LANG ANDREW

THE DISENTANGLERS

Andrew Lang

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Lang A.

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Содержание

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PREFACE

It has been suggested to the Author that the incident of the Berbalangs, in The Adventure of the Fair American, is rather improbable. He can only refer the sceptical to the perfectly genuine authorities cited in his footnotes.

I. THE GREAT IDEA

The scene was a dusky shabby little room in Ryder Street. To such caves many repair whose days are passed, and whose food is consumed, in the clubs of the adjacent thoroughfare of cooperative palaces, Pall Mall. The furniture was battered and dingy; the sofa on which Logan sprawled had a certain historic interest: it was covered with cloth of horsehair, now seldom found by the amateur. A bookcase with glass doors held a crowd of books to which the amateur would at once have flown. They were in 'boards' of faded blue, and the paper labels bore alluring names: they were all First Editions of the most desirable kind. The bottles in the liqueur case were antique; a coat of arms, not undistinguished, was in relief on the silver stoppers. But the liquors in the flasks were humble and conventional. Merton, the tenant of the rooms, was in a Zingari cricketing coat; he occupied the arm-chair, while Logan, in evening dress, maintained a difficult equilibrium on the slippery sofa. Both men were of an age between twenty-five and twenty-nine, both were pleasant to the eye. Merton was, if anything, under the middle height: fair, slim, and active. As a freshman he had coxed his College Eight, later he rowed Bow in that vessel. He had won the Hurdles, but been beaten by his Cambridge opponent; he had taken a fair second in Greats, was believed to have been 'runner up' for the Newdigate prize poem, and might have won other laurels, but that he was found to do the female parts very fairly in the dramatic performances of the University, a thing irreconcilable with study. His father was a rural dean. Merton's most obvious vice was a thirst for general information. 'I know it is awfully bad form to know anything,' he had been heard to say, 'but everyone has his failings, and mine is occasionally useful.'

Logan was tall, dark, athletic and indolent. He was, in a way, the last of an historic Scottish family, and rather fond of discoursing on the ancestral traditions. But any satisfaction that he derived from them was, so far, all that his birth had won for him. His little patrimony had taken to itself wings. Merton was in no better case. Both, as they sat together, were gloomily discussing their prospects.

In the penumbra of smoke, and the malignant light of an ill trimmed lamp, the Great Idea was to be evolved. What consequences hung on the Great Idea! The peace of families insured, at a trifling premium. Innocence rescued. The defeat of the subtlest criminal designers: undreamed of benefits to natural science! But I anticipate. We return to the conversation in the Ryder Street den.

'It is a case of emigration or the workhouse,' said Logan.

'Emigration! What can you or I do in the Colonies? They provide even their own ushers. My only available assets, a little Greek and less Latin, are drugs in the Melbourne market,' answered Merton; 'they breed their own dominies. Protection!'

'In America they might pay for lessons in the English accent.. ' said Logan.

'But not,' said Merton, 'in the Scotch, which is yours; oh distant cousin of a marquis! Consequently by rich American lady pupils "you are not one to be desired."'

'Tommy, you are impertinent,' said Logan. 'Oh, hang it, where is there an opening, a demand, for the broken, the stoney broke? A man cannot live by casual paragraphs alone.'

'And these generally reckoned "too high-toned for our readers,"' said Merton.

'If I could get the secretaryship of a golf club!' Logan sighed.

'If you could get the Chancellorship of the Exchequer! I reckon that there are two million applicants for secretaryships of golf clubs.'

'Or a land agency,' Logan murmured.

'Oh, be practical!' cried Merton. 'Be inventive! Be modern! Be up to date! Think of something *new*! Think of a felt want, as the Covenanting divine calls it: a real public need, hitherto but dimly present, and quite a demand without a supply.'

'But that means thousands in advertisements,' said Logan, 'even if we ran a hair-restorer. The ground bait is too expensive. I say, I once knew a fellow who ground-baited for salmon with potted shrimps.'

'Make a paragraph on him then,' said Merton.

'But results proved that there was no felt want of potted shrimps – or not of a fly to follow.'

'Your collaboration in the search, the hunt for money, the quest, consists merely in irrelevancies and objections,' growled Merton, lighting a cigarette.

'Lucky devil, Peter Nevison. Meets an heiress on a Channel boat, with 4,000*l*. a year; and there he is.' Logan basked in the reflected sunshine.

'Cut by her people, though – and other people. I could not have faced the row with her people,' said Merton musingly.

'I don't wonder they moved heaven and earth, and her uncle, the bishop, to stop it. Not eligible, Peter was not, however you took him,' Logan reflected. 'Took too much of this,' he pointed to the heraldic flask.

'Well, *she* took him. It is not much that parents, still less guardians, can do now, when a girl's mind is made up.'

'The emancipation of woman is the opportunity of the indigent male struggler. Women have their way,' Logan reflected.

'And the youth of the modern aged is the opportunity of our sisters, the girls "on the make,"' said Merton. 'What a lot of old men of title are marrying young women as hard up as we are!'

'And then,' said Logan, 'the offspring of the deceased marchionesses make a fuss. In fact marriage is always the signal for a family row.'

'It is the infernal family row that I never could face. I had a chance – '

Merton seemed likely to drop into autobiography.

'I know,' said Logan admonishingly.

'Well, hanged if I could take it, and she – she could not stand it either, and both of us – '

'Do not be elegiac,' interrupted Logan. 'I know. Still, I am rather sorry for people's people. The unruly affections simply poison the lives of parents and guardians, aye, and of the children too. The aged are now so hasty and imprudent. What would not Tala have given to prevent his Grace from marrying Mrs. Tankerville?'

Merton leapt to his feet and smote his brow.

'Wait, don't speak to me – a great thought flushes all my brain. Hush! I have it,' and he sat down again, pouring seltzer water into a half empty glass.

'Have what?' asked Logan.

'The Felt Want. But the accomplices?'

'But the advertisements!' suggested Logan.

'A few pounds will cover *them*. I can sell my books,' Merton sighed.

'A lot of advertising your first editions will pay for. Why, even to launch a hair-restorer takes – '

'Oh, but,' Merton broke in, '*this* want is so widely felt, acutely felt too: hair is not in it. But where are the accomplices?'

'If it is gentleman burglars I am not concerned. No Raffles for me! If it is venal physicians to kill off rich relations, the lives of the Logans are sacred to me.'

'Bosh!' said Merton, 'I want "lady friends," as Tennyson says: nice girls, well born, well bred, trying to support themselves.'

'What do you want *them* for? To support them?'

'I want them as accomplices,' said Merton. 'As collaborators.'

'Blackmail?' asked Logan. 'Has it come to this? I draw the line at blackmail. Besides, they would starve first, good girls would; or marry Lord Methusalem, or a beastly South African *richard*.'

'Robert Logan of Restalrig, that should be' – Merton spoke impressively – 'you know me to be incapable of practices, however lucrative, which involve taint of crime. I do not prey upon the society which I propose to benefit. But where are the girls?'

'Where are they not?' Logan asked. 'Dawdling, as jesters, from country house to country house. In the British Museum, verifying references for literary gents, if they can get references to verify. Asking leave to describe their friends' parties in *The Leidy's News*. Trying for places as golfing governesses, or bridge governesses, or gymnastic mistresses at girls' schools, or lady laundresses, or typewriters, or lady teachers of cookery, or pegs to hang costumes on at dress-makers'. The most beautiful girl I ever saw was doing that once; I met her when I was shopping with my aunt who left her money to the Armenians.'

'You kept up her acquaintance? The girl's, I mean,' Merton asked.

'We have occasionally met. In fact – '

'Yes, I know, as you said lately,' Merton remarked. 'That's one, anyhow, and there is Mary Willoughby, who got a second in history when I was up. *She* would do. Better business for her than the British Museum. I know three or four.'

'I know five or six. But what for?' Logan insisted.

'To help us in supplying the widely felt want, which is my discovery,' said Merton.

'And that is?'

'Disentanglers – of both sexes. A large and varied staff, calculated to meet every requirement and cope with every circumstance.' Merton quoted an unwritten prospectus.

'I don't follow. What the deuce is your felt want?'

'What we were talking about.'

'Ground bait for salmon?' Logan reverted to his idea.

'No. Family rows about marriages. Nasty letters. Refusals to recognise the choice of a son, a daughter, or a widowed but youthful old parent, among the upper classes. Harsh words. Refusals to allow meetings or correspondence. Broken hearts. Improvident marriages. Preaching down a daughter's heart, or an aged parent's heart, or a nephew's, or a niece's, or a ward's, or anybody's heart. Peace restored to the household. Intended marriage off, and nobody a penny the worse, unless – '

'Unless what?' said Logan.

'Practical difficulties,' said Merton, 'will occur in every enterprise. But they won't be to our disadvantage, the reverse – if they don't happen too often. And we can guard against *that* by a scientific process.'

'Now will you explain,' Logan asked, 'or shall I pour this whisky and water down the back of your neck?'

