily, relighting his cigar.

‘Get the whip hand of her,’ snarled Slivers, viciously; ‘find out if she’s in love, and threaten to divorce her if she doesn’t go halves.’

‘There’s no chance of her having any lovers,’ retorted Villiers; ‘she’s a piece of ice.’

‘Ice melts,’ replied Slivers, quickly. ‘Wait till “Mr Right” comes along, and then she’ll begin to regret being married to you, and then –’

‘Well?’

‘You’ll have the game in your own hands,’ hissed the wicked old man, rubbing his hands. ‘Oh!’ he cried, spinning round on his wooden leg, ‘it’s a lovely idea. Wait till we meet “Mr Right”, just wait,’ and he dropped into his chair quite overcome by the state of excitement he had worked himself into.

‘If you’ve quite done with those gymnastics, my friend,’ said a soft voice near the door, ‘perhaps I may enter.’

Both the inmates of the office looked up at this, and saw that two men were standing at the half-open door – one an extremely handsome young man of about thirty, dressed in a neat suit of blue serge, and wearing a large white wide-awake hat, with a bird’s-eye handkerchief twisted round it. His companion was short and heavily built, dressed somewhat the same, but with his black hat pulled down over his eyes.

‘Come in,’ growled Slivers, angrily, when he saw his visitors. ‘What the devil do you want?’

‘Work,’ said the young man, advancing to the table. ‘We are new arrivals in the country, and were told to come to you to get work.’

‘I don’t keep a factory,’ snarled Slivers, leaning forward.

‘I don’t think I would come to you if you did,’ retorted the stranger, coolly. ‘You would not be a pleasant master either to look at or to speak to.’

Villiers laughed at this, and Slivers stared dumbfounded at being spoken to in such a manner.

‘Devil,’ broke in Billy, rapidly. ‘You’re a liar – devil.’

‘Those, I presume, are your master’s sentiments towards me,’ said the young man, bowing gravely to the bird. ‘But as soon as he recovers the use of his tongue, I trust he will tell us if we can get work or not.’

Slivers was just going to snap out a refusal, when he caught sight of McIntosh’s letter on the table, and this recalled to his mind the conversation he had with Mr Villiers. Here was a young man handsome enough to make any woman fall in love with him, and who, moreover, had a clever tongue in his head. All Slivers’ animosity revived against Madame Midas as he thought of the Devil’s Lead, and he determined to use this young man as a tool to ruin her in the eyes of the world. With these thoughts in his mind, he drew a sheet of paper towards him, and dipping the rusty pen in the thick ink, prepared to question his visitors as to what they could do, with a view to sending them out to the Pactolus claim.

‘Names?’ he asked, grasping his pen firmly in his left hand.

‘Mine,’ said the stranger, bowing, ‘is Gaston Vandeloup, my friend’s Pierre Lemaire – both French.’

Slivers scrawled this down in the series of black scratches, which did duty with him for writing.

‘Where do you come from?’ was his next question.

‘The story,’ said M. Vandeloup, with suavity, ‘is too long to repeat at present; but we came to-day from Melbourne.’

‘What kind of work can you do?’ asked Slivers, sharply.

‘Anything that turns up,’ retorted the Frenchman.

‘I was addressing your companion, sir; not you,’ snarled Slivers, turning viciously on him.

‘I have to answer for both,’ replied the young man, coolly, slipping one hand into his pocket and leaning up against the door in a negligent attitude, ‘my friend is dumb.’

‘Poor devil!’ said Slivers, harshly.

‘But,’ went on Vandeloup, sweetly, ‘his legs, arms, and eyes are all there.’

Slivers glared at this fresh piece of impertinence, but said nothing. He wrote a letter to McIntosh, recommending him to take on the two men, and handed it to Vandeloup, who received it with a bow.

‘The price of your services, Monsieur?’ he asked.

‘Five bob,’ growled Slivers, holding out his one hand.

Vandeloup pulled out two half-crowns and put them in the thin, claw-like fingers, which instantly closed on them.

‘It’s a mining place you’re going to,’ said Slivers, pocketing the money; ‘the Pactolus claim. There’s a pretty woman there. Have a drink?’

Vandeloup declined, but his companion, with a grunt, pushed past him, and filling a tumbler with the whisky, drank it off. Slivers looked ruefully at the bottle, and then hastily put it away, in case Vandeloup should change his mind and have some.

Vandeloup put on his hat and went to the door, out of which Pierre had already preceded him.

‘I trust, gentlemen,’ he said, with a graceful bow, ‘we shall meet again, and can then discuss the beauty of this lady to whom Mr Slivers alludes. I have no doubt he is a judge of beauty in others, though he is so incomplete himself.’

He went out of the door, and then Slivers sprang up and rushed to Villiers.

‘Do you know who that is?’ he asked, in an excited manner, pulling his companion to the window.

Villiers looked through the dusty panes, and saw the young Frenchman walking away, as handsome and gallant a man as he had ever seen, followed by the slouching figure of his friend.

‘Vandeloup,’ he said, turning to Slivers, who was trembling with excitement.

‘No, you fool,’ retorted the other, triumphantly. That is “Mr Right”.’

CHAPTER III. – MADAME MIDAS AT HOME

Madame Midas was standing on the verandah of her cottage, staring far away into the distance, where she could see the tall chimney and huge mound of white earth which marked the whereabouts of the Pactolus claim. She was a tall voluptuous-looking woman of what is called a Junoesque type – decidedly plump, with firm white hands and well-formed feet. Her face was of a whitish tint, more like marble than flesh, and appeared as if modelled from the antique – with the straight Greek nose, high and smooth forehead, and full red mouth, with firmly-closed lips. She had dark and piercing eyes, with heavy arched eyebrows above them, and her hair, of a bluish-black hue, was drawn smoothly over the forehead, and coiled in thick wreaths at the top of her small, finely-formed head. Altogether a striking-looking woman, but with an absence of animation about her face, which had a calm, serene expression, effectually hiding any thoughts that might be passing in her mind, and which resembled nothing so much in its inscrutable look as the motionless calm which the old Egyptians gave to their sphinxes. She was dressed for coolness in a loose white dress, tied round her waist with a crimson scarf of Indian silk; and her beautifully modelled arms, bare to the elbow, and unadorned by any trinkets, were folded idly in front of her as she looked out at the landscape, which was mellowed and full of warmth under the bright yellow glare of the setting sun.

The cottage – for it was nothing else – stood on a slight rise immediately in front of a dark wood of tall gum-trees, and there was a long row of them on the right, forming a shelter against the winds, as if the wood had thrown a protecting arm around the cottage, and wanted to draw it closer to its warm bosom. The country was of an undulating character, divided into fields by long rows of gorse hedges, all golden with blossoms, which gave out a faint, peach-like odour. Some of these meadows were yellow with corn – some a dull red with sorrel, others left in their natural condition of bright green grass – while here and there stood up, white and ghost-like, the stumps of old trees, the last remnants of the forests, which were slowly retreating before the axe of the settler. These fields, which had rather a harlequin aspect with their varied colours, all melted together in the far distance into an indescribable neutral tint, and ended in the dark haze of the bush, which grew over all the undulating hills. On the horizon, however, at intervals, a keen eye could see some tall tree standing boldly up, outlined clearly against the pale yellow of the sky. There was a white dusty road or rather a track between two rough fences, with a wide space of green grass on each side, and here and there could be seen the cattle wandering idly homeward, lingering every now and then to pull at a particularly tempting tuft of bush grass growing in the moist ditches which ran along each side of the highway. Scattered over this pastoral-looking country were huge mounds of white earth, looking like heaps of carded wool, and at the end of each of these invariably stood a tall, ugly skeleton of wood. These marked the positions of the mines – the towers contained the winding gear, while the white earth was the clay called mulloch, brought from several hundred feet below the surface. Near these mounds were rough-looking sheds with tall red chimneys, which made a pleasant spot of colour against the white of the clay. On one of these mounds, rather isolated from the others, and standing by itself in the midst of a wide green paddock, Mrs Villiers' eyes were fixed, and she soon saw the dark figure of a man coming slowly down the white mound, along the green field and advancing slowly up the hill. When she saw him coming, without turning her head or raising her voice, she called out to someone inside,

‘Archie is coming, Selina – you had better hurry up the tea, for he will be hungry after such a long day.’

The person inside made no answer save by an extra clatter of some domestic utensils, and Madame apparently did not expect a reply, for without saying anything else she walked slowly down the garden path, and leaned lightly over the gate, waiting for the newcomer, who was indeed none other than Archibald McIntosh, the manager of the Pactolus.

He was a man of about medium height, rather thin than otherwise, with a long, narrow-looking head and boldly cut features – clean shaved save for a frill of white hair which grew on his throat up the sides of his head to his ears, and which gave him rather a peculiar appearance, as if he had his jaw bandaged up. His eyes were grey and shrewd-looking, his lips were firmly compressed – in fact, the whole appearance of his face was obstinate – the face of a man who would stick to his opinions whatever anyone else might say to the contrary. He was in a rough miner's dress, all splashed with clay, and as he came up to the gate Madame could see he was holding something in his hand.

'D'ye no ken what yon may be?' he said, a smile relaxing his grim features as he held up a rather large nugget; 'tis the third yin this week!'

Madame Midas took the nugget from him and balanced it carefully in her hand, with a thoughtful look in her face, as if she was making a mental calculation.

'About twenty to twenty-five ounces, I should say,' she observed in her soft low voice; 'the last we had was fifteen, and the one before twenty – looks promising for the gutter, doesn't it?'

'Well, I'll no say but what it might mean a deal mair,' replied McIntosh, with characteristic Scotch caution, as he followed Madame into the house; 'it's no a verra bad sign, onyhow; I winna say but what we might be near the Devil's Lead.'

'And if we are?' said Madame, turning with a smile.

'Weel, mem, ye'll have mair siller nor ye'll ken what to dae wi', an' 'tis to be hoped ye'll no be making a fool of yersel.'

Madame laughed – she was used to McIntosh's plain speaking, and it in no wise offended her. In fact, she preferred it very much more than being flattered, as people's blame is always genuine, their praise rarely so. At all events she was not displeased, and looked after him with a smile in her dark eyes as he disappeared into the back kitchen to make himself decent for tea. Madame herself sat down in an arm-chair in the bow window, and watched Selina preparing the meal.

Selina Jane Sprotts, who now acted as servant to Mrs Villiers, was rather an oddity in her way. She had been Madame's nurse, and had followed her up to Ballarat, with the determination of never leaving her. Selina was a spinster, as her hand had never been sought in marriage, and her personal appearance was certainly not very fascinating. Tall and gaunt, she was like a problem from Euclid, all angles, and the small quantity of grey hair she possessed was screwed into a hard lump at the back of her head. Her face was reddish in colour, and her mouth prim and pursed up, as if she was afraid of saying too much, which she need not have been, as she rarely spoke, and was as economical of her words as she was of everything else. She was much given to quoting proverbs, and hurled these prepared little pieces of wisdom on every side like pellets out of a pop-gun. Conversation which consists mainly of proverbs is rarely exhilarating; consequently Miss Sprotts was not troubled to talk much, either by Madame or McIntosh.