He rose to his feet, menace in his eye.

'Bear fighting barred! We are no longer boys. We are men – broken men. Sit down, don't play the bear,' said Merton.

'Well, explain, or I fire!'

'Don't you see? The problem for the family, for hundreds of families, is to get the undesirable marriage off without the usual row. Very few people really like a row. Daughter becomes anæmic; foreign cures are expensive and no good. Son goes to the Devil or the Cape. Aged and opulent, but amorous, parent leaves everything he can scrape together to disapproved of new wife. Relations cut each other all round. Not many people really enjoy that kind of thing. They want a pacific solution – marriage off, no remonstrances.'

'And how are you going to do it?'

'Why,' said Merton, 'by a scientific and thoroughly organised system of disengaging or disentangling. We enlist a lot of girls and fellows like ourselves, beautiful, attractive, young, or not so young, well connected, intellectual, athletic, and of all sorts of types, but all *broke*, all without visible means of subsistence. They are people welcome in country houses, but travelling third class, and

devilishly perplexed about how to tip the servants, how to pay if they lose at bridge, and so forth. We enlist them, we send them out on demand, carefully selecting our agents to meet the circumstances in each case. They go down and disentangle the amorous by – well, by entangling them. The lovers are off with the old love, the love which causes all the worry, without being on with the new love – our agent. The thing quietly fizzles out.'

'Quietly!' Logan snorted. 'I like "quietly." They would be on with the new love. Don't you see, you born gomeral, that the person, man or woman, who deserts the inconvenient A. – I put an A. B. case – falls in love with your agent B., and your B. is, by the nature of the thing, more ineligible than A. – too poor. A babe could see that. You disappoint me, Merton.'

'You state,' said Merton, 'one of the practical difficulties which I foresaw. Not that it does not suit *us* very well. Our comrade and friend, man or woman, gets a chance of a good marriage, and, Logan, there is no better thing. But parents and guardians would not stand much of that: of people marrying our agents.'

'Of course they wouldn't. Your idea is crazy.'

'Wait a moment,' said Merton. 'The resources of science are not yet exhausted. You have heard of the epoch-making discovery of Jenner, and its beneficent results in checking the ravages of smallpox, that scourge of the human race?'

'Oh don't talk like a printed book,' Logan remonstrated. 'Everybody has heard of vaccination.'

'And you are aware that similar prophylactic measures have been adopted, with more or less of success, in the case of other diseases?'

'I am aware,' said Logan, 'that you are in danger of personal suffering at my hands, as I already warned you.'

'What is love but a disease?' Merton asked dreamily. 'A French *savant*, Monsieur Janet, says that nobody ever falls in love except when he is a little bit off colour: I forget the French equivalent.'

'I am coming for you,' Logan arose in wrath.

'Sit down. Well, your objection (which it did not need the eyes of an Argus to discover) is that the patients, the lovers young, whose loves are disapproved of by the family, will fall in love with our agents, insist on marrying *them*, and so the last state of these afflicted parents – or children – will be worse than the first. Is that your objection?'

'Of course it is; and crushing at that,' Logan replied.

'Then science suggests prophylactic measures: something akin to vaccination,' Merton explained. 'The agents must be warranted "immune." Nice new word!'

'How?'

'The object,' Merton answered, 'is to make it impossible, or highly improbable, that our agents, after disentangling the affections of the patients, curing them of one attack, will accept their addresses, offered in a second fit of the fever. In brief, the agents must not marry the patients, or not often.'

'But how can you prevent them if they want to do it?'

'By a process akin, in the emotional region of our strangely blended nature, to inoculation.'

'Hanged if I understand you. You keep on repeating yourself. You dodder!'

'Our agents must have got the disease already, the pretty fever; and be safe against infection. There must be on the side of the agent a prior attachment. Now, don't interrupt, there always *is* a prior attachment. You are in love, I am in love, he, she, and they, all of the broken brigade, are in love; all the more because they have not a chance. "Cursed be the social wants that sin against the strength of youth." So, you see, our agents will be quite safe not to crown the flame of the patients, not to accept them, if they do propose, or expect a proposal. "Every security from infection guaranteed." There is the felt want. Here is the remedy; not warranted absolutely painless, but salutary, and tending to the amelioration of the species. So we have only to enlist the agents, and send a few advertisements to the papers. My first editions must go. Farewell Shelley, Tennyson, Keats, uncut Waverleys, Byron, *The*

Waltz, early Kiplings (at a vast reduction on account of the overflooded state of the market). Farewell Kilmarnock edition of Burns, and Colonel Lovelace, his *Lucasta*, and *Tamerlane* by Mr. Poe, and the rest. The money must be raised.' Merton looked resigned.

'I have nothing to sell,' said Logan, 'but an entire set of clubs by Philp. Guaranteed unique, and in exquisite condition.'

'You must part with them,' said Merton. 'We are like Palissy the potter, feeding his furnace with the drawing-room furniture.'

'But how about the recruiting?' Logan asked. 'It's like one of these novels where you begin by collecting desperados from all quarters, and then the shooting commences.'

'Well, we need not ransack the Colonies,' Merton replied. 'Patronise British industries. We know some fellows already and some young women.'

'I say,' Logan interrupted, 'what a dab at disentangling Lumley would have been if he had not got that Professorship of Toxicology at Edinburgh, and been able to marry Miss Wingan at last!'

'Yes, and Miss Wingan would have been useful. What a lively girl, ready for everything,' Merton replied.

'But these we can still get at,' Logan asked: 'how are you to be sure that they are – vaccinated?'

'The inquiry is delicate,' Merton admitted, 'but the fact may be almost taken for granted. We must give a dinner (a preliminary expense) to promising collaborators, and champagne is a great promoter of success in delicate inquiries. *In vino veritas*.'

'I don't know if there is money in it, but there is a kind of larkiness,' Logan admitted.

'Yes, I think there will be larks.'

'About the dinner? We are not to have Johnnies disguised as hansom cabbies driving about, and picking up men and women that look the right sort, in the streets, and compelling them to come in?'

'Oh no, *that* expense we can cut. It would not do with the women, obviously: heavens, what queer fishes that net would catch! The flag of the Disentanglers shall never be stained by – anything. You know some likely agents: I know some likely agents. They will suggest others, as our field of usefulness widens. Of course there is the oath of secrecy: we shall administer that after dinner to each guest apart.'

'Jolly difficult for those that are mixed up with the press to keep an oath of secrecy!' Logan spoke as a press man.

'We shall only have to do with gentlemen and ladies. The oath is not going to sanction itself with religious terrors. Good form – we shall appeal to a "sense of form" – now so widely diffused by University Extension Lectures on the Beautiful, the Fitting, the – '

'Oh shut up!' cried Logan. 'You always haver after midnight. For, look here, here is an objection; this precious plan of yours, parents and others could work it for themselves. I dare say they do. When they see the affections of a son, or a daughter, or a bereaved father beginning to stray towards A., they probably invite B. to come and stay and act as a lightning conductor. They don't need us.'

'Oh, don't they? They seldom have an eligible and satisfactory lightning conductor at hand, somebody to whom they can trust their dear one. Or, if they have, the dear one has already been bored with the intended lightning conductor (who is old, or plain, or stupid, or familiar, at best), and they won't look at him or her. Now our Disentanglers are not going to be plain, or dull, or old, or stale, or commonplace – we'll take care of that. My dear fellow, don't you know how dismal the *parti* selected for a man or girl invariably is? Now *we* provide a different and superior article, a *fresh* article too, not a familiar bore or a neighbour.'

'Well, there is a good deal in that, as you say,' Logan admitted. 'But decent people will think the whole speculation shady. How are you to get round that? There is something you have forgotten.'

'What?' Merton asked.

'Why it stares you in the face. References. Unexceptionable references; people will expect them all round.'

‘Please don’t say “unexceptionable”; say “references beyond the reach of cavil.”’ Merton was a purist. ‘It costs more in advertisements, but my phrase at once enlists the sympathy of every liberal and elegant mind. But as to references (and I am glad that you have some common sense, Logan), there is, let me see, there is the Dowager.’

‘The divine Althæa – Marchioness of Bowton?’

‘The same,’ said Merton. ‘The oldest woman, and the most recklessly up-to-date in London. She has seen *bien d’autres*, and wants to see more.’

‘She will do; and my aunt,’ Logan said.

‘Not, oh, of course not, the one who left her money to the Armenians?’ Merton asked.

‘No, another. And there’s old Lochmaben’s young wife, my cousin, widely removed, by marriage. She is American, you know, and perhaps you know her book, *Social Experiments*?’

‘Yes, it is not half bad,’ Merton conceded, ‘and her heart will be in what I fear she will call “the new departure.” And she is pretty, and highly respected in the parish.’

‘And there’s my aunt I spoke of, or great aunt, Miss Nicky Maxwell. The best old thing: a beautiful monument of old gentility, and she would give her left hand to help any one of the clan.’

‘She will do. And there’s Mrs. Brown-Smith, Lord Yarrow’s daughter, who married the patent soap man. *Elle est capable de tout*. A real good woman, but full of her fun.’

‘That will do for the lady patronesses. We must secure them at once.’

‘But won’t the clients blab?’ Logan suggested.

‘They can’t,’ Merton said. ‘They would be laughed at consumedly. It will be their interest to hold their tongues.’

‘Well, let us hope that they will see it in that light.’ Logan was not too sanguine.

Merton had a better opinion of his enterprise.

‘People, if they come to us at all for assistance in these very delicate and intimate affairs, will have too much to lose by talking about them. They may not come, we can only try, but if they come they will be silent as the grave usually is.’

‘Well, it is late, and the whisky is low,’ said Logan in mournful tones. ‘May the morrow’s reflections justify the inspiration of – the whisky. Good night!’

‘Good night,’ said Merton absently.

He sat down when Logan had gone, and wrote a few notes on large sheets of paper. He was elaborating the scheme. ‘If collaboration consists in making objections, as the French novelist said, Logan is a rare collaborator,’ Merton muttered as he turned out the pallid lamp and went to bed.

Next morning, before dressing, he revolved the scheme. It bore the change of light and survived the inspiration of alcohol. Logan looked in after breakfast. He had no new objections. They proceeded to action.

II. FROM THE HIGHWAYS AND HEDGES

The first step towards Merton's scheme was taken at once. The lady patronesses were approached. The divine Althæa instantly came in. She had enjoyed few things more since the Duchess of Richmond's ball on the eve of Waterloo. Miss Nicky Maxwell at first professed a desire to open her coffers, 'only anticipating,' she said, 'an event' – which Logan declined in any sense to anticipate. Lady Lochmaben said that they would have a lovely time as experimental students of society. Mrs. Brown-Smith instantly offered her own services as a Disentangler, her lord being then absent in America studying the negro market for detergents.

'I think,' she said, 'he expects Brown-Smith's brand to make an Ethiopian change his skin, and then means to exhibit him as an advertisement.'

'And settle the negro question by making them all white men,' said Logan, as he gracefully declined the generous but compromising proposal of the lady. 'Yet, after all,' thought he, 'is she not right? The prophylactic precautions would certainly be increased, morally speaking, if the Disentanglers were married.' But while he pigeon-holed this idea for future reference, at the moment he could not see his way to accepting Mrs. Brown-Smith's spirited idea. She reluctantly acquiesced in his view of the case, but, like the other dames, promised to guarantee, if applied to, the absolute respectability of the enterprise. The usual vows of secrecy were made, and (what borders on the supernatural) they were kept.

Merton's first editions went to Sotheby's, 'Property of a gentleman who is changing his objects of collection.' A Russian archduke bought Logan's unique set of golf clubs by Philp. Funds accrued from other sources. Logan had a friend, dearer friend had no man, one Trevor, a pleasant bachelor whose sister kept house for him. His purse, or rather his cheque book, gaped with desire to be at Logan's service, but had gaped in vain. Finding Logan grinning one day over the advertisement columns of a paper at the club, his prophetic soul discerned a good thing, and he wormed it out 'in dern privacy.' He slapped his manly thigh and insisted on being in it – as a capitalist. The other stoutly resisted, but was overcome.

'You need an office, you need retaining fees, you need outfits for the accomplices, and it is a legitimate investment. I'll take interest and risks,' said Trevor.

So the money was found.

The inaugural dinner, for the engaging of accomplices, was given in a private room of a restaurant in Pall Mall.

The dinner was gay, but a little pathetic. Neatness, rather than the gloss of novelty (though other gloss there was), characterised the garments of the men. The toilettes of the women were modest; that amount of praise (and it is a good deal) they deserved. A young lady, Miss Maskelyne, an amber-hued beauty, who practically lived as a female jester at the houses of the great, shone resplendent, indeed, but magnificence of apparel was demanded by her profession.

'I am *so* tired of it,' she said to Merton. 'Fancy being more and more anxious for country house invitations. Fancy an artist's feelings, when she knows she has not been a success. And then when the woman of the house detests you! She often does. And when they ask you to give your imitation of So-and-so, and forget that his niece is in the room! Do you know what they would have called people like me a hundred years ago? Toad-eaters! There is one of us in an old novel I read a bit of once. She goes about, an old maid, to houses. Once she arrived in a snow storm and a hearse. Am I to come to that? I keep learning new drawing-room tricks. And when you fall ill, as I did at Eckford, and you can't leave, and you think they are tired to death of you! Oh, it is I who am tired, and time passes, and one grows old. I am a hag!'

Merton said 'what he ought to have said,' and what, indeed, was true. He was afraid she would tell him what she owed her dress-makers. Therefore he steered the talk round to sport, then to the

Highlands, then to Knoydart, then to Alastair Macdonald of Craigiecorrichan, and then Merton knew, by a tone in the voice, a drop of the eyelashes, that Miss Maskelyne was – vaccinated. Prophylactic measures had been taken: this agent ran no risk of infection. There was Alastair.

Merton turned to Miss Willoughby, on his left. She was tall, dark, handsome, but a little faded, and not plump: few of the faces round the table were plump and well liking. Miss Willoughby, in fact, dwelt in one room, in Bloomsbury, and dined on cocoa and bread and butter. These were for her the rewards of the Higher Education. She lived by copying crabbed manuscripts.

'Do you ever go up to Oxford now?' said Merton.

'Not often. Sometimes a St. Ursula girl gets a room in the town for me. I have coached two or three of them at little reading parties. It gets one out of town in autumn: Bloomsbury in August is not very fresh. And at Oxford one can "tout," or "cadge," for a little work. But there are so many of us.'

'What are you busy with just now?'

'Vatican transcripts at the Record Office.'

'Any exciting secrets?'

'Oh no, only how much the priests here paid to Rome for their promotions. Secrets then perhaps: not thrilling now.'

'No schemes to poison people?'

'Not yet: no plots for novels, and oh, such long-winded pontifical Latin, and such awful crabbed hands.'

'It does not seem to lead to much?'

'To nothing, in no way. But one is glad to get anything.'

'Jephson, of Lincoln, whom I used to know, is doing a book on the Knights of St. John in their Relations to the Empire,' said Merton.

'Is he?' said Miss Willoughby, after a scarcely distinguishable but embarrassed pause, and she turned from Merton to exhibit an interest in the very original scheme of mural decoration behind her.

'It is quite a new subject to most people,' said Merton, and he mentally ticked off Miss Willoughby as safe, for Jephson, whom he had heard that she liked, was a very poor man, living on his fellowship and coaching. He was sorry: he had never liked or trusted Jephson.

'It is a subject sure to create a sensation, isn't it?' asked Miss Willoughby, a little paler than before.

'It might get a man a professorship,' said Merton.

'There are so many of us, of them, I mean,' said Miss Willoughby, and Merton gave a small sigh. 'Not much larkiness here,' he thought, and asked a transient waiter for champagne.

Miss Willoughby drank a little of the wine: the colour came into her face.

'By Jove, she's awfully handsome,' thought Merton.

'It was very kind of you to ask me to this festival,' said the girl. 'Why have you asked us, me at least?'

'Perhaps for many besides the obvious reason,' said Merton. 'You may be told later.'

'Then there is a reason in addition to that which most people don't find obvious? Have you come into a fortune?'

'No, but I am coming. My ship is on the sea and my boat is on the shore.'

'I see faces that I know. There is that tall handsome girl, Miss Markham, with real gold hair, next Mr. Logan. We used to call her the Venus of Milo, or Milo for short, at St. Ursula's. She has mantles and things tried on her at Madame Claudine's, and stumpy purchasers argue from the effect (neglecting the cause) that the things will suit *them*. Her people were ruined by Australian gold mines. And there is Miss Martin, who does stories for the penny story papers at a shilling the thousand words. The fathers have backed horses, and the children's teeth are set on edge. Is it a Neo-Christian dinner? We are all so poor. You have sought us in the highways and hedges.'

'Where the wild roses grow,' said Merton.

'I don't know many of the men, though I see faces that one used to see in the High. There is Mr. Yorker, the athletic man. What is he doing now?'

'He is sub-vice-secretary of a cricket club. His income depends on his bat and his curl from leg. But he has a rich aunt.'

'Cricket does not lead to much, any more than my ability to read the worst handwritings of the darkest ages. Who is the man that the beautiful lady opposite is making laugh so?' asked Miss Willoughby, without moving her lips.

Merton wrote 'Bulstrode of Trinity' on the back of the menu.

'What does *he* do?'

'Nothing,' said Merton in a low voice. 'Been alligator farming, or ostrich farming, or ranching, and come back shorn; they all come back. He wants to be an ecclesiastical "chucker out," and cope with Mr. Kensitt and Co. New profession.'

'He ought not to be here. He can ride and shoot.'

'He is the only son of his mother and she is a widow.'

'He ought to go out. My only brother is out. I wish I were a man. I hate dawdlers.' She looked at him: her eyes were large and grey under black lashes, they were dark and louring.