Miss Sprotts moved noiselessly about the small room, in a wonderfully dextrous manner considering her height, and, after laying the table, placed the teapot on the hob to 'draw', thereby disturbing a cat and a dog who were lying in front of the fire – for there was a fire in the room in spite of the heat of the day, Selina choosing to consider that the house was damp. She told Madame she knew it was damp because her bones ached, and as she was mostly bones she certainly had a good opportunity of judging.

Annoyed at being disturbed by Miss Sprotts, the dog resigned his comfortable place with a plaintive growl, but the cat, of a more irritable temperament, set up and made a sudden scratch at her hand, drawing blood therefrom.

'Animals,' observed Selina, grimly, 'should keep their place;' and she promptly gave the cat a slap on the side of the head, which sent him over to Madame's feet, with an angry spit. Madame picked him up and soothed his ruffled feelings so successfully, that he curled himself up on her lap and went to sleep.

By-and-bye Archie, who had been making a great splashing in the back premises, came in looking clean and fresh, with a more obstinate look about his face than ever. Madame went to the tea-table and sat down, for she always had her meals with them, a fact of which they were very proud, and they always treated her with intense respect, though every now and then they were inclined to domineer. Archie, having seen that the food on the table was worth thanking God for, asked a blessing in a peremptory sort of manner, as if he thought Heaven required a deal of pressing to make it attentive. Then they commenced to eat in silence, for none of the party were very much given to speech, and no sound was heard save the rattling of the cups and saucers and the steady ticking of the clock. The window was open, and a faint breeze came in – cool and fragrant with the scent of the forest, and perfumed with the peach-like odour of the gorse blossoms. There was a subdued twilight through all the room, for the night was coming on, and the gleam of the flickering flames of the fire danced gaily against the roof and exaggerated all objects to an immense size. At last Archie pushed back his chair to show that he had finished, and prepared to talk.

‘I dinna see ony new bodies coming,’ he said, looking at his mistress. ‘They, feckless things, that left were better than none, though they should hae been skelped for their idleness.’

‘You have written to Slivers?’ said Madame, raising her eyes.

‘That wudden-legged body,’ retorted McIntosh. ‘Deed and I have, but the auld tyke hasna done onything to getting me what I want. Weel, weel,’ in a resigned sort of a manner, ‘we micht be waur off than we are, an’ wha kens but what Providence will send us men by-and-bye?’

Selina looked up at this, saw her opportunity, and let slip an appropriate proverb.

‘If we go by by-and-bye lane,’ she said sharply, ‘we come to the gate of never.’

This being undeniable, no one gave her the pleasure of contradicting her, for Archie knew it was impossible to argue with Selina, so handy was she with her proverbial wisdom – a kind of domestic Tupper, whose philosophy was of the most irritating and unanswerable kind. He did the wisest thing he could under the circumstances, and started a new subject.

‘I say yon the day.’

‘Yon’ in this case meant Mr Villiers, whose name was tabooed in the house, and was always spoken of in a half-hinting kind of way. As both her servants knew all about her unhappy life, Madame did not scruple to talk to them.

‘How was he looking?’ she asked, smoothing the crumbs off her dress.

‘Brawly,’ replied Archie, rising; ‘he lost money on that Moscow mine, but he made a fine haul owre the Queen o’ Hearts claim.’

‘The wicked,’ observed Selina, ‘flourish like a green bay tree.’

‘Ou, ay,’ retorted McIntosh, drily; ‘we ken a’ about that, Selina – auld Hornie looks after his ain.’

‘I think he leads a very hand-to-mouth existence,’ said Madame, calmly; ‘however rich he may become, he will always be poor, because he never was a provident man.’

‘He’s comin’ tae see ye, mem,’ said Archie, grimly, lighting his pipe.

Madame rose to her feet and walked to the window.

‘He’s done that before,’ she said, complacently; ‘the result was not satisfactory.’

‘Continual dropping wears away a stone,’ said Selina, who was now clearing away.

‘But not iron,’ replied Madame, placidly; ‘I don’t think his persistence will gain anything.’

Archie smiled grimly, and then went outside to smoke his pipe, while Madame sat down by the open window and looked out at the fast-fading landscape.

Her thoughts were not pleasant. She had hoped to cut herself off from all the bitterness and sorrow of her past life, but this husband of hers, like an unquiet spirit, came to trouble her and remind her of a time she would willingly have forgotten. She looked calm and quiet enough sitting there with her placid face and smooth brow; but this woman was like a slumbering volcano, and her passions were all the more dangerous from being kept in check.

A bat flew high up in the air across the clear glow of the sky, disappearing into the adjacent bush, and Madame, stretching out her hand, idly plucked a fresh, dewy rose off the tree which grew round the window.

‘If I could only get rid of him,’ she thought, toying with the flower; ‘but it is impossible. I can’t do that without money, and money I never will have till I find that lead. I must bribe him, I suppose. Oh, why can’t he leave me alone now? Surely he has ruined my life sufficiently in the past to let me have a few years, if not of pleasure, at least of forgetfulness.’ And with a petulant gesture she hurled the rose out of the window, where it struck Archie a soft and fragrant blow on the cheek.

‘Yes,’ said Madame to herself, as she pulled down the window, ‘I must get rid of him, and if bribery won’t do – there are other means.’

CHAPTER IV. – THE GOOD SAMARITAN

Is there anyone nowadays who reads Cowper – that charming, domestic poet who wrote ‘The Task’, and invested even furniture with the glamour of poesy? Alas! to many people Cowper is merely a name, or is known only as the author of the delightfully quaint ballad of John Gilpin. Yet he was undoubtedly the Poet Laureate of domesticity, and every householder should possess a bust or picture of him – placed, not amid the frigid splendours of the drawing room, but occupying the place of honour in his own particular den, where everything is old-fashioned, cheery, and sanctified by long usage. No one wrote so pleasantly about the pleasures of a comfortable room as Cowper. And was he not right to do so? After all, every hearth is the altar of the family, whereon the sacred fire should be kept constantly burning, waxing and waning with the seasons, but never be permitted to die out altogether. Miss Sprotts, as before mentioned, was much in favour of a constant fire, because of the alleged dampness of the house, and Madame Midas did not by any means object, as she was a perfect salamander for heat. Hence, when the outward door was closed, the faded red curtains of the window drawn, and the newly replenished fire blazed brightly in the wide fireplace, the room was one which even Cowper – sybarite in home comforts as he was – would have contemplated with delight.

Madame Midas was seated now at the small table in the centre of the room, poring over a bewildering array of figures, and the soft glow of the lamp touched her smooth hair and white dress with a subdued light.

Archie sat by the fire, half asleep, and there was a dead silence in the room, only broken by the rapid scratching of Madame’s pen or the click of Selina’s needles. At last Mrs Villiers, with a sigh of relief, laid down her pen, put all her papers together, and tied them neatly with a bit of string.

‘I’m afraid I’ll have to get a clerk, Archie,’ she said, as she put the papers away, ‘the office work is getting too much for me.’

‘Deed, mem, and ‘tis that same I was thinkin’ o’,’ returned Mr McIntosh, sitting bolt upright in his chair, lest the imputation of having been asleep should be brought against him. ‘It’s ill wark seein’ ye spoilin’ your bonny eyes owre sic a muckle lot o’ figures as ye hae there.’

‘Someone must do it,’ said Madame, resuming her seat at the table.

‘Then why not get a body that can dae it?’ retorted Archie; ‘not but what ye canna figure yersel’, mem, but really ye need a rest, and if I hear of onyone in toun wha we can trust I’ll bring him here next week.’

‘I don’t see why you shouldn’t,’ said Madame, musingly; ‘the mine is fairly under way now, and if things go on as they are doing, I must have someone to assist me.’

At this moment a knock came to the front door, which caused Selina to drop her work with a sudden start, and rise to her feet.

‘Not you, Selina,’ said Madame, in a quiet voice; ‘let Archie go; it may be some tramp.’

‘Deed no, mem,’ replied Archie, obstinately, as he arose from his seat; ‘tis verra likely a man fra the warks saying he wants to go. There’s mair talk nor sense aboot them, I’m thinkin’ – the yattering parrots.’

Selina resumed her knitting in a most phlegmatic manner, but Madame listened intently, for she was always haunted by a secret dread of her husband breaking in on her, and it was partly on this account that McIntosh stayed in the house. She heard a murmur of voices, and then Archie returned with two men, who entered the room and stood before Madame in the light of the lamp.

‘Tis two men fra that wudden-legged gowk o’ a Slivers,’ said Archie, respectfully. ‘Ain o’ them has a wee bit letter for ye’ – turning to receive same from the foremost man.

The man, however, did not take notice of Archie’s gesture, but walking forward to Madame, laid the letter down before her. As he did so, she caught sight of the delicacy of his hands, and looked up suddenly with a piercing gaze. He bore the scrutiny coolly, and took a chair in silence, his companion

doing the same, while Madame opened the letter and read Slivers' bad writing with a dexterity only acquired by long practice. Having finished her perusal, she looked up slowly.

'A broken-down gentleman,' she said to herself, as she saw the easy bearing and handsome face of the young man; then looking at his companion, she saw by his lumpish aspect and coarse hands, that he occupied a much lower rank of life than his friend.

Monsieur Vandeloup – for it was he – caught her eye as she was scrutinising them, and his face broke into a smile – a most charming smile, as Madame observed mentally, though she allowed nothing of her thoughts to appear on her face.

'You want work,' she said, slowly folding up the letter, and placing it in her pocket; 'do you understand anything about gold-mining?'

'Unfortunately, no, Madame,' said Vandeloup, coolly; 'but we are willing to learn.'

Archie grunted in a dissatisfied manner, for he was by no means in favour of teaching people their business, and, besides, he thought Vandeloup too much of a gentleman to do good work.

'You look hardly strong enough for such hard labour,' said Mrs Villiers, doubtfully eyeing the slender figure of the young man. 'Your companion, I think, will do, but you –'

'I, Madame, am like the lilies of the field that neither toil nor spin,' replied Vandeloup, gaily; 'but, unfortunately, I am now compelled by necessity to work, and though I should prefer to earn my bread in an easier manner, beggars,' – with a characteristic shrug, which did not escape Madame's eye – 'cannot be choosers.'

'You are French?' she asked quickly, in that language.

'Yes, Madame,' he replied in the same tongue, 'both my friend and myself are from Paris, but we have not been long out here.'

'Humph,' Madame leaned her head on her hand and thought, while Vandeloup looked at her keenly, and remembered what Slivers had said.

'She is, indeed, a handsome woman,' he observed, mentally; 'my lines will fall in pleasant places, if I remain here.'

Mrs Villiers rather liked the looks of this young man; there was a certain fascination about him which few women could resist, and Madame, although steeled to a considerable extent by experience, was yet a woman. His companion, however, she did not care about – he had a sullen and lowering countenance, and looked rather dangerous.

'What is your name?' she asked the young man.

'Gaston Vandeloup.'

'You are a gentleman?'

He bowed, but said nothing.

'And you?' asked Madame, sharply turning to the other.

He looked up and touched his mouth.

'Pardon him not answering, Madame,' interposed Vandeloup, 'he has the misfortune to be dumb.'

'Dumb?' echoed Madame, with a glance of commiseration, while Archie looked startled, and Selina mentally observed that silence was golden.