'Have you, by any chance, a spark of the devil in you?' asked Merton, taking a social header.

'I have been told so, and sometimes thought so,' said Miss Willoughby. 'Perhaps this one will go out by fasting if not by prayer. Yes, I *have* a spark of the Accuser of the Brethren.'

'*Tant mieux*,' thought Merton.

All the people were talking and laughing now. Miss Maskelyne told a story to the table. She did a trick with a wine glass, forks, and a cork. Logan interviewed Miss Martin, who wrote tales for the penny fiction people, on her methods. Had she a moral aim, a purpose? Did she create her characters first, and let them evolve their fortunes, or did she invent a plot, and make her characters fit in?

Miss Martin said she began with a situation: 'I wish I could get one somewhere as secretary to a man of letters.'

'They can't afford secretaries,' said Logan. 'Besides they are family men, married men, and so – '

'And so what?'

'Go look in any glass, and say,' said Logan, laughing. 'But how do you begin with a situation?'

'Oh, anyhow. A lot of men in a darkened room. Pitch dark.'

'A séance?'

'No, a conspiracy. They are in the dark that when arrested they may swear they never saw each other.'

'They could swear that anyhow.'

'Conspirators have consciences. Then there comes a red light shining between the door and the floor. Then the door breaks down under a hammer, the light floods the room. There is a man in it whom the others never saw enter.'

'How did he get in?'

'He was there before they came. Then the fighting begins. At the end of it where is the man?'

'Well, where is he? What was he up to?'

'I don't know yet,' said Miss Martin, 'it just comes as I go on. It has just got to come. It is a fourteen hours a day business. All writing. I crib things from the French. Not whole stories. I take the opening situation; say the two men in a boat on the river who hook up a sack. I don't read the rest of the Frenchman, I work on from the sack, and guess what was in it.'

'What was in the sack?'

'*In the Sack*! A name for a story! Anything, from the corpse of a freak (good idea, corpse of a freak with no arms and legs, or with too many) to a model of a submarine ship, or political papers. But I am tired of corpses. They pervade my works. They give "a *bouquet*, a fragrance," as Mr. Talbot Twysden said about his cheap claret.'

'You read the old Masters?'

'The obsolete Thackeray? Yes, I know him pretty well.'

'What are you publishing just now?'

'This to an author? Don't you know?'

'I blush,' said Logan.

'Unseen,' said Miss Martin, scrutinising him closely.

'Well, you do not read the serials to which I contribute,' she went on. 'I have two or three things running. There is *The Judge's Secret*.'

'What was that?'

'He did it himself.'

'Did what?'

'Killed the bishop. He is not a very plausible judge in English: in French he would be all right, a *juge d'instruction*, the man who cross-examines the prisoners in private, you know.'

'Judges don't do that in England,' said Logan.

'No, but this case is an exception. The judge was such a very old friend, a college friend, of the murdered bishop. So he takes advantage of his official position, and steals into the cell of the accused. My public does not know any better, and, of course, I have no reviewers. I never come out in a book.'

'And why did the judge assassinate the prelate?'

'The prelate knew too much about the judge, who sat in the Court of Probate and Divorce.'

'Satan reproving sin?' asked Logan.

'Yes, exactly; and the bishop being interested in the case – '

'No scandal about Mrs. Proudie?'

'No, not that exactly, still, you see the motive?'

'I do,' said Logan. 'And the conclusion?'

'The bishop was not really dead at all. It takes some time to explain. The *corpus delicti*– you see I know my subject – was somebody else. And the bishop was alive, and secretly watching the judge, disguised as Mr. Sherlock Holmes. Oh, I know it is too much in Dickens's manner. But my public has not read Dickens.'

'You interest me keenly' said Logan.

'I am glad to hear it. And the penny public take freely. Our circulation goes up. I asked for a rise of three pence on the thousand words.'

'Now this *is* what I call literary conversation,' said Logan. 'It is like reading *The British Weekly Bookman*. Did you get the threepence? if the inquiry is not indelicate.'

'I got twopence. But, you see, there are so many of us.'

'Tell me more. Are you serialising anything else?'

'Serialising is the right word. I see you know a great deal about literature. Yes, I am serialising a featured tale.'

'A featured tale?'

'You don't know what that is? You do not know everything yet! It is called *Myself*.'

'Why *Myself*?'

'Oh, because the narrator did it – the murder. A stranger is found in a wood, hung to a tree. Nobody knows who he is. But he and the narrator had met in Paraguay. He, the murdered man, came home, visited the narrator, and fell in love with the beautiful being to whom the narrator was engaged. So the narrator lassoed him in a wood.'

'Why?'

'Oh, the old stock reason. He knew too much.'

'What did he know?'

'Why, that the narrator was living on a treasure originally robbed from a church in South America.'

'But, if it *was* a treasure, who would care?'

'The girl was a Catholic. And the murdered man knew more.'

'How much more?'

'This: to find out about the treasure, the narrator had taken priest's orders, and, of course, could not marry. And the other man, being in love with the girl, threatened to tell, and so the lasso came in handy. It is a Protestant story and instructive.'

'Jolly instructive! But, Miss Martin, you are the Guy Boothby of your sex!'

At this supreme tribute the girl blushed like dawn upon the hills.

'My word, she is pretty!' thought Logan; but what he said was, 'You know Mr. Tierney, your neighbour? Out of a job as a composition master. Almost reduced to University Extension Lectures on the didactic Drama.'

Tierney was talking eagerly to his neighbour, a fascinating lady laundress, *la belle blanchisseuse*, about starch.

Further off a lady instructress in cookery, Miss Frere, was conversing with a tutor of bridge.

'Tierney,' said Logan, in a pause, 'may I present you to Miss Martin?' Then he turned to Miss Markham, formerly known at St. Ursula's as Milo. She had been a teacher of golf, hockey, cricket, fencing, and gymnastics, at a very large school for girls, in a very small town. Here she became society to such an alarming extent (no party being complete without her, while the colonels and majors never left her in peace), that her connection with education was abruptly terminated. At present raiment was draped on her magnificent shoulders at Madame Claudine's. Logan, as he had told Merton, 'occasionally met her,' and Logan had the strongest reasons for personal conviction that she was absolutely proof against infection, in the trying circumstances to which a Disentangler is professionally exposed. Indeed she alone of the women present knew from Logan the purpose of the gathering.

Cigarettes had replaced the desire of eating and drinking. Merton had engaged a withdrawing room, where he meant to be closeted with his guests, one by one, administer the oath, and prosecute delicate inquiries on the important question of immunity from infection. But, after a private word or two with Logan, he deemed these conspicuous formalities needless. 'We have material enough to begin with,' said Logan. 'We knew beforehand that some of the men were safe, and certain of the women.'

There was a balcony. The providence of nature had provided a full moon, and a night of balm. The imaginative maintained that the scent of hay was breathed, among other odours, over Pall Mall the Blest. Merton kept straying with one guest or another into a corner of the balcony. He hinted that there was a thing in prospect. Would the guest hold himself, or herself, ready at need? Next morning, if the promise was given, the guest might awake to peace of conscience. The scheme was beneficent, and, incidentally, cheerful.

To some he mentioned retainers; money down, to speak grossly. Most accepted on the strength of Merton's assurances that their services must always be ready. There were difficulties with Miss Willoughby and Miss Markham. The former lady (who needed it most) flatly refused the arrangement. Merton pleaded in vain. Miss Markham, the girl known to her contemporaries as Milo, could not hazard her present engagement at Madame Claudine's. If she was needed by the scheme in the dead season she thought that she could be ready for whatever it was.

Nobody was told exactly what the scheme was. It was only made clear that nobody was to be employed without the full and exhaustive knowledge of the employers, for whom Merton and Logan were merely agents. If in doubt, the agents might apply for counsel to the lady patronesses, whose very names tranquilised the most anxious inquirers. The oath was commuted for a promise, on honour, of secrecy. And, indeed, little if anything was told that could be revealed. The thing was not political: spies on Russia or France were not being recruited. That was made perfectly clear. Anybody might

withdraw, if the prospect, when beheld nearer, seemed undesirable. A mystified but rather merry gathering walked away to remote lodgings, Miss Maskelyne alone patronising a hansom.

On the day after the dinner Logan and Merton reviewed the event and its promise, taking Trevor into their counsels. They were not ill satisfied with the potential recruits.

'There was one jolly little thing in white,' said Trevor. 'So pretty and flowering! "Cherries ripe themselves do cry," a line in an old song, that's what her face reminded me of. Who was she?'

'She came with Miss Martin, the penny novelist,' said Logan. 'She is stopping with her. A country parson's daughter, come up to town to try to live by typewriting.'

'She will be of no use to us,' said Merton. 'If ever a young woman looked fancy-free it is that girl. What did you say her name is, Logan?'

'I did not say, but, though you won't believe it, her name is Miss Blossom, Miss Florry Blossom. Her godfathers and godmothers must bear the burden of her appropriate Christian name; the other, the surname, is a coincidence – designed or not.'