'Yes, he has been so from his birth, – at least, so he gives me to understand,' said Gaston, with a shrug of his shoulders, which insinuated a doubt on the subject; 'but it's more likely the result of an accident, for he can hear though he cannot speak. However, he is strong and willing to work; and I also, if you will kindly give me an opportunity,' added he, with a winning smile.

'You have not many qualifications,' said Madame, shortly, angry with herself for so taking to this young man's suave manner.

'Probably not,' retorted Vandeloup, with a cynical smile. 'I fancy it will be more a case of charity than anything else, as we are starving.'

Madame started, while Archie murmured 'Puir deils.'

‘Surely not as bad as that?’ observed Mrs Villiers, in a softer tone.

‘Why not?’ retorted the Frenchman, carelessly. ‘Manna does not fall from heaven as in the days of Moses. We are strangers in a strange land, and it is hard to obtain employment. My companion Pierre can work in your mine, and if you will take me on I can keep your books’ – with a sudden glance at a file of papers on the table.

‘Thank you, I keep my own books,’ replied Madame, shortly. ‘What do you say to engaging them, Archie?’

‘We ma gie them a try,’ said McIntosh, cautiously. ‘Ye do need a figger man, as I tauld ye, and the dour deil can wark i’ the claim.’

Madame drew a long breath, and then made up her mind.

‘Very well,’ she said, sharply; ‘you are engaged, M. Vandeloup, as my clerk, and your companion can work in the mine. As to wages and all that, we will settle to-morrow, but I think you will find everything satisfactory.’

‘I am sure of that, Madame,’ returned Vandeloup, with a bow.

‘And now,’ said Madame Midas, graciously, relaxing somewhat now that business was over, ‘you had better have some supper.’

Pierre’s face lighted up when he heard this invitation, and Vandeloup bowed politely.

‘You are very kind,’ he said, looking at Mrs Villiers in a friendly manner; ‘supper is rather a novelty to both of us.’

Selina meanwhile had gone out, and returned with some cold beef and pickles, a large loaf and a jug of beer. These she placed on the table, and then retired to her seat again, inwardly rebellious at having two tramps at the table, but outwardly calm.

Pierre fell upon the victuals before him with the voracity of a starving animal, and ate and drank in such a savage manner that Madame was conscious of a kind of curious repugnance, and even Archie was startled out of his Scotch phlegm.

‘I wadna care aboot keepin’ yon long,’ he muttered to himself; ‘he’s mair like a cannibal nor a ceevalized body.’

Vandeloup, however, ate very little and soon finished; then filling a glass with beer, he held it to his lips and bowed again to Madame Midas.

‘To your health, Madame,’ he said, drinking.

Mrs Villiers bowed courteously. This young man pleased her. She was essentially a woman with social instincts, and the appearance of this young and polished stranger in the wilds of the Pactolus claim promised her a little excitement. It was true that every now and then, when she caught a glimpse from his scintillating eyes, she was conscious of a rather unpleasant sensation, but this she put down to fancy, as the young man’s manners were really charming.

When the supper was ended, Pierre pushed back his chair into the shadow and once more relapsed into his former gloom, but Vandeloup stood up and looked towards Madame in a hesitating manner.

‘I’m afraid, Madame, we disturb you,’ he murmured vaguely, though in his heart he wished to stay in this pleasant room and talk to such a handsome woman; ‘we had best be going.’

‘Not at all,’ answered Madame, graciously, ‘sit down; you and your friend can sleep in the men’s quarters to-night, and to-morrow we will see if we can’t provide you with a better resting-place.’

Vandeloup murmured something indistinctly, and then resumed his seat.

‘Meanwhile,’ said Mrs Villiers, leaning back in her chair, and regarding him fixedly, ‘tell me all about yourselves.’

‘Alas, Madame,’ answered Vandeloup, with a charming smile and deprecating shrug of his shoulders, ‘there is not much to tell. I was brought up in Paris, and, getting tired of city life, I came out to India to see a little of the world; then I went over to Borneo, and was coming down to Australia, when our vessel was wrecked and all on board were drowned but myself and this fellow,’ pointing to

Pierre, 'who was one of the sailors. We managed to get a boat, and after tossing about for nearly a week we were cast up on the coast of Queensland, and from thence came to Melbourne. I could not get work there, neither could my friend, and as we heard of Ballarat we came up here to try to get employment, and our lines, Madame,' – with another bow – 'have fallen in a pleasant place.'

'What a dreadful chapter of accidents,' said Madame, coolly looking at him to see if he was speaking the truth, for experience of her husband had inspired her with an instinctive distrust of men. Vandeloup, however, bore her scrutiny without moving a muscle of his face, so Madame at last withdrew her eyes, quite satisfied that his story was true.

'Is there no one in Paris to whom you can write?' she asked, after a pause.

'Luckily, there is,' returned Gaston, 'and I have already sent a letter, asking for a remittance, but it takes time to get an answer, and as I have lost all my books, papers, and money, I must just wait for a few months, and, as I have to live in the meantime, I am glad to obtain work.'

'Still, your consul –' began Mrs Villiers.

'Alas, Madame, what can I say – how can I prove to him that I am what I assert to be? My companion is dumb and cannot speak for me, and, unluckily, he can neither read nor write. I have no papers to prove myself, so my consul may think me – what you call – a scamp. No; I will wait till I receive news from home, and get to my own position again; besides,' with a shrug, 'after all, it is experience.'

'Experience,' said Madame, quietly, 'is a good schoolmaster, but the fees are somewhat high.'

'Ah!' said Vandeloup, with a pleased look, 'you know Heine, I perceive, Madame. I did not know he was read out here.'

'We are not absolute barbarians, M. Vandeloup,' said Madame, with a smile, as she arose and held out her hand to the young man; 'and now good night, for I am feeling tired, and I will see you to-morrow. Mr McIntosh will show you where you are to sleep.'

Vandeloup took the hand she held out to him and pressed it to his lips with a sudden gesture. 'Madame,' he said, passionately, 'you are an angel, for to-day you have saved the lives of two men.'

Madame snatched her hand away quickly, and a flush of annoyance spread over her face as she saw how Selina and Archie stared. Vandeloup, however, did not wait for her answer, but went out, followed by Pierre. Archie put on his hat and walked out after them, while Madame Midas stood looking at Selina with a thoughtful expression of countenance.

'I don't know if I've done a right thing, Selina,' she said, at length; 'but as they were starving I could hardly turn them away.'

'Cast your bread on the waters and it shall come back after many days – buttered,' said Selina, giving her own version of the text.

Madame laughed.

'M. Vandeloup talks well,' she observed.

'So did HE,' replied Selina, with a sniff, referring to Mr Villiers; 'once bitten, twice shy.'

'Quite right, Selina,' replied Mrs Villiers, coolly; 'but you are going too fast. I'm not going to fall in love with my servant.'

'You're a woman,' retorted Selina, undauntedly, for she had not much belief in her own sex.

'Yes, who has been tricked and betrayed by a man,' said Madame, fiercely; 'and do you think because I succour a starving human being I am attracted by his handsome face? You ought to know me better than that, Selina. I have always been true to myself,' and without another word she left the room.

Selina stood still for a moment, then deliberately put away her work, slapped the cat in order to relieve her feelings, and poked the fire vigorously.

'I don't like him,' she said, emphasizing every word with a poke. 'He's too smooth and handsome, his eyes ain't true, and his tongue's too smart. I hate him.'

Having delivered herself of this opinion, she went to boil some water for Mr McIntosh, who always had some whisky hot before going to bed.

Selina was right in her estimate of Vandeloup, and, logically argued, the case stood thus: —

Some animals of a fine organization have an instinct which warns them to avoid approaching danger.

Woman is one of these finely-organized animals. ERGO —

Let no woman go contrary to her instinct.

CHAPTER V. – MAMMON’S TREASURE HOUSE

At the foot of the huge mound of white mulloch which marked the site of the Pactolus Mine was a long zinc-roofed building, which was divided into two compartments. In one of these the miners left their clothes, and put on rough canvas suits before going down, and here also they were searched on coming up in order to see if they had carried away any gold. From this room a long, narrow passage led to the top of the shaft, so that any miner having gold concealed upon him could not throw it away and pick it up afterwards, but had to go right into the searching room from the cage, and could not possibly hide a particle without being found out by the searchers. The other room was the sleeping apartment of such miners as stayed on the premises, for the majority of the men went home to their families when their work was done.

There were three shifts of men on the Pactolus during the twenty-four hours, and each shift worked eight hours at a time – the first going on at midnight and knocking off at eight in the morning, the second commencing at eight and ending at four in the afternoon, and the third starting at four and lasting until midnight again, when the first shift of men began anew.

Consequently, when M. Vandeloup awoke next morning at six o’clock the first shift were not yet up, and some of the miners who had to go on at eight were sleeping heavily in their beds. The sleeping places were berths, ranging along two sides of the room, and divided into upper and lower compartments like those on shipboard.

Gaston having roused himself naturally wanted to see where he was, so rubbing his eyes and yawning he leaned on his elbow and took a leisurely survey of his position.

He saw a rather large room lighted at regular intervals by three square windows, and as these were uncurtained, the cold, searching light of daybreak was slowly stealing through them into the apartment, and all the dusky objects therein were gradually revealing themselves in the still light. He could hear the heavy, monotonous breathing of the men, and the restless turning and tossing of those who could not sleep.

Gaston yawned once or twice, then feeling disinclined for any more sleep, he softly put on his clothes, so as not to awake Pierre, who slept in the berth below, and descending from his sleeping-place groped his way to the door and went out into the cool fragrant morning.

There was a chill wind blowing from the bush, bringing with it a faint aromatic odour, and on glancing downwards he saw that the grass was wet with dew. The dawn was burning redly in the east, and the vivid crimson of the sky put him in mind of that sunset under which he had landed with his companion on the Queensland coast. Suddenly a broad shaft of yellow light broke into the pale pink of the sky, and with a burst of splendour the sun rose slowly into sight from behind the dark bush, and all the delicate workings of the dawn disappeared in the flood of golden light which poured over the landscape.

Vandeloup looked idly at all this beauty with an unobservant eye, being too much occupied with his thoughts to take notice of anything; and it was only when two magpies near him broke into a joyous duet, in which each strove to emulate the other’s mellow notes, that he awoke from his brown study, and began to walk back again to the mine.

‘I must let nothing stand in my way to acquire money,’ he said, musingly; ‘with it one can rule the world; without it – but how trite and bald these well-worn maxims seem! Why do I repeat them, parrot-like, when I see what I have to do so clearly before me? That woman, for instance – I must begin by making her my friend. Bah! she is that already; I saw it in her eyes, which she can’t control as she does her face. Yes, I must make her my friend; my very dear friend – and then – well, to my mind, the world-pivot is a woman. I will spare no one in order to attain my ends – I will make myself my own God, and consider no one but myself, and those who stand in my path must get out of it

or run the chance of being crushed. This,' with a cynical smile, 'is what some would call the devil's philosophy; at all events, it is good enough for me.'

He was near the mine by this time, and hearing someone calling to him he looked up, and saw McIntosh walking towards him. There was a stir in the men's quarters now, and he could see the door was open and several figures were moving briskly about, while a number of others were crossing the fields. The regular beat of the machinery still continued, and the smoke was pouring out thick and black from the tall red chimney, while the wheels were spinning round in the poppet-heads as the mine slowly disgorged the men who had been working all night.

McIntosh came slowly along with his hands in his pockets and a puzzled look on his severe face. He could not make up his mind whether to like or dislike this young man, but Madame Midas had seemed so impressed that he had half made up his mind to dislike him out of a spirit of contradiction.

'Weemen are sae easy pleased, puir feckless bodies,' he said to himself, 'a bonny face is a' they fash their heads aboot, though the same may be already in the grip of auld Nickyben. Weel, weel, if Madam does fancy the lad – an' he's no bad lookin', I'll say that – she may just hae her ain way, and I'll keep my e'e on baith.'

He looked grimly at the young man as he came briskly forward with a gay smile.

'Ye're a verra early bird,' he said, fondling his frill of white hair, and looking keenly at the tall, slim figure of the Frenchman.

'Case of "must", my friend,' returned Vandeloup, coolly; 'it's only rich men can afford to be in bed, not poor devils like me.'

'You're no muckle like ither folk,' said the suspicious old Scotchman, with a condemnatory sniff.

'Of that I am glad,' retorted Vandeloup, with suavity, as he walked beside him to the men's quarters. 'What a horrible thing to be the duplicate of half-a-dozen other men. By the way,' breaking off into a new subject, 'Madame Midas is charming.'

'Aye, aye,' said Archie, jealously, 'we ken all about they French-fangled way o' gieing pretty words, and deil a scrap of truth in ony o' them.'

Gaston was about to protest that he said no more than he felt, which was indeed the truth, but Archie impatiently hurried him off to breakfast at the office, as he declared himself famishing. They made a hearty meal, and, having had a smoke and a talk, prepared to go below.

First of all, they arrayed themselves in underground garments – not grave clothes, though the name is certainly suggestive of the cemetery – which consisted of canvas trousers, heavy boots, blue blouses of a rough woollen material, and a sou'wester each. Thus accoutred, they went along to the foot of the poppet heads, and Archie having opened a door therein, Vandeloup saw the mouth of the shaft yawning dark and gloomy at his feet. As he stood there, gazing at the black hole which seemed to pierce down into the entrails of the earth, he turned round to take one last look at the sun before descending to the nether world.

'This is quite a new experience to me,' he said, as they stepped into the wet iron cage, which had ascended to receive them in answer to Archie's signal, and now commenced to drop down silently and swiftly into the pitchy darkness. 'It puts me in mind of Jules Verne's romances.'

Archie did not reply, for he was too much occupied in lighting his candle to answer, and, moreover, knew nothing about romances, and cared still less. So they went on sliding down noiselessly into the gloom, while the water, falling from all parts of the shaft, kept splashing constantly on the top of the cage and running in little streams over their shoulders.

'It's like a nightmare,' thought the Frenchman, with a nervous shudder, as he saw the wet walls gleaming in the faint light of the candle. 'Worthy of Dante's "Inferno".'

At last they reached the ground, and found themselves in the main chamber, from whence the galleries branched off to east and west.

It was upheld on all sides by heavy wooden supports of bluegum and stringy bark, the scarred surfaces of which made them look like the hieroglyphic pillars in old Egyptian temples. The walls were dripping with damp, and the floor of the chamber, though covered with iron plates, was nearly an inch deep with yellow-looking water, discoloured by the clay of the mine. Two miners in rough canvas clothes were waiting here, and every now and then a trolley laden with wash would roll suddenly out of one of the galleries with a candle fastened in front of it, and would be pushed into the cage and sent up to the puddlers. Round the walls candles fastened to spikes were stuck into the woodwork, and in their yellow glimmer the great drops of water clinging to the roof and sides of the chamber shone like diamonds.

‘Aladdin’s garden,’ observed Vandeloup, gaily, as he lighted his candle at that of Archie’s and went towards the eastern gallery, ‘only the jewels are not substantial enough.’

Archie showed the Frenchman how to carry his candle in the miner’s manner, so that it could not go out, which consisted in holding it low down between the forefinger and third finger, so that the hollow palm of the hand formed a kind of shield; and then Vandeloup, hearing the sound of falling water close to him, asked what it was, whereupon Archie explained it was for ventilating purposes. The water fell the whole height of the mine through a pipe into a bucket, and a few feet above this another pipe was joined at right angles to the first and stretched along the gallery near the roof like a never-ending serpent right to the end of the drive. The air was driven along this by the water, and then, being released from the pipe, returned back through the gallery, so that there was a constant current circulating all through the mine.

As they groped their way slowly along, their feet splashed into pools of yellow clayey water at the sides of the drive, or stumbled over the rough ground and rugged rails laid down for the trollies. All along the gallery, at regular intervals, were posts of stringy bark in a vertical position, while beams of the same were laid horizontally across the top, but so low that Vandeloup had to stoop constantly to prevent himself knocking his head against their irregular projections.

Clinging to these side posts were masses of white fungus, which the miners use to remove discolorations from their hands, and from the roof also it hung like great drifts of snow, agitated with every breath of wind as the keen air, damped and chilled by the underground darkness, rushed past them. Every now and then they would hear a faint rumble in the distance, and Archie would drag his companion to one side while a trolley laden with white, wet-looking wash, and impelled by a runner, would roll past with a roaring and grinding of wheels.

At intervals on each side of the main drive black chasms appeared, which Archie informed his companion were drives put in to test the wash, and as these smaller galleries continued branching off, Vandeloup thought the whole mine resembled nothing so much as a herring-bone.

Being accustomed to the darkness and knowing every inch of the way, the manager moved forward rapidly, and sometimes Vandeloup lagged so far behind that all he could see of his guide was the candle he carried, shining like a pale yellow star in the pitchy darkness. At last McIntosh went into one of the side galleries, and going up an iron ladder fixed to the side of the wall, they came to a second gallery thirty feet above the other, and branching off at right angles.

This was where the wash was to be found, for, as Archie informed Vandeloup, the main drives of a mine were always put down thirty or forty feet below the wash, and then they could work up to the higher levels, the reason of this being that the leads had a downward tendency, and it was necessary for the main drive to be sunk below, as before mentioned, in order to get the proper levels and judge the gutters correctly. At the top of the ladder they found some empty trucks which had delivered their burden into a kind of shoot, through which it fell to the lower level, and there another truck was waiting to take it to the main shaft, from whence it went up to the puddlers.

Archie made Vandeloup get into one of these trucks, and though they were all wet and covered with clay, he was glad to do so, and be smoothly carried along, instead of stumbling over the rails and splashing among the pools of water. Every now and then as they went along there would be a

gush of water from the dripping walls, which was taken along in pipes to the main chamber, and from thence pumped out of the mine by a powerful pump, worked by a beam engine, by which means the mine was kept dry.

At last, after they had gone some considerable distance, they saw the dim light of a candle, and heard the dull blows of a pick, then found themselves at the end of the drive, where a miner was working at the wash. The wash wherein the gold is found was exceedingly well defined, and represented a stratified appearance, being sandwiched in between a bed of white pipe-clay and a top layer of brownish earth, interspersed with gravel. Every blow of the pick sent forth showers of sparks in all directions, and as fast as the wash was broken down the runner filled up the trollies with it. After asking the miner about the character of the wash, and testing some himself in a shovel, Archie left the gallery, and going back to the shoot, they descended again to the main drive, and visited several other faces of wash, the journey in each instance being exactly the same in all respects. Each face had a man working at it, sometimes two, and a runner who loaded the trucks, and ran them along to the shoots. In spite of the ventilation, Vandeloup felt as if he was in a Turkish bath, and the heat was in some places very great. At the end of one of the drives McIntosh called Vandeloup, and on going towards him the young man found him seated on a truck with the plan of the mine before him, as he wanted to show him all the ramifications of the workings.

The plan looked more like a map of a city than anything else, with the main drive doing duty as the principal street, and all the little galleries, branching off in endless confusion, looked like the lanes and alleys of a populous town.

‘It’s like the catacombs in Rome,’ said Vandeloup to McIntosh, after he had contemplated the plan for some time; ‘one could easily get lost here.’

‘He nicht,’ returned McIntosh, cautiously, ‘if he didna ken a’ about the lie of the mine – o’er yonder,’ putting one finger on the plan and pointing with the other to the right of the tunnel; ‘we found a twenty-ounce nugget yesterday, and ain afore that o’ twenty-five, and in the first face we were at twa months ago o’er there,’ pointing to the left, ‘there was yin big ain I ca’d the Villiers nugget, which as ye ken is Madame’s name.’

‘Oh, yes, I know that,’ said Vandeloup, much interested; ‘do you christen all your nuggets?’

‘If they’re big enough,’ replied Archie.

‘Then I hope you will find a hundred-ounce lump of gold, and call it the Vandeloup,’ returned the young man, laughing.

‘There’s mony a true word spoke in jest, laddie,’ said Archie, gravely; ‘when we get to the Deil’s Lead we may find ain o’ that size.’

‘What do you mean by leads?’ asked Vandeloup, considerably puzzled.

Thereupon Archie opened his mouth, and gave the young man a scientific lecture on mining, the pith of which was as follows: —

‘Did ye no ken,’ said Mr McIntosh, sagaciously, ‘in the auld days – I winna say but what it might be as far back as the Fa’ o’ Man, may be a wee bit farther – the rains washed a’ the gold fra the taps o’ the hills, where the quartz reefs were, down tae the valleys below, where the rivers ye ken were flowin’. And as the ages went on, an’ nature, under the guidance o’ the Almighty, performed her work, the river bed, wiv a’ its gold, would be covered o’er with anither formation, and then the river, or anither yin, would flow on a new bed, and the precious metal would be washed fra the hills in the same way as I tauld ye of, and the second river bed would be also covered o’er, and sae the same game went on and is still progressin’. Sae when the first miners came doon tae this land of Ophir the gold they got by scratchin’ the tap of the earth was the latest deposit, and when ye gae doon a few hundred feet ye come on the second river – or rather, I should say, the bed o’ the former river-and it is there that the gold is tae be found; and these dried-up rivers we ca’ leads. Noo, laddie, ye ma ken that at present we are in the bed o’ ain o’ these auld streams three hun’red feet frae the tap o’ the earth, and it’s here we get the gold, and as we gae on we follow the wandrin’s o’ the river and lose sight o’ it.’

‘Yes,’ said Vandeloup quickly, ‘but you lost this river you call the Devil’s Lead – how was that?’

‘Weel,’ said Mr McIntosh, deliberately, ‘rivers are varra like human bein’s in the queer twists they take, and the Deil’s Lead seems to hae been ain like that. At present we are on the banks o’ it, where we noo get these nuggets; but ‘tis the bed I want, d’ye ken, the centre, for its there the gold is; losh, man,’ he went on, excitedly, rising to his feet and rolling up the plan, ‘ye dinna ken how rich the Deil’s Lead is; there’s just a fortune in it.’

“I suppose these rivers must stop at a certain depth?”

“Ou, ay,” returned the old Scotchman, “we gae doon an’ doon till we come on what we ma ca’ the primary rock, and under that there is nothin’ – except,” with a touch of religious enthusiasm, “maybe ‘tis the bottomless pit, where auld Hornie dwells, as we are tauld in the Screepture; noo let us gae up again, an’ I’ll show ye the puddlers at wark.”