'Well, she is not suitable,' said Merton sternly. 'Misplaced affections she might distract, but then, after she had distracted them, she might reciprocate them. As a conscientious manager I cannot recommend her to clients.'

'But,' said Trevor, 'she may be useful for all that, as well as decidedly ornamental. Merton, you'll want a typewriter for your business correspondence, and Miss Blossom typewrites: it is her profession.'

'Well,' said Merton, 'I am not afraid. I do not care too much for "that garden in her face," for your cherry-ripe sort of young person. If a typewriter is necessary I can bear with her as well as another.'

'I admire your courage and resignation,' said Trevor, 'so now let us go and take rooms for the Society.'

They found rooms, lordly rooms, which Trevor furnished in a stately manner, hanging a selection of his mezzotints on the walls – ladies of old years, after Romney, Reynolds, Hoppner, and the rest. A sober opulence and comfort characterised the chambers; a well-selected set of books in a Sheraton bookcase was intended to beguile the tedium of waiting clients. The typewriter (Miss Blossom accepted the situation) occupied an inner chamber, opening out of that which was to be sacred to consultations.

The firm traded under the title of Messrs. Gray and Graham. Their advertisement – in all the newspapers – addressed itself 'To Parents, Guardians, Children and others.' It set forth the sorrows and anxieties which beset families in the matter of undesirable matrimonial engagements and entanglements. The advertisers proposed, by a new method, to restore domestic peace and confidence. 'No private inquiries will, in any case, be made into the past of the parties concerned. The highest references will in every instance be given and demanded. Intending clients must in the first instance apply by letter to Messrs. Gray and Graham. No charge will be made for a first interview, which can only be granted after satisfactory references have been exchanged by letter.'

'If *that* does not inspire confidence,' said Merton, 'I don't know what will.'

'Nothing short of it will do,' said Logan.

'But the mezzotints will carry weight,' said Trevor, 'and a few good cloisonnés and enamelled snuff-boxes and bronzes will do no harm.'

So he sent in some weedings of his famous collection.

III. ADVENTURE OF THE FIRST CLIENTS

Merton was reading the newspaper in the office, expecting a client. Miss Blossom was typewriting in the inner chamber; the door between was open. The office boy knocked at Merton's outer door, and the sound of that boy's strangled chuckling was distinctly audible to his employer. There is something irritating in the foolish merriment of a youthful menial. No conduct could be more likely than that of the office boy to irritate the first client, arriving on business of which it were hard to exaggerate the delicate and anxious nature.

These reflections flitted through Merton's mind as he exclaimed 'Come in,' with a tone of admonishing austerity.

The office boy entered. His face was scarlet, his eyes goggled and ran water. Hastily and loudly exclaiming 'Mr. and Miss Apsley' (which ended with a crow) he stuffed his red pocket handkerchief into his mouth and escaped. At the sound of the names, Merton had turned towards the inner door, open behind him, whence came a clear and piercing trill of feminine laughter from Miss Blossom. Merton angrily marched to the inner door, and shut his typewriter in with a bang. His heart burned within him. Nothing could be so insulting to clients; nothing so ruinous to a nascent business. He wheeled round to greet his visitors with a face of apology; his eyes on the average level of the human countenance divine. There was no human countenance divine. There was no human countenance at that altitude. His eyes encountered the opposite wall, and a print of 'Mrs. Pelham Feeding Chickens.'

In a moment his eyes adjusted themselves to a lower elevation. In front of him were standing, hand in hand, a pair of small children, a boy of nine in sailor costume, but with bare knees not usually affected by naval officers, and a girl of seven with her finger in her mouth.

The boy bowed gravely. He was a pretty little fellow with a pale oval face, arched eyebrows, promise of an aquiline nose, and two large black eyes. 'I think, sir,' said the child, 'I have the pleasure of redressing myself to Mr. Gray or Mr. Graham?'

'Graham, at your service,' said Merton, gravely; 'may I ask you and Miss Apsley to be seated?'

There was a large and imposing arm-chair in green leather; the client's chair. Mr. Apsley lifted his little sister into it, and sat down beside her himself. She threw her arms round his neck, and laid her flaxen curls on his shoulder. Her blue eyes looked shyly at Merton out of her fleece of gold. The four shoes of the clients dangled at some distance above the carpet.

'You are the author of this article, I think, Mr. Graham?' said Mr. Apsley, showing his hand, which was warm, and holding out a little crumpled ball of paper, not precisely fresh.

Merton solemnly unrolled it; it contained the advertisement of his firm.

'Yes,' he said, 'I wrote that.'

'You got our letters, for you answered them,' said Mr. Apsley, with equal solemnity. 'Why do you want Bats and me?'

'The lady's name is Bats?' said Merton, wondering why he was supposed to 'want' either of the pair.

'My name is Batsy. I like you: you are pretty,' said Miss Apsley.

Merton positively blushed: he was unaccustomed to compliments so frank from a member of the sex at an early stage of a business interview. He therefore kissed his fair client, who put up a pair of innocent damp lips, and then allowed her attention to be engrossed by a coin on his watch-chain.

'I don't quite remember your case, sir, or what you mean by saying I wanted you, though I am delighted to see you,' he said to Mr. Apsley. 'We have so many letters! With your permission I shall consult the letter book.'

'The article says "To Parents, Guardians, Children, and others." It was in print,' remarked Mr. Apsley, with a heavy stress on "children," 'and she said you wanted *us*.'

The mystified Merton, wondering who 'she' was, turned the pages of the letter book, mumbling, 'Abernethy, Applecombe, Ap. Davis, Apsley. Here we are,' he began to read the letter aloud. It was typewritten, which, when he saw his clients, not a little surprised him.

'Gentlemen,' the letter ran, 'having seen your advertisement in the *Daily Diatribe* of to-day, May 17, I desire to express my wish to enter into communication with you on a matter of pressing importance. – I am, in the name of my sister, Miss Josephine Apsley, and myself,

'Faithfully yours,

'Thomas Lloyd Apsley.'

'That's the letter,' said Mr. Apsley, 'and you wrote to us.'

'And what did I say?' asked Merton.

'Something about preferences, which we did not understand.'

'References, perhaps,' said Merton. 'Mr. Apsley, may I ask whether you wrote this letter yourself?'

'No; None-so-pretty printed it on a kind of sewing machine. *She* told us to come and see you, so we came. I called her None-so-pretty, out of a fairy story. She does not mind. Gran says she thinks she rather likes it.'

'I shouldn't wonder if she did,' said Merton. 'But what is her real name?'

'She made me promise not to tell. She was staying at the Home Farm when we were staying at Gran's.'

'Is Gran your grandmother?'

'Yes,' replied Mr. Apsley.

Hereon Bats remarked that she was 'velly hungalee.'

'To be sure,' said Merton. 'Luncheon shall be brought at once.' He rang the bell, and, going out, interpellated the office boy.

'Why did you laugh when my friends came to luncheon? You must learn manners.'

'Please, sir, the kid, the young gentleman I mean, said he came on business,' answered the boy, showing apoplectic symptoms.

'So he did; luncheon is his business. Go and bring luncheon for – five, and see that there are chicken, cutlets, tartlets, apricots, and ginger-beer.'

The boy departed and Merton reflected. 'A hoax, somebody's practical joke,' he said to himself. 'I wonder who Miss None-so-pretty is.' Then he returned, assured Batsy that luncheon was even at the doors, and leaving her to look at *Punch*, led Mr. Apsley aside. 'Tommy,' he said (having seen his signature), 'where do you live?'

The boy named a street on the frontiers of St. John's Wood.

'And who is your father?'

'Major Apsley, D.S.O.'

'And how did you come here?'

'In a hansom. I told the man to wait.'

'How did you get away?'

'Father took us to Lord's, with Miss Limmer, and there was a crowd, and Bats and I slipped out; for None-so-pretty said we ought to call on you.'

'Who is Miss Limmer?'

'Our governess.'

'Have you a mother?'

The child's brown eyes filled with tears, and his cheeks flushed. 'It was in India that she – '

'Yes, be a man, Tommy. I am looking the other way,' which Merton did for some seconds. 'Now, Tommy, is Miss Limmer kind to you?'

The child's face became strangely set and blank; his eyes looking vacant. 'Miss Limmer is very kind to us. She loves us and we love her dearly. Ask Batsy,' he said in a monotonous voice, as if he were repeating a lesson. 'Batsy, come here,' he said in the same voice. 'Is Miss Limmer kind to us?'

Batsy threw up her eyes – it was like a stage effect, 'We love Miss Limmer dearly, and she loves us. She is very, very kind to us, like our dear mamma.' Her voice was monotonous too. 'I never can say the last part,' said Tommy. 'Batsy knows it; about dear mamma.'

'Indeed!' said Merton. 'Tommy, *why* did you come here?'

'I don't know. I told you that None-so-pretty told us to. She did it after she saw *that* when we were bathing.' Tommy raised one of his little loose breeks that did not cover the knee.