Vandeloup had not the least idea what the puddlers were, but desirous of learning, he followed his guide, who led him into another gallery, which formed a kind of loop, and joined again with the main drive. As Gaston stumbled along, he felt a touch on his shoulder, and on turning, saw it was Pierre, who had been put to work with the other men, and was acting as one of the runners.

“Ah! you are there, my friend,” said Vandeloup, coolly, looking at the uncouth figure before him by the feeble glimmer of his candle; “work away, work away; it’s not very pleasant, but at all events,” in a rapid whisper, “it’s better than New Caledonia.”

Pierre nodded in a sullen manner, and went back to his work, while Vandeloup hurried on to catch up to McIntosh, who was now far ahead.

“I wish,” said this pleasant young man to himself, as he stumbled along, “I wish that the mine would fall in and crush Pierre; he’s such a dead weight to be hanging round my neck; besides, he has such a gaol-bird look about him that it’s enough to make the police find out where he came from; if they do, good-bye to wealth and respectability.”

He found Archie waiting for him at the entrance to the main drive, and they soon arrived at the bottom of the shaft, got into the cage, and at last reached the top of the earth again. Vandeloup drew a long breath of the fresh pure air, but his eyes felt quite painful in the vivid glare of the sun.

“I don’t envy the gnomes,” he said gaily to Archie as they went on to the puddlers; “they must have been subject to chronic rheumatism.”

Mr McIntosh, not having an acquaintance with fairy lore, said nothing in reply, but took Vandeloup to the puddlers, and showed all the process of getting the gold.

The wash was carried along in the trucks from the top of the shaft to the puddlers, which were large circular vats into which water was constantly gushing. The wash dirt being put into these, there was an iron ring held up by chains, having blunt spikes to it, which was called a harrow. Two of these being attached to beams laid crosswise were dragged round and round among the wash by the constant revolution of the cross-pieces. This soon reduced all the wash dirt to a kind of fine, creamy-looking syrup, with heavy white stones in it, which were removed every now and then by the man in charge of the machine. Descending to the second story of the framework, Vandeloup found himself in a square chamber, the roof of which was the puddler. In this roof was a trap-door, and when the wash dirt had been sufficiently mixed the trap-door was opened, and it was precipitated through on to the floor of the second chamber. A kind of broad trough, running in a slanting direction and called a sluice, was on one side, and into this a quantity of wash was put, and a tap at the top turned on, which caused the water to wash the dirt down the sluice. Another man at the foot, with a pitchfork, kept shifting up the stones which were mixed up with the gravel, and by degrees all the surplus dirt was washed away, leaving only these stones and a kind of fine black sand, in which the gold being heavy, had stayed. This sand was carefully gathered up with a brush and iron trowel into a shallow tin basin, and then an experienced miner carefully manipulated the same with clear water. What with blowing with the breath, and allowing the water to flow gently over it, all the black sand was soon taken away, and the bottom of the tin dish was then covered with dirty yellow grains of gold interspersed with

little water-worn nuggets. Archie took the gold and carried it down to the office, where it was first weighed and then put into a little canvas bag, which would be taken to the bank in Ballarat, and there sold at the rate of four pounds an ounce or thereabouts.

‘Sae this, ye ken,’ said Archie, when he had finished all his explanations, ‘is the way ye get gold.’

‘My faith,’ said Vandeloup, carelessly, with a merry laugh, ‘gold is as hard to get in its natural state as in its artificial.’

‘An’ harder,’ retorted Archie, ‘forbye there’s nae sic wicked wark about it.’

‘Madame will be rich some day,’ remarked Vandeloup, as they left the office and walked up towards the house.

‘Maybe she will,’ replied the other, cautiously. ‘Australia’s a gran’ place for the siller, ye ken. I’m no verra far wrang but what wi’ industry and perseverance ye may mak a wee bit siller yersel’, laddie.’

‘It won’t be my fault if I don’t,’ returned M. Vandeloup, gaily; ‘and Madame Midas,’ he added, mentally, ‘will be an excellent person to assist me in doing so.’

CHAPTER VI. – KITTY

Gaston Vandeloup having passed all his life in cities found that his existence on the Pactolus claim was likely to be very dreary. Day after day he arose in the morning, did his office work, ate his meals, and after a talk with Madame Midas in the evening went to bed at ten o'clock. Such Arcadian simplicity as this was not likely to suit the highly cultivated tastes he had acquired in his earlier life. As to the episode of New Caledonia M. Vandeloup dismissed it completely from his mind, for this young man never permitted his thoughts to dwell on disagreeable subjects.

His experiences as a convict had been novel but not pleasant, and he looked upon the time which had elapsed since he left France in the convict ship to the day he landed on the coast of Queensland in an open boat as a bad nightmare, and would willingly have tried to treat it as such, only the constant sight of his dumb companion, Pierre Lemaire, reminded him only too vividly of the reality of his trouble. Often and often did he wish that Pierre would break his neck, or that the mine would fall in and crush him to death; but nothing of the sort happened, and Pierre continued to vex his eyes and to follow him about with a dog-like fidelity which arose – not from any love of the young man, but – from the fact that he found himself a stranger in a strange land, and Vandeloup was the only person he knew. With such a millstone round his neck, the young Frenchman often despaired of being able to get on in Australia. Meanwhile he surrendered himself to the situation with a kind of cynical resignation, and looked hopefully forward to the time when a kind Providence would rid him of his unpleasant friend.

The feelings of Madame Midas towards Vandeloup were curious. She had been a very impressionable girl, and her ill-fated union with Villiers had not quite succeeded in deadening all her feelings, though it had doubtless gone a good way towards doing so. Being of an appreciative nature, she liked to hear Vandeloup talk of his brilliant life in Paris, Vienna, London, and other famous cities, which to her were merely names. For such a young man he had certainly seen a great deal of life, and, added to this, his skill as a talker was considerable, so that he frequently held Madame, Selina, and McIntosh spell-bound by his fairy-like descriptions and eloquent conversation. Of course, he only talked of the most general subjects to Mrs Villiers, and never by any chance let slip that he knew the seamy side of life – a side with which this versatile young gentleman was pretty well acquainted. As a worker, Gaston was decidedly a success. Being quick at figures and easily taught anything, he soon mastered all the details of the business connected with the Pactolus claim, and Madame found that she could leave everything to him with perfect safety, and could rely on all matters of business being well and promptly attended to. But she was too clever a woman to let him manage things himself, or even know how much she trusted him; and Vandeloup knew that whatever he did those calm dark eyes were on him, and that the least slip or neglect on his part would bring Madame Midas to his side with her quiet voice and inflexible will to put him right again.

Consequently the Frenchman was careful not to digress or to take too much upon himself, but did his work promptly and carefully, and soon became quite indispensable to the work of the mine. In addition to this he had made himself very popular with the men, and as the months rolled on was looked upon quite as a fixture in the Pactolus claim.

As for Pierre Lemaire, he did his work well, ate and slept, and kept his eye on his companion in case he should leave him in the lurch; but no one would have guessed that the two men, so different in appearance, were bound together by a guilty secret, or were, morally speaking, both on the same level as convicts from a French prison.

A whole month had elapsed since Madame had engaged M. Vandeloup and his friend, but as yet the Devil's Lead had not been found. Madame, however, was strong in her belief that it would soon be discovered, for her luck – the luck of Madame Midas – was getting quite a proverb in Ballarat.

One bright morning Vandeloup was in the office running up endless columns of figures, and Madame, dressed in her underground garments, was making ready to go below, just having stepped in to see Gaston.

‘By the way, M. Vandeloup,’ she said in English, for it was only in the evenings they spoke French, ‘I am expecting a young lady this morning, so you can tell her I have gone down the mine, but will be back in an hour if she will wait for me.’

‘Certainly, Madame,’ said Vandeloup, looking up with his bright smile; ‘and the young lady’s name?’

‘Kitty Marchurst,’ replied Madame, pausing a moment at the door of the office; ‘she is the daughter of the Rev. Mark Marchurst, a minister at Ballarat. I think you will like her, M. Vandeloup,’ she went on, in a conversational tone; ‘she is a charming girl – only seventeen, and extremely pretty.’

‘Then I am sure to like her,’ returned Gaston, gaily; ‘I never could resist the charm of a pretty woman.’

‘Mind,’ said Madame, severely, holding up her finger, ‘you must not turn my favourite’s head with any of your idle compliments; she has been very strictly brought up, and the language of gallantry is Greek to her.’

Vandeloup tried to look penitent, and failed utterly.

‘Madame,’ he said, rising from his seat, and gravely bowing, ‘I will speak of nothing to Mademoiselle Kitty but of the weather and the crops till you return.’

Madame laughed pleasantly.

‘You are incorrigible, M. Vandeloup,’ she said, as she turned to go. ‘However, don’t forget what I said, for I trust you.’

When Mrs Villiers had gone, closing the office door after her, Gaston was silent for a few minutes, and then burst out laughing.

‘She trusts me,’ he said, in a mocking tone. ‘In heaven’s name, why? I never did pretend to be a saint, and I’m certainly not going to be one because I’m put on my word of honour. Madame,’ with an ironical bow in the direction of the closed door, ‘since you trust me I will not speak of love to this bread-and-butter miss, unless she proves more than ordinarily pretty, in which case,’ shrugging his shoulders, ‘I’m afraid I must betray your trust, and follow my own judgment.’

He laughed again, and then, going back to his desk, began to add up his figures. At the second column, however, he paused, and commenced to sketch faces on the blotting paper.

‘She’s the daughter of a minister,’ he said, musingly. ‘I can guess, then, what like she is – prim and demure, like a caricature by Cham. In that case she will be safe from me, for I could never bear an ugly woman. By the way, I wonder if ugly women think themselves pretty; their mirrors must lie most obligingly if they do. There was Adele, she was decidedly plain, not to say ugly, and yet so brilliant in her talk. I was sorry she died; yes, even though she was the cause of my exile to New Caledonia. Bah! it is always a woman one has to thank for one’s misfortunes – curse them; though why I should I don’t know, for they have always been good friends to me. Ah, well, to return to business, Mademoiselle Kitty is coming, and I must behave like a bear in case she should think my intentions are wrong.’

He went to work on the figures again, when suddenly he heard a high clear voice singing outside. At first he thought it was a bird, but no bird could execute such trills and shakes, so by the time the voice arrived at the office door M. Vandeloup came to the conclusion that the owner of the voice was a woman, and that the woman was Miss Kitty Marchurst.

He leaned back in his chair and wondered idly if she would knock at the door or enter without ceremony. The latter course was the one adopted by Miss Marchurst, for she threw open the door and stood there blushing and pouting at the embarrassing situation in which she now found herself.

‘I thought I would find Mrs Villiers here,’ she said, in a low, sweet voice, the peculiar timbre of which sent a thrill through Gaston’s young blood, as he arose to his feet. Then she looked up, and

catching his dark eyes fixed on her with a good deal of admiration in them, she looked down and commenced drawing figures on the dusty floor with the tip of a very dainty shoe.

‘Madame has gone down the mine,’ said M. Vandeloup, politely, ‘but she desired me to say that she would be back soon, and that you were to wait here, and I was to entertain you;’ then, with a grave bow, he placed the only chair in the office at the disposal of his visitor, and leaned up against the mantelpiece in an attitude of unstudied grace. Miss Marchurst accepted his offer, and depositing her small person in the big cane chair, she took furtive glances at him, while Gaston, whose experience of women was by no means limited, looked at her coolly, in a manner which would have been rude but for the charming smile which quivered upon his lips.

Kitty Marchurst was a veritable fairy in size, and her hands and feet were exquisitely formed, while her figure had all the plumpness and roundness of a girl of seventeen – which age she was, though she really did not look more than fourteen. An innocent child-like face, two limpid blue eyes, a straight little nose, and a charming rose-lipped mouth were Kitty’s principal attractions, and her hair was really wonderful, growing all over her head in crisp golden curls. Child-like enough her face looked in repose, but with the smile came the woman – such a smile, a laughing merry expression such as the Greeks gave to Hebe. Dressed in a rough white dress trimmed with pale blue ribbons, and her golden head surmounted by a sailor hat, with a scarf of the same azure hue tied around it, Kitty looked really charming, and Vandeloup could hardly restrain himself from taking her up in his arms and kissing her, so delightfully fresh and piquant she appeared. Kitty, on her side, had examined Gaston with a woman’s quickness of taking in details, and she mentally decided he was the best-looking man she had ever seen, only she wished he would talk. Shyness was not a part of her nature, so after waiting a reasonable time for Vandeloup to commence, she determined to start herself.

‘I’m waiting to be entertained,’ she said, in a hurried voice, raising her eyes; then afraid of her own temerity, she looked down again.

Gaston smiled a little at Kitty’s outspoken remark, but remembering Madame’s injunction he rather mischievously determined to carry out her desires to the letter.

‘It is a very nice day,’ he said, gravely. Kitty looked up and laughed merrily.

‘I don’t think that’s a very original remark,’ she said coolly, producing an apple from her pocket. ‘If that’s all you’ve got to say, I hope Madame won’t be long.’

Vandeloup laughed again at her petulance, and eyed her critically as she took a bit out of the red side of the apple with her white teeth.

‘You like apples?’ he asked, very much amused by her candour.

‘Pretty well,’ returned Miss Marchurst, eyeing the fruit in a disparaging manner; ‘peaches are nicer; are Madame’s peaches ripe?’ looking anxiously at him.

‘I think they are,’ rejoined Gaston, gravely.

‘Then we’ll have some for tea,’ decided Kitty, taking another bite out of her apple.

‘I’m going to stay to tea, you know,’ she went on in a conversational tone. ‘I always stay to tea when I’m on a visit here, and then Brown – that’s our man,’ in an explanatory manner, ‘comes and fetches me home.’

‘Happy Brown!’ murmured Vandeloup, who really meant what he said.

Kitty laughed, and blushed.

‘I’ve heard all about you,’ she said, coolly, nodding to him.

‘Nothing to my disadvantage, I hope,’ anxiously.

‘Oh dear, no: rather the other way,’ returned Miss Marchurst, gaily. ‘They said you were good-looking – and so you are, very good-looking.’

Gaston bowed and laughed, rather amused at the way she spoke, for he was used to being flattered by women, though hardly in the outspoken way of this country maiden.

‘She’s been strictly brought up,’ he muttered sarcastically, ‘I can see that. Eve before the fall in all her innocence.’

‘I don’t like your eyes,’ said Miss Kitty, suddenly.

‘What’s the matter with them?’ with a quizzical glance.

‘They look wicked.’

‘Ah, then they belie the soul within,’ returned Vandeloup, seriously. ‘I assure you, I’m a very good young man.’

Then I’m sure not to like you,’ said Kitty, gravely shaking her golden head. ‘Pa’s a minister, you know, and nothing but good young men come to our house; they’re all so horrid,’ viciously, ‘I hate ‘em.’

Vandeloup laughed so much at this that Kitty rose to her feet and looked offended.

‘I don’t know what you are laughing at,’ she said, throwing her half-eaten apple out of the door; ‘but I don’t believe you’re a good young man. You look awfully bad,’ seriously. ‘Really, I don’t think I ever saw anyone look so bad.’

‘Suppose you undertake my reformation?’ suggested Vandeloup, eagerly.

‘Oh! I couldn’t; it wouldn’t be right; but,’ brightly, ‘pa will.’

‘I don’t think I’ll trouble him,’ said Gaston, hastily, who by no means relished the idea. ‘I’m too far gone to be any good.’

She was about to reply when Madame Midas entered, and Kitty flew to her with a cry of delight.

‘Why, Kitty,’ said Madame, highly pleased, ‘I am so glad to see you, my dear; but keep off, or I’ll be spoiling your dress.’

‘Yes, so you will,’ said Kitty, retreating to a safe distance; ‘what a long time you have been.’

‘Have I, dear?’ said Madame, taking off her underground dress; ‘I hope M. Vandeloup has proved a good substitute.’

‘Madame,’ answered Vandeloup, gaily, as he assisted Mrs Villiers to doff her muddy garments, ‘we have been talking about the crops and the weather.’

‘Oh, indeed,’ replied Mrs Villiers, who saw the flush on Kitty’s cheek, and by no means approved of it; ‘it must have been very entertaining.’

‘Very!’ assented Gaston, going back to his desk.

‘Come along, Kitty,’ said Madame, with a keen glance at her clerk, and taking Kitty’s arm within her own, ‘let us go to the house, and see if we can find any peaches.’

‘I hope we’ll find some big ones,’ said Kitty, gluttonously, as she danced along by the side of Mrs Villiers.

‘Temptation has been placed in my path in a very attractive form,’ said Vandeloup to himself, as he went back to those dreary columns of figures, ‘and I’m afraid that I will not be able to resist.’

When he came home to tea he found Kitty was as joyous and full of life as ever, in spite of the long hot afternoon and the restless energy with which she had been running about. Even Madame Midas felt weary and worn out by the heat of the day, and was sitting tranquilly by the window; but Kitty, with bright eyes and restless feet, followed Selina all over the house, under the pretence of helping her, an infliction which that sage spinster bore with patient resignation.

After tea it was too hot to light the lamp, and even Selina let the fire go out, while all the windows and doors were open to let the cool night wind blow in. Vandeloup sat on the verandah with McIntosh smoking cigarettes and listening to Madame, who was playing Mendelssohn’s ‘In a Gondola’, that dreamy melody full of the swing and rhythmic movement of the waves. Then to please old Archie she played ‘Auld Lang Syne’ – that tender caressing air which is one of the most pathetic and heart-stirring melodies in the world. Archie leaned forward with bowed head as the sad melody floated on the air, and his thoughts went back to the heather-clad Scottish hills. And what was this Madame was now playing, with its piercing sorrow and sad refrain? Surely ‘Farewell to Lochaber’, that bitter lament of the exile leaving bonny Scotland far behind. Vandeloup, who was not attending to the music, but thinking of Kitty, saw two big tears steal down McIntosh’s severe face, and marvelled at such a sign of weakness.

‘Sentiment from him?’ he muttered, in a cynical tone; ‘why, I should have as soon expected blood from a stone.’

Suddenly the sad air ceased, and after a few chords, Kitty commenced to sing to Madame’s accompaniment. Gaston arose to his feet, and leaned up against the door, for she was singing Gounod’s charming valse from ‘Mirella’, the bird-like melody of which suited her high clear voice to perfection. Vandeloup was rather astonished at hearing this innocent little maiden execute the difficult valse with such ease, and her shake was as rapid and true as if she had been trained in the best schools of Europe. He did not know that Kitty had naturally a very flexible voice, and that Madame had trained her for nearly a year. When the song was ended Gaston entered the room to express his thanks and astonishment, both of which Kitty received with bursts of laughter.

‘You have a fortune in your throat, mademoiselle,’ he said, with a bow, ‘and I assure you I have heard all the great singers of to-day from Patti downwards.’

‘I have only been able to teach her very little,’ said Madame, looking affectionately at Miss Marchurst, who now stood by the table, blushing at Vandeloup’s praises, ‘but when we find the Devil’s Lead I am going to send her home to Italy to study singing.’

‘For the stage?’ asked Vandeloup.

‘That is as it may be,’ replied Madame, enigmatically, ‘but now, M. Vandeloup, you must sing us something.’

‘Oh, does he sing?’ said Kitty, joyously.

‘Yes, and play too,’ answered Madame, as she vacated her seat at the piano and put her arm round Kitty, ‘sing us something from the “Grand Duchess”, Monsieur.’

He shook his head.

‘Too gay for such an hour,’ he said, running his fingers lightly over the keys; ‘I will give you something from “Faust”.’

He had a pleasant tenor voice, not very strong, but singularly pure and penetrating, and he sang ‘Salve Dinora’, the exquisite melody of which touched the heart of Madame Midas with a vague longing for love and affection, while in Kitty’s breast there was a feeling she had never felt before. Her joyousness departed, her eyes glanced at the singer in a half-frightened manner, and she clung closer to Madame Midas as if she were afraid, as indeed she was.

When Vandeloup finished the song he dashed into a riotous student song which he had heard many a time in midnight Paris, and finally ended with singing Alfred de Musset’s merry little chanson, which he thought especially appropriate to Kitty: —

Bonjour, Suzon, ma fleur des bois, Es-tu toujours la plus jolie, Je reviens, tel que tu me vois,
D’un grand voyage en Italie.

Altogether Kitty had enjoyed her evening immensely, and was quite sorry when Brown came to take her home. Madame wrapped her up well and put her in the buggy, but was rather startled to see her flushed cheeks, bright eyes, and the sudden glances she stole at Vandeloup, who stood handsome and debonair in the moonlight.

‘I’m afraid I’ve made a mistake,’ she said to herself as the buggy drove off.

She had, for Kitty had fallen in love with the Frenchman.

And Gaston?

He walked back to the house beside Madame, thinking of Kitty, and humming the gay refrain of the song he had been singing —

‘Je passe devant ta maison Ouvre ta porte, Bonjour, Suzon.’

Decidedly it was a case of love at first sight on both sides.

CHAPTER VII. – MR VILLIERS PAYS A VISIT

Slivers and his friend Villiers were by no means pleased with the existing state of things. In sending Vandeloup to the Pactolus claim, they had thought to compromise Madame Midas by placing her in the society of a young and handsome man, and counting on one of two things happening – either that Madame would fall in love with the attractive Frenchman, and seek for a divorce in order to marry him – which divorce Villiers would of course resist, unless she bribed him by giving him an interest in the Pactolus – or that Villiers could assume an injured tone and accuse Vandeloup of being his wife's lover, and threaten to divorce her unless she made him her partner in the claim. But they had both reckoned wrongly, for neither of these things happened, as Madame was not in love with Vandeloup, and acted with too much circumspection to give any opportunity for scandal. Consequently, Slivers and Co., not finding matters going to their satisfaction, met one day at the office of the senior partner for the purpose of discussing the affair, and seeing what could be done towards bringing Madame Midas to their way of thinking.

Villiers was lounging in one of the chairs, dressed in a white linen suit, and looked rather respectable, though his inflamed face and watery eyes showed what a drunkard he was. He was sipping a glass of whisky and water and smoking his pipe, while he watched Slivers stumping up and down the office, swinging his cork arm vehemently to and fro as was his custom when excited. Billy sat on the table and eyed his master with a steady stare, or else hopped about among the papers talking to himself.