That was not pleasant to look on: it was on the inside of the right thigh.

'How did you get hurt *there*?' asked Merton.

The boy's monotonous chant began again: his eyes were fixed and blank as before. 'I fell off a tree, and my leg hit a branch on the way down.'

'Curious accident,' said Merton; 'and None-so-pretty saw the mark?'

'Yes.'

'And asked you how you got it?'

'Yes, and she saw blue marks on Batsy, all over her arms.'

'And you told None-so-pretty that you fell off a tree?'

'Yes.'

'And she told you to come here?'

'Yes, she had read your printed article.'

'Well, here is luncheon,' said Merton, and bade the office boy call Miss Blossom from the inner chamber to share the meal. Batsy had as low a chair as possible, and was disposing her napkin to do the duty of a pinafore.

Miss Blossom entered from within with downcast eyes.

'None-so-pretty!'

'None-so-pretty!' shouted the children, while Tommy rushed to throw his arms round her neck, to meet which she stooped down, concealing a face of blushes. Batsy descended from her chair, waddled up, climbed another chair, and attacked the girl from the rear. The office boy was arranging luncheon. Merton called him to the writing-table, scribbled a note, and said, 'Take that to Dr. Maitland, with my compliments.'

Maitland had been one of the guests at the inaugural dinner. He was entirely devoid of patients, and was living on the anticipated gains of a great work on Clinical Psychology.

'Tell Dr. Maitland he will find me at luncheon if he comes instantly,' said Merton as the boy fled on his errand. 'I see that I need not introduce you to my young friends, Miss Blossom,' said Merton. 'May I beg you to help Miss Apsley to arrange her tucker?'

Miss Blossom, almost unbecomingly brilliant in her complexion, did as she was asked. Batsy had cold chicken, new potatoes, green peas, and two helpings of apricot tart. Tommy devoted himself to cutlets. A very mild shandygaff was compounded for him in an old Oriel pewter. Both children made love to Miss Blossom with their eyes. It was not at all what Merton felt inclined to do; the lady had entangled him in a labyrinth of puzzledom.

'None-so-pretty,' exclaimed Tommy, 'I am glad you told us to come here. Your friends are nice.'

Merton bowed to Tommy, 'I am glad too,' he said. 'Miss Blossom knew that we were kindred souls, same kind of chaps, I mean, you and me, you know, Tommy!'

Miss Blossom became more and more like the fabled peony, the crimson variety. Luckily the office boy ushered in Dr. Maitland, who, exchanging glances of surprise with Merton, over the children's heads, began to make himself agreeable. He had nearly as many tricks as Miss Maskelyne. He was doing the short-sighted man eating celery, and unable to find the salt because he is unable to find his eyeglass.

Merton, seeing his clients absorbed in mirth, murmured something vague about 'business,' and spirited Miss Blossom away to the inner chamber.

'Sit down, pray, Miss Blossom. There is no time to waste. What do you know about these children? Why did you send them here?'

The girl, who was pale enough now, said, 'I never thought they would come.'

'They are here, however. What do you know about them?'

'I went to stay, lately, at the Home Farm on their grandmother's place. We became great friends. I found out that they were motherless, and that they were being cruelly ill-treated by their governess.'

'Miss Limmer?'

'Yes. But they both said they loved her dearly. They always said that when asked. I gathered from their grandmother, old Mrs. Apsley, that their father would listen to nothing against the governess. The old lady cried in a helpless way, and said he was capable of marrying the woman, out of obstinacy, if anybody interfered. I had your advertisement, and I thought you might disentangle him. It was a kind of joke. I only told them that you were a kind gentleman. I never dreamed of their really coming.'

'Well, you must take them back again presently, there is the address. You must see their father; you must wait till you see him. And how are you to explain this escapade? I can't have the children taught to lie.'

'They have been taught *that* lesson already.'

'I don't think they are aware of it,' said Merton.

Miss Blossom stared.

'I can't explain, but you must find a way of keeping them out of a scrape.'

'I think I can manage it,' said Miss Blossom demurely.

'I hope so. And manage, if you please, to see this Miss Limmer and observe what kind of person she is,' said Merton, with his hand on the door handle, adding, 'Please ask Dr. Maitland to come here, and do you keep the children amused for a moment.'

Miss Blossom nodded and left the room; there was laughter in the other chamber. Presently Maitland joined Merton.

'Look here,' said Merton, 'we must be rapid. These children are being cruelly ill-treated and deny it. Will you get into talk with the boy, and ask him if he is fond of his governess, say "Miss Limmer," and notice what he says and how he says it? Then we must pack them away.'

'All right,' said Maitland.

They returned to the children. Miss Blossom retreated to the inner room. Bats simplified matters by falling asleep in the client's chair. Maitland began by talking about schools. Was Tommy going to Eton?

Tommy did not know. He had a governess at home.

'Not at a preparatory school yet? A big fellow like you?'

Tommy said that he would like to go to school, but they would not send him.

'Why not?'

Tommy hesitated, blushed, and ended by saying that they didn't think it safe, as he walked in his sleep.

'You will soon grow out of that,' said Maitland, 'but it is not very safe at school. A boy I knew was found sound asleep on the roof at school.'

'He might have fallen off,' said Tommy.

'Yes. That's why your people keep you at home. But in a year or two you will be all right. Know any Latin yet?'

Tommy said that Miss Limmer taught him Latin.

'Are you and she great friends?'

Tommy's face and voice altered as before, while he mechanically repeated the tale of the mutual affection which linked him with Miss Limmer.

'*That's* all very jolly,' said Maitland.

'Now, Tommy,' said Merton, 'we must waken Batsy, and Miss Blossom is going to take you both home. Hope we shall often meet.'

He called Miss Blossom; Batsy kissed both of her new friends. Merton conducted the party to the cab, and settled, in spite of Tommy's remonstrances, with the cabman, who made a good thing of it, and nodded when told to drive away as soon as he had deposited his charges at their door. Then Merton led Maitland upstairs and offered him a cigar.

'What do you think of it?' he asked.

'Common post-hypnotic suggestion by the governess,' said Maitland.

'I guessed as much, but can it really be worked like that? You are not chaffing?'

'Simplest thing to work in the world,' said Maitland. 'A lot of nonsense, however, that the public believes in can't be done. The woman could not sit down in St. John's Wood, and "will" Tommy to come to her if he was in the next room. At least she might "will" till she was black in the face, and he would know nothing about it. But she can put him to sleep, and make him say what he does not want to say, in answer to questions, afterwards, when he is awake.'

'You're sure of it?'

'It is as certain as anything in the world up to a certain point.'

'The girl said something that the boy did not say, more gushing, about his dead mother.'

'The hypnotised subject often draws a line somewhere.'

'The woman must be a fiend,' said Merton.

'Some of them are, now and then,' said the author of *Clinical Psychology*.

* * * * *

Miss Blossom's cab, the driver much encouraged by Tommy, who conversed with him through the trap in the roof, dashed up to the door of a house close to Lord's. The horse was going fast, and nearly cannoned into another cab-horse, also going fast, which was almost thrown on its haunches by the driver. Inside the other hansom was a tall man with a pale face under the tan, who was nervously gnawing his moustache. Miss Blossom saw him, Tommy saw him, and cried 'Father!' Half-hidden behind a blind of the house Miss Blossom beheld a woman's face, expectant. Clearly she was Miss Limmer. All the while that they were driving Miss Blossom's wits had been at work to construct a story to account for the absence and return of the children. Now, by a flash of invention, she called to her cabman, 'Drive on – fast!' Major Apsley saw his lost children with their arms round the neck of a wonderfully pretty girl; the pretty girl waved her parasol to him with a smile, beckoning forwards; the children waved their arms, calling out 'A race! a race!'

What could a puzzled parent do but bid his cabman follow like the wind? Miss Blossom's cab flew past Lord's, dived into Regent's Park, leading by two lengths; reached the Zoological Gardens, and there its crew alighted, demurely waiting for the Major. He leaped from his hansom, and taking off his hat, strode up to Miss Blossom, as if he were leading a charge. The children captured him by the legs. 'What does this mean, Madam? What are you doing with my children? Who are you?'

'She's None-so-pretty,' said Tommy, by way of introduction.

Miss Blossom bowed with grace, and raising her head, shot two violet rays into the eyes of the Major, which were of a bistre hue. But they accepted the message, like a receiver in wireless telegraphy. No man, let be a Major, could have resisted None-so-pretty at that moment. 'Come into the gardens,' she said, and led the way. 'You would like a ride on the elephant, Tommy?' she asked Master Apsley. 'And you, Batsy?'

The children shouted assent.

'How in the world does she know them?' thought the bewildered officer.

The children mounted the elephant.

'Now, Major Apsley,' said Miss Blossom, 'I have found your children.'

'I owe you thanks, Madam; I have been very anxious, but – '

'It is more than your thanks I want. I want you to do something for me, a very little thing,' said Miss Blossom, with the air of a supplicating angel, the violet eyes dewy with tears.

'I am sure I shall be delighted to do anything you ask, but – '

'Will you *promise*? It is a very little thing indeed!' and her hands were clasped in entreaty. 'Please promise!'

'Well, I promise.'

'Then keep your word: it is a little thing! Take Tommy home this instant, let nobody speak to him or touch him – and – make him take a bath, and see him take it.'

'Take a bath!'

'Yes, at once, in your presence. Then ask him.. any questions you please, but pay extreme attention to his answers and his face, and the sound of his voice. If that is not enough do the same with Batsy. And after that I think you had better not let the children out of your sight for a short time.'

'These are very strange requests.'

'And it was by a strange piece of luck that I met you driving home to see if the lost children were found, and secured your attention before it could be pre-engaged.'

'But where did you find them and why?'

Miss Blossom interrupted him, 'Here is the address of Dr. Maitland, I have written it on my own card; he can answer some questions you may want to ask. Later I will answer anything. And now in the name of God,' said the girl reverently, with sudden emotion, 'you will keep your promise to the letter?'

'I will,' said the Major, and Miss Blossom waved her parasol to the children. 'You must give the poor elephant a rest, he is tired,' she cried, and the tender-hearted Batsy needed no more to make her descend from the great earth-shaking beast. The children attacked her with kisses, and then walked off, looking back, each holding one of the paternal hands, and treading, after the manner of childhood, on the paternal toes.

Miss Blossom walked till she met an opportune omnibus.

About an hour later a four-wheeler bore a woman with blazing eyes, and a pile of trunks gaping untidily, from the Major's house in St. John's Wood Road.

The Honourable Company had won its first victory: Major Apsley, having fulfilled Miss Blossom's commands, had seen what she expected him to see, and was disentangled from Miss Limmer.

The children still call their new stepmother None-so-pretty.

IV. ADVENTURE OF THE RICH UNCLE

'His God is his belly, Mr. Graham,' said the client, 'and if the text strikes you as disagreeably unrefined, think how it must pain me to speak thus of an uncle, if only by marriage.'

The client was a meagre matron of forty-five, or thereabouts. Her dark scant hair was smooth, and divided down the middle. Acerbity spoke in every line of her face, which was of a dusky yellow, where it did not rather verge on the faint hues of a violet past its prime. She wore thread gloves, and she carried a battered reticule of early Victorian days, in which Merton suspected that tracts were lurking. She had an anxious peevish mouth; in truth she was not the kind of client in whom Merton's heart delighted.

And yet he was sorry for her, especially as her rich uncle's cook was the goddess of the gentleman whose god had just been denounced in scriptural terms by the client, a Mrs. Gisborne. She was sad, as well she might be, for she was a struggler, with a large family, and great expectations from the polytheistic uncle who adored his cook and one of his nobler organs.

'What has his history been, this gentleman's – Mr. Fulton, I think you called him?'

'He was a drysalter in the City, sir,' and across Merton's mind flitted a vision of a dark shop with Finnan haddocks, bacon, and tongues in the window, and smelling terribly of cheese.

'Oh, a drysalter?' he said, not daring to display ignorance by asking questions to corroborate his theory of the drysalting business.

'A drysalter, sir, and isinglass importer.'

Merton was conscious of vagueness as to isinglass, and was distantly reminded of a celebrated racehorse. However, it was clear that Mr. Fulton was a retired tradesman of some kind. 'He went out of isinglass – before the cheap scientific substitute was invented (it is made out of old quill pens) – with seventy-five thousand pounds. And it *ought* to come to my children. He has not another relation living but ourselves; he married my aunt. But we never see him: he said that he could not stand our Sunday dinners at Hampstead.'

A feeling not remote from sympathy with Mr. Fulton stole over Merton's mind as he pictured these festivals. 'Is his god very – voluminous?'

Mrs. Gisborne stared.

'Is he a very portly gentleman?'

'No, Mr. Graham, he is next door to a skeleton, though you would not expect it, considering.'

'Considering his devotion to the pleasures of the table?'

'Gluttony, shameful waste *I* call it. And he is a stumbling block and a cause of offence to others. He is a patron of the City and Suburban College of Cookery, and founded two scholarships there, for scholars learning how to pamper the – '

'The epicure,' said Merton. He knew the City and Suburban College of Cookery. One of his band, a Miss Frere, was a Fellow and Tutor of that academy.

'And about what age is your uncle?' he asked.

'About sixty, and not a white hair on his head.'

'Then he may marry his cook?'

'He will, sir.'

'And is very likely to have a family.'

Mrs. Gisborne sniffed, and produced a pocket handkerchief from the early Victorian reticule. She applied the handkerchief to her eyes in silence. Merton observed her with pity. 'We need the money so; there are so many of us,' said the lady.

'Do you think that Mr. Fulton is – passionately in love, with his domestic?'

'He only loves his meals,' said Mrs. Gisborne; '*he* does not want to marry her, but she has a hold over him through – his – '

'Passions, not of the heart,' said Merton hastily. He dreaded an anatomical reference.

'He is afraid of losing her. He and his cronies give each other dinners, jealous of each other they are; and he actually pays the woman two hundred a year.'

'And beer money?' said Merton. He had somewhere read or heard of beer money as an item in domestic finance.

'I don't know about that. The cruel thing is that she is a woman of strict temperance principles. So am I. I am sure it is an awful thing to say, Mr. Graham, but Satan has sometimes put it into my heart to wish that the woman, like too, too many of her sort, was the victim of alcoholic temptations. He has a fearful temper, and if once she was not fit for duty at one of his dinners, this awful gnawing anxiety would cease to ride my bosom. He would pack her off.'

'Very natural. She is free from the besetting sin of the artistic temperament?'

'If you mean drink, she is; and that is one reason why he values her. His last cook, and his last but one – ' Here Mrs. Gisborne narrated at some length the tragic histories of these artists.

'Providential, I thought it, but now,' she said despairingly.

'She certainly seems a difficult woman to dislodge,' said Merton. 'A dangerous entanglement. Any followers allowed? Could anything be done through the softer emotions? Would a guardsman, for instance – ?'

'She hates the men. Never one of them darkens her kitchen fire. Offers she has had by the score, but they come by post, and she laughs and burns them. Old Mr. Potter, one of his cronies, tried to get her away *that* way, but he is over seventy, and old at that, and she thought she had another chance to better herself. And she'll take it, Mr. Graham, if you can't do something: she'll take it.'

'Will you permit me to say that you seem to know a good deal about her! Perhaps you have some sort of means of intelligence in the enemy's camp?'

'The kitchen maid,' said Mrs. Gisborne, purpling a little, 'is the sister of our servant, and tells her things.'

'I see,' said Merton. 'Now can you remember any little weakness of this, I must frankly admit, admirable artist and exemplary woman?'

'You are not going to take her side, a scheming red-faced hussy, Mr. Graham?'

'I never betrayed a client, Madam, and if you mean that I am likely to help this person into your uncle's arms, you greatly misconceive me, and the nature of my profession.'

'I beg your pardon, sir, but I will say that your heart does not seem to be in the case.'

'It is not quite the kind of case with which we are accustomed to deal,' said Merton. 'But you have not answered my question. Are there any weak points in the defence? To Venus she is cold, of Bacchus she is disdainful.'

'I never heard of the gentlemen I am sure, sir, but as to her weaknesses, she has the temper of a – ' Here Mrs. Gisborne paused for a comparison. Her knowledge of natural history and of mythology, the usual sources of parallels, failed to provide a satisfactory resemblance to the cook's temper.

'The temper of a Megæra,' said Merton, admitting to himself that the word was not, though mythological, what he could wish.

'Of a Megæra as you know that creature, sir, and impetuous! If everything is not handy, if that poor girl is not like clockwork with the sauces, and herbs, and things, if a saucepan boils over, or a ham falls into the fire, if the girl treads on the tail of one of the cats – and the woman keeps a dozen – then she flies at her with anything that comes handy.'

'She is fond of cats?' said Merton; 'really this lady has sympathetic points:' and he patted the grey Russian puss, Kutuzoff, which was a witness to these interviews.

'She dotes on the nasty things: and you may well say "lady!" Her Siamese cat, a wild beast he is, took the first prize at the Crystal Palace Show. The papers said "Miss Blowser's *Rangoon*, bred by the exhibitor." Miss Blowser! I don't know what the world is coming to. He stands on the doorsteps,

the cat, like a lynx, and as fierce as a lion. Why he got her into the police-court: flew at a dog, and nearly tore his owner, a clergyman, to pieces. There were articles about it in the papers.'