'You thought you were going to do big things when you sent that jackadandy out to the Pactolus,' said Villiers, after a pause.

'At any rate, I did something,' snarled Slivers, in a rage, 'which is more than you did, you whisky barrel.'

'Look here, don't you call names,' growled Mr Villiers, in a sulky tone. 'I'm a gentleman, remember that.'

'You were a gentleman, you mean,' corrected the senior partner, with a malignant glance of his one eye. 'What are you now?'

'A stockbroker,' retorted the other, taking a sip of whisky.

'And a damned poor one at that,' replied the other, sitting on the edge of the table, which position caused his wooden leg to stick straight out, a result which he immediately utilized by pointing it threateningly in the direction of Villiers.

'Look here,' said that gentleman, suddenly sitting up in his chair in a defiant manner, 'drop these personalities and come to business; what's to be done? Vandeloup is firmly established there, but there's not the slightest chance of my wife falling in love with him.'

'Wait,' said Slivers, stolidly wagging his wooden leg up and down; 'wait, you blind fool, wait.'

'Wait for the waggon!' shrieked Billy, behind, and then supplemented his remarks by adding, 'Oh, my precious mother!' as he climbed up on Slivers' shoulder.

'You always say wait,' growled Villiers, not paying any attention to Billy's interruption; 'I tell you we can't wait much longer; they'll drop on the Devil's Lead shortly, and then we'll be up a tree.'

'Then, suppose you go out to the Pactolus and see your wife,' suggested Slivers.

'No go,' returned Villiers, gloomily, 'she'd break my head.'

'Bah! you ain't afraid of a woman, are you?' snarled Slivers, viciously.

'No, but I am of McIntosh and the rest of them,' retorted Villiers. 'What can one man do against twenty of these devils. Why, they'd kill me if I went out there; and that infernal wife of mine wouldn't raise her little finger to save me.'

‘You’re a devil!’ observed Billy, eyeing Villiers from his perch on Slivers’ shoulder. ‘Oh, Lord! ha! ha! ha!’ going into fits of laughter; then drawing himself suddenly up, he ejaculated ‘Pickles!’ and shut up.

‘It’s no good beating about the bush,’ said the wooden-legged man, getting down from the table. ‘You go out near the claim, and see if you can catch her; then give it to her hot.’

‘What am I to say?’ asked Villiers, helplessly.

Slivers looked at him with fiery scorn in his one eye.

‘Say!’ he shrieked, waving his cork arm, ‘talk about your darned honour! Say she’s dragging your noble name through the mud, and say you’ll divorce her if she don’t give you half a share in the Pactolus; that will frighten her.’

‘Pickles!’ again ejaculated the parrot.

‘Oh, no, it won’t,’ said Villiers; ‘Brag’s a good dog, but he don’t bite. I’ve tried that game on before, and it was no go.’

‘Then try it your own way,’ grumbled Slivers, sulkily, going to his seat and pouring himself out some whisky. ‘I don’t care what you do, as long as I get into the Pactolus, and once I’m in the devil himself won’t get me out.’

Villiers thought a moment, then turned to go.

‘I’ll try,’ he said, as he went out of the door, ‘but it’s no go, I tell you, she’s stone,’ and with a dismal nod he slouched away.

‘Stone, is she?’ cried the old man, pounding furiously on the floor with his wooden leg, ‘then I’d smash her; I’d crush her; I’d grind her into little bits, damn her,’ and overcome by his rage, Slivers shook Billy off his shoulder and took a long drink.

Meanwhile Mr Villiers, dreading lest his courage should give way, went to the nearest hotel and drank pretty freely so that he might bring himself into an abnormal condition of bravery. Thus primed, he went to the railway station, took the train to the Pactolus claim, and on arriving at the end of his journey had one final glass of whisky to steady his nerves.

The last straw, however, breaks the camel’s back, and this last drink reduced Mr Villiers to that mixed state which is known in colonial phrase as half-cocked. He lurched out of the hotel, and went in the direction of the Pactolus claim. His only difficulty was that, as a matter of fact, the solitary mound of white earth which marked the entrance to the mine, suddenly appeared before his eyes in a double condition, and he beheld two Pactolus claims, which curious optical delusion rather confused him, inasmuch as he was undecided to which he should go.

‘Itsh the drinksh,’ he said at length, stopping in the middle of the white dusty road, and looking preternaturally solemn; ‘it maksh me see double: if I see my wife, I’ll see two of her, then’ – with a drunken giggle – ‘I’ll be a bigamist.’

This idea so tickled him, that he commenced to laugh, and, finding it inconvenient to do so on his legs, he sat down to indulge his humour freely. A laughing jackass perched on the fence at the side of the road heard Mr Villiers’ hilarity, and, being of a convivial turn of mind itself, went off into fits of laughter also. On hearing this echo Mr Villiers tried to get up, in order to punish the man who mocked him, but, though his intentions were good, his legs were unsteady, and after one or two ineffectual attempts to rise he gave it up as a bad job. Then rolling himself a little to one side of the dusty white road, he went sound asleep, with his head resting on a tuft of green grass. In his white linen suit he was hardly distinguishable in the fine white dust of the road, and though the sun blazed hotly down on him and the mosquitos stung him, yet he slept calmly on, and it was not till nearly four o’clock in the afternoon that he woke up. He was more sober, but still not quite steady, being in that disagreeable temper to which some men are subject when suffering a recovery. Rising to his feet, with a hearty curse, he picked up his hat and put it on; then, thrusting his hands into his pockets, he slouched slowly along, bent upon meeting his wife and picking a quarrel with her.

Unluckily for Madame Midas, she had that day been to Ballarat, and was just returning. She had gone by train, and was now leaving the station and walking home to the Pactolus along the road. Being absorbed in thought, she did not notice the dusty figure in front of her, otherwise she would have been sure to have recognised her husband, and would have given him a wide berth by crossing the fields instead of going by the road. Mr Villiers, therefore, tramped steadily on towards the Pactolus, and his wife tramped steadily after him, until at last, at the turn of the road where it entered her property, she overtook him.

A shudder of disgust passed through her frame as she raised her eyes and saw him, and she made a sudden gesture as though to fall behind and thus avoid him. It was, however, too late, for Mr Villiers, hearing footsteps, turned suddenly and saw the woman he had come to see standing in the middle of the road.

Husband and wife stood gazing at one another for a few moments in silence, she looking at him with an expression of intense loathing on her fine face, and he vainly trying to assume a dignified carriage – a task which his late fit of drunkenness rendered difficult.

At last, his wife, drawing her dress together as though his touch would have contaminated her, tried to pass, but on seeing this he sprang forward, before she could change her position, and caught her wrist.

‘Not yet!’ he hissed through his clenched teeth; ‘first you must have a word with me.’

Madame Midas looked around for aid, but no one was in sight. They were some distance from the Pactolus, and the heat of the afternoon being intense, every one was inside. At last Madame saw some man moving towards them, down the long road which led to the station, and knowing that Vandeloup had been into town, she prayed in her heart that it might be he, and so prepared to parley with her husband till he should come up. Having taken this resolution, she suddenly threw off Villiers’ grasp, and turned towards him with a superb gesture of scorn.

‘What do you want?’ she asked in a low, clear voice, but in a tone of concentrated passion.

‘Money!’ growled Villiers, insolently planting himself directly in front of her, ‘and I’m going to have it.’

‘Money!’ she echoed, in a tone of bitter irony; ‘have you not had enough yet? Have you not squandered every penny I had from my father in your profligacy and evil companions? What more do you want?’

‘A share in the Pactolus,’ he said, sullenly.

His wife laughed scornfully. ‘A share in the Pactolus!’ she echoed, with bitter sarcasm, ‘A modest request truly. After squandering my fortune, dragging me through the mire, and treating me like a slave, this man expects to be rewarded. Listen to me, Randolph Villiers,’ she said, fiercely, stepping up to him and seizing his hand, ‘this land we now stand on is mine – the gold underneath is mine; and if you were to go on your knees to me and beg for a morsel of bread to save you from starving, I would not lift one finger to succour you.’

Villiers writhed like a snake under her bitter scorn.

‘I understand,’ he said, in a taunting tone; ‘you want it for your lover.’

‘My lover? What do you mean?’

‘What I say,’ he retorted boldly, ‘all Ballarat knows the position that young Frenchman holds in the Pactolus claim.’

Mrs Villiers felt herself grow faint – the accusation was so horrible. This man, who had embittered her life from the time she married him, was still her evil genius, and was trying to ruin her in the eyes of the world. The man she had seen on the road was now nearly up to them, and with a revulsion of feeling she saw that it was Vandeloup. Recovering herself with an effort, she turned and faced him steadily.

‘You lied when you spoke just now,’ she said in a quiet voice. ‘I will not lower myself to reply to your accusation; but, as there is a God above us, if you dare to cross my path again, I will kill you.’

She looked so terrible when she said this that Villiers involuntarily drew back, but recovering himself in a moment, he sprang forward and caught her arm.

‘You devil! I’ll make you pay for this,’ and he twisted her arm till she thought it was broken. ‘You’ll kill me, will you? – you! – you!’ he shrieked, still twisting her arm and causing her intense pain, ‘you viper!’

Suddenly, when Madame was almost fainting with pain, she heard a shout, and knew that Vandeloup had come to the rescue. He had recognised Madame Midas down the road, and saw that her companion was threatening her; so he made all possible speed, and arrived just in time.

Madame turned round to see Vandeloup throw her husband into a ditch by the side of the road, and walk towards her. He was not at all excited, but seemed as cool and calm as if he had just been shaking hands with Mr Villiers instead of treating him violently.

‘You had better go home, Madame,’ he said, in his usual cool voice, ‘and leave me to deal with this – gentleman; you are not hurt?’

‘Only my arm,’ replied Mrs Villiers, in a faint voice; ‘he nearly broke it. But I can walk home alone.’

‘If you can, do so,’ said Vandeloup, with a doubtful look at her. ‘I will send him away.’

‘Don’t let him hurt you.’

‘I don’t think there’s much danger,’ replied the young man, with a glance at his arms, ‘I’m stronger than I look.’

‘Thank you, Monsieur,’ said Madame Midas, giving him her hand; ‘you have rendered me a great service, and one I will not forget.’

He bent down and kissed her hand, which action was seen by Mr Villiers as he crawled out of the ditch. When Madame Midas was gone and Vandeloup could see her walking homeward, he turned to look for Mr Villiers, and found him seated on the edge of the ditch, all covered with mud and streaming with water – presenting a most pitiable appearance. He regarded M. Vandeloup in a most malignant manner, which, however, had no effect on that young gentleman, who produced a cigarette, and having lighted it proceeded to talk.

‘I’m sorry I can’t offer you one,’ said Gaston, affably, ‘but I hardly think you would enjoy it in your present damp condition. If I might be permitted to suggest anything,’ with a polite smile, ‘a bath and a change of clothes would be most suitable to you, and you will find both at Ballarat. I also think,’ said Vandeloup, with an air of one who thinks deeply, ‘that if you hurry you will catch the next train, which will save you a rather long walk.’

Mr Villiers glared at his tormentor in speechless anger, and tried to look dignified, but, covered as he was with mud, his effort was not successful.

‘Do you know who I am?’ he said at length, in a blustering manner.

‘Under some circumstances,’ said M. Vandeloup, in a smooth voice, ‘I should have taken you for a mud bank, but as you both speak and smile I presume you are a man of the lowest type; as you English yourselves say – a blackguard.’

‘I’ll smash you!’ growled Villiers, stepping forward.

‘I wouldn’t try if I were you,’ retorted Vandeloup, with a disparaging glance. ‘I am young and strong, almost a total abstainer; you, on the contrary, are old and flabby, with the shaking nerves of an incurable drunkard. No, it would be hardly fair for me to touch you.’

‘You dare not lay a finger on me,’ said Villiers, defiantly.

‘Quite right,’ replied Vandeloup, lighting another cigarette, ‘you’re rather too dirty for close companionship. I really think you’d better go; Monsieur Sleeves no doubt expects you.’

‘And this is the man that I obtained work for,’ said Mr Villiers, addressing the air.

‘It’s a very ungrateful world,’ said Vandeloup, calmly, with a shrug of his shoulders; ‘I never expect anything from it; I’m sorry if you do, for you are sure to be disappointed.’

Villiers, finding he could make nothing out of the imperturbable coolness of the young Frenchman, turned to go, but as he went, said spitefully —

‘You can tell my wife I’ll pay her for this.’

‘Accounts are paid on Saturdays,’ called out M. Vandeloup, gaily; ‘if you call I will give you a receipt of the same kind as you had to-day.’

Villiers made no response, as he was already out of hearing, and went on his way to the station with mud on his clothes and rage in his heart.

Vandeloup looked after him for a few minutes with a queer smile on his lips, then turned on his heel and walked home, humming a song.

CHAPTER VIII. – MADAME MIDAS STRIKES ‘ILE’

Aesop knew human nature very well when he wrote his fable of the old man and his ass, who tried to please everybody and ended up by pleasing nobody. Bearing this in mind, Madame Midas determined to please herself, and take no one's advice but her own with regard to Vandeloup. She knew if she dismissed him from the mine it would give colour to her husband's vile insinuations, so she thought the wisest plan would be to take no notice of her meeting with him, and let things remain as they were. It turned out to be the best thing she could have done, for though Villiers went about Ballarat accusing her of being the young Frenchman's mistress, everyone was too well aware of existing circumstances to believe what he said. They knew that he had squandered his wife's fortune, and that she had left him in disgust at his profligacy, so they declined to believe his accusations against a woman who had proved herself true steel in withstanding bad fortune. So Mr Villiers' endeavours to ruin his wife only recoiled on his own head, for the Ballarat folk argued, and rightly, that whatever she did it was not his place to cast the first stone at her, seeing that the unsatisfactory position she was now in was mainly his own work. Villiers, therefore, gained nothing by his attempt to blacken his wife's character except the contempt of everyone, and even the few friends he had gained turned their backs on him until no one would associate with him but Slivers, who did so in order to gain his own ends. The company had quarrelled over the unsuccessful result of Villiers' visit to the Pactolus, and Slivers, as senior partner, assisted by Billy, called Villiers all the names he could lay his tongue to, which abuse Villiers accepted in silence, not even having the spirit to resent it. But though he was outwardly sulky and quiet, yet within he cherished a deep hatred against his wife for the contempt with which he was treated, and inwardly vowed to pay her out on the first feasible opportunity.

It was now nearly six months since Vandeloup had become clerk at the Pactolus, and he was getting tired of it, only watching his opportunity to make a little money and go to Melbourne, where he had not much doubt as to his success. With a certain sum of money to work on, M. Vandeloup thought that with his talents and experience of human nature he would soon be able to make a fortune, particularly as he was quite unfettered by any scruples, and as long as he made money he did not care how he gained it. With such an adaptable nature he could hardly help doing well, but in order to give him the start he required a little capital, so stayed on at the Pactolus and saved every penny he earned in the hope of soon accumulating enough to leave. Another thing that kept him there was his love for Kitty – not a very pure or elevating love certainly, still it was love for all that, and Vandeloup could not tear himself away from the place where she resided.

He had called on Kitty's father, the Rev. Mark Marchurst, who lived at the top of Black Hill, near Ballarat, and did not like him. Mr Marchurst, a grave, quiet man, who was the pastor of a particular sect, calling themselves very modestly 'The Elect', was hardly the kind of individual to attract a brilliant young fellow like Vandeloup, and the wonder was that he ever had such a charming daughter.

Kitty had fallen deeply in love with Vandeloup, so as he told her he loved her in return, she thought that some day they would get married. But nothing was farther from M. Vandeloup's thoughts than marriage, even with Kitty, for he knew how foolish it would be for him to marry before making a position.

'I don't want a wife to drag me back,' he said to himself one day when Kitty had hinted at matrimony; 'when I am wealthy it will be time enough to think of marriage, but it will be long before I am rich, and can I wait for Bebe all that time? Alas! I do not think so.'

The fact was, the young man was very liberal in his ideas, and infinitely preferred a mistress to a wife. He had not any evil designs towards Kitty, but her bright manner and charming face pleased him, and he simply enjoyed the hours as they passed. She idolised him, and Gaston, who was accustomed to be petted and caressed by women, accepted all her affection as his due. Curiously enough, Madame

Midas, lynx-eyed as she was, never suspected the true state of affairs. Vandeloup had told Kitty that no one was to know of their love for one another, and though Kitty was dying to tell Madame about it, yet she kept silent at his request, and acted so indifferently towards him when under Mrs Villiers' eye, that any doubts that lady had about the fascinations of her clerk soon vanished.

As to M. Vandeloup, the situation was an old one for him accustomed as he had been to carry on with guilty wives under the very noses of unsuspecting husbands, and on this occasion he acted admirably. He was very friendly with Kitty in public – evidently looking upon her as a mere child, although he made no difference in his manner. And this innocent intrigue gave a piquant flavour to his otherwise dull life.

Meanwhile, the Devil's Lead was still undiscovered, many people declaring it was a myth, and that such a lead had never existed. Three people, however, had a firm belief in its existence, and were certain it would be found some day – this trio being McIntosh, Madame Midas, and Slivers.

The Pactolus claim was a sort of Naboth's vineyard to Slivers, who, in company with Billy, used to sit in his dingy little office and grind his teeth as he thought of all the wealth lying beneath those green fields. He had once even gone so far as to offer to buy a share in the claim from Madame Midas, but had been promptly refused by that lady – a circumstance which by no means added to his love for her.

Still the Devil's Lead was not found, and people were beginning to disbelieve in its existence, when suddenly indications appeared which showed that it was near at hand. Nuggets, some large, some small, began to be constantly discovered, and every day news was brought into Ballarat about the turning-up of a thirty-ounce or a twenty-ounce nugget in the Pactolus, when, to crown all, the news came and ran like wildfire through the city that a three hundred ounce nugget had been unearthed.

There was great excitement over this, as such a large one had not been found for some time, and when Slivers heard of its discovery he cursed and swore most horribly; for with his long experience of gold mining, he knew that the long-looked for Devil's Lead was near at hand. Billy, becoming excited with his master, began to swear also; and these two companions cursed Madame Midas and all that belonged to her most heartily. If Slivers could only have seen the interior of Madame Midas's dining room, by some trick of necromancy, he would certainly not have been able to do the subject justice in the swearing line.

There were present Madame Midas, Selina, McIntosh, and Vandeloup, and they were all gathered round the table looking at the famous nugget. There it lay in the centre of the table, a virgin mass of gold, all water-worn and polished, hollowed out like a honeycomb, and dotted over with white pebbles like currants in a plum pudding.

'I think I'll send it to Melbourne for exhibition,' said Mrs Villiers, touching the nugget very lightly with her fingers.

'Deed, mum, and 'tis worth it,' replied McIntosh, whose severe face was relaxed in a grimly pleasant manner; 'but losh! 'tis naething tae what 'ull come oot o' the Deil's Lead.'

'Oh, come, now,' said Vandeloup, with a disbelieving smile, 'the Devil's Lead won't consist of nuggets like that.'

'Maybe no,' returned the old Scotchman, dryly; 'but every mickle makes a muckle, and ye ken the Lead wull hae mony sma' nuggets, which is mair paying, to my mind, than yin large ain.'

'What's the time?' asked Madame, rather irrelevantly, turning to Archie.

Mr McIntosh drew out the large silver watch, which was part and parcel of himself, and answered gravely that it was two o'clock.

'Then I'll tell you what,' said Mrs Villiers, rising; 'I'll take it in with me to Ballarat and show it to Mr Marchurst.'

McIntosh drew down the corners of his mouth, for, as a rigid Presbyterian, he by no means approved of Marchurst's heretical opinions, but of course said nothing as Madame wished it.

‘Can I come with you, Madame?’ said Vandeloup, eagerly, for he never lost an opportunity of seeing Kitty if he could help it.

‘Certainly,’ replied Madame, graciously; ‘we will start at once.’

Vandeloup was going away to get ready, when McIntosh stopped him.

‘That friend o’ yours is gangin’ awa’ t’ the toun the day,’ he said, touching Vandeloup lightly on the shoulder.

‘What for?’ asked the Frenchman, carelessly.

‘Tis to see the play actors, I’m thinkin’,’ returned Archie, dryly. ‘He wants tae stap all nicht i’ the toun, so I’ve let him gae, an’ have tauld him to pit up at the Wattle Tree Hotel, the landlord o’ which is a freend o’ mine.’

‘Very kind of you, I’m sure,’ said Vandeloup, with a pleasant smile; ‘but may I ask what play actors you refer to?’

‘I dinna ken anythin’ about sic folk,’ retorted Mr McIntosh, piously, ‘the deil’s ain bairns, wha wull gang into the pit of Tophet.’

‘Aren’t you rather hard on them, Archie?’ said Madame Midas, smiling quietly. ‘I’m very fond of the theatre myself.’

‘It’s no for me to give ma opeenion about ma betters,’ replied Archie, ungraciously, as he went out to see after the horse and trap; ‘but I dinna care aboot sitting in the seat of the scornfu’, or walking in the ways of the unrighteous,’ and with this parting shot at Vandeloup he went away.

That young man shrugged his shoulders, and looked at Madame Midas in such a comical manner that she could not help smiling.

‘You must forgive Archie,’ she said, pausing at the door of her bedroom for a moment. ‘He has been brought up severely, and it is hard to rid oneself of the traditions of youth.’

‘Very traditional in this case, I’m afraid,’ answered Gaston, referring to McIntosh’s age.

‘If you like,’ said Madame, in a kindly tone, ‘you can stay in to-night yourself, and go to the theatre.’

‘Thank you, Madame,’ replied Gaston, gravely. ‘I will avail myself of your kind permission.’

‘I’m afraid you will find an Australian provincial company rather a change after the Parisian theatres,’ said Mrs Villiers, as she vanished into her room.

Vandeloup smiled, and turned to Selina, who was busy about her household work.

‘Mademoiselle Selina,’ he said, gaily, ‘I am in want of a proverb to answer Madame; if I can’t get the best I must be content with what I can get. Now what piece of wisdom applies?’

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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