'I seem to remember it,' said Merton. '*Christianos ad Leones*'. In fact he had written this humorous article himself. 'But is there nothing else?' he asked. 'Only a temper, so natural to genius disturbed or diverted in the process of composition, and a passion for the *felidae*, such as has often been remarked in the great. There was Charles Baudelaire, Mahomet – '

'I don't know what you mean, sir, and,' said Mrs. Gisborne, rising, and snapping her reticule, 'I think I was a fool for answering your advertisement. I did not come here to be laughed at, and I think common politeness – '

'I beg a thousand pardons,' said Merton. 'I am most distressed at my apparent discourtesy. My mind was preoccupied by the circumstances of this very difficult case, and involuntarily glided into literary anecdote on the subject of cats and their owners. They are my passion – cats – and I regret that they inspire you with antipathy.' Here he picked up Kutuzoff and carried him into the inner room.

'It is not that I object to any of Heaven's creatures kept in their place,' said Mrs. Gisborne somewhat mollified, 'but you must make allowances, sir, for my anxiety. It sours a mother of nine. Friday is one of his gorging dinner-parties, and who knows what may happen if she pleases him? The kitchen maid says, I mean I hear, that she wears an engaged ring already.'

'That is very bad,' said Merton, with sympathy. 'The dinner is on Friday, you say?' and he made a note of the date.

'Yes, 15 Albany Grove, on the Regent's Canal.'

'You can think of nothing else – no weakness to work on?'

'No, sir, just her awful temper; I would save him from it, for *he* has another as bad. And besides hopes from him have kept me up so long, his only relation, and times are so hard, and schooling and boots, and everything so dear, and we so many in family.' Tears came into the poor lady's eyes.

'I'll give the case my very best attention,' he said, shaking hands with the client. To Merton's horror she tried, Heaven help her, to pass a circular packet, wrapped in paper, into his hand. He evaded it. It was a first interview, for which no charge was made. 'What can be done shall be done, though I confess that I do not see my way,' and he accompanied her downstairs to the street.

'I behaved like a cad with my chaff,' he said to himself, 'but hang me if I see how to help her. And I rather admire that cook.'

He went into the inner room, wakened the sleeping partner, Logan, on the sofa, and unfolded the case with every detail. 'What can we do, *que faire*!'

'There's an exhibition of modern, mediæval, ancient, and savage cookery at Earl's Court, the Cookeries,' said Logan. 'Couldn't we seduce an artist like Miss Blowser there, I mean *thither* of course, the night before the dinner, and get her up into the Great Wheel and somehow stop the Wheel – and make her too late for her duties?'

'And how are you going to stop the Wheel?'

'Speak to the Man at the Wheel. Bribe the beggar.'

'Dangerous, and awfully expensive. Then think of all the other people on the Wheel! Logan, *vous chassez de race*. The old Restalrig blood is in your veins.'

'My ancestors nearly nipped off with a king, and why can't I carry off a cook? Hustle her into a hansom – '

'Oh, bah! these are not modern methods.'

'*Il n'y a rien tel que d'enlever*,' said Logan.

'I never shall stain the cause with police-courts,' said Merton. 'It would be fatal.'

'I've heard of a cook who fell on his sword when the fish did not come up to time. Now a raid on the fish? She might fall on her carving knife when they did not arrive, or leap into the flames of the kitchen fire, like Œnone, don't you know.'

'Bosh. Vatel was far from the sea, and he had not a fish-monger's shop round the corner. Be modern.'

Logan rumpled his hair, 'Can't I get her to lunch at a restaurant and ply her with the wines of Eastern France? No, she is Temperance personified. Can't we send her a forged telegram to say that her mother is dying? Servants seem to have such lots of mothers, always inconveniently, or conveniently, moribund.'

'I won't have forgery. Great heavens, how obsolete you are! Besides, that would not put her employer in a rage.'

'Could I go and consult – ?' he mentioned a specialist. 'He is a man of ideas.'

'He is a man of the purest principles – and an uncommonly hard hitter.'

'It is his purity I want. My own mind is hereditarily lawless. I want something not immoral, yet efficacious. There was that parson, whom you say the woman's cat nearly devoured. Like Paul with beasts he fought the cat. Now, I wonder if that injured man is not meditating some priestly revenge that would do our turn and get rid of Miss Blowser?'

Merton shook his head impatiently. His own invention was busy, but to no avail. Miss Blowser seemed impregnable. Kutuzoff Hedzoff, the puss, stalked up to Logan and leaped on his knees. Logan stroked him, Kutuzoff purred and blinked, Logan sought inspiration in his topaz eyes. At last he spoke: 'Will you leave this affair to me, Merton? I think I have found out a way.'

'What way?'

'That's my secret. You are so beastly moral, you might object. One thing I may tell you – it does not compromise the Honourable Company of Disentanglers.'

'You are not going to try any detective work; to find out if she is a woman with a past, with a husband living? You are not going to put a live adder among the eels? I daresay drysalters eat eels. It is the reading of sensational novels that ruins our youth.'

'What a suspicious beggar you are. Certainly I am neither a detective nor a murderer *à la Montépin*!

'No practical jokes with the victuals?'

'Of course not.'

'No kidnapping Miss Blowser?'

'Certainly no kidnapping – Miss Blowser.'

'Now, honour bright, is your plan within the law? No police-court publicity?'

'No, the police will have no say or show in the matter; at least,' said Logan, 'as far as my legal studies inform me, they won't. But I can take counsel's opinion if you insist on it.'

'Then you are sailing near the wind?'

'Really I don't think so: not really what you call near.'

'I am sorry for that unlucky Mrs. Gisborne,' said Merton, musingly. 'And with two such tempers as the cook's and Mr. Fulton's the match could not be a happy one. Well, Logan, I suppose you won't tell me what your game is?'

'Better not, I think, but, I assure you, honour is safe. I am certain that nobody can say anything. I rather expect to earn public gratitude, on the whole. *You* can't appear in any way, nor the rest of us. By-the-bye do you remember the address of the parson whose dog was hurt?'

'I think I kept a cutting of the police case; it was amusing,' said Merton, looking through a kind of album, and finding presently the record of the incident.

'It may come in handy, or it may not,' said Logan. He then went off, and had Merton followed him he might not have been reassured. For Logan first walked to a chemist's shop, where he purchased a quantity of a certain drug. Next he went to the fencing rooms which he frequented, took his fencing mask and glove, borrowed a fencing glove from a left-handed swordsman whom he knew, and drove to his rooms with this odd assortment of articles. Having deposited them, he paid a call at the dwelling of a fair member of the Disentanglers, Miss Frere, the lady instructress in the culinary art, at the City

and Suburban College of Cookery, whereof, as we have heard, Mr. Fulton, the eminent drysalter, was a patron and visitor. Logan unfolded the case and his plan of campaign to Miss Frere, who listened with intelligent sympathy.

'Do you know the man by sight?' he asked.

'Oh yes, and he knows me perfectly well. Last year he distributed the prizes at the City and Suburban School of Cookery, and paid me the most extraordinary compliments.'

'Well deserved, I am confident,' said Logan; 'and now you are sure that you know exactly what you have to do, as I have explained?'

'Yes, I am to be walking through Albany Grove at a quarter to four on Friday.'

'Be punctual.'

'You may rely on me,' said Miss Frere.

Logan next day went to Trevor's rooms in the Albany; he was the capitalist who had insisted on helping to finance the Disentanglers. To Trevor he explained the situation, unfolded his plan, and asked leave to borrow his private hansom.

'Delighted,' said Trevor. 'I'll put on an old suit of tweeds, and a seedy bowler, and drive you myself. It will be fun. Or should we take my motor car?'

'No, it attracts too much attention.'

'Suppose we put a number on my cab, and paint the wheels yellow, like pirates, you know, when they are disguising a captured ship. It won't do to look like a private cab.'

'These strike me as judicious precautions, Trevor, and worthy of your genius. That is, if we are not caught.'

'Oh, we won't be caught,' said Trevor. 'But, in the meantime, let us find that place you mean to go to on a map of London, and I'll drive you there now in a dog-cart. It is better to know the lie of the land.'

Logan agreed and they drove to his objective in the afternoon; it was beyond the border of known West Hammersmith. Trevor reconnoitred and made judicious notes of short cuts.

On the following day, which was Thursday, Logan had a difficult piece of diplomacy to execute. He called at the rooms of the clergyman, a bachelor and a curate, whose dog and person had suffered from the assaults of Miss Blowser's Siamese favourite. He expected difficulties, for a good deal of ridicule, including Merton's article, *Christianos ad Leones*, had been heaped on this martyr. Logan looked forward to finding him crusty, but, after seeming a little puzzled, the holy man exclaimed, 'Why, you must be Logan of Trinity?'

'The same,' said Logan, who did not remember the face or name (which was Wilkinson) of his host.

'Why, I shall never forget your running catch under the scoring-box at Lord's,' exclaimed Mr. Wilkinson, 'I can see it now. It saved the match. I owe you more than I can say,' he added with deep emotion.

'Then be grateful, and do me a little favour. I want – just for an hour or two – to borrow your dog,' and he stooped to pat the animal, a fox-terrier bearing recent and glorious scars.

'Borrow Scout! Why, what can you want with him?'

'I have suffered myself through an infernal wild beast of a cat in Albany Grove,' said Logan, 'and I have a scheme – it is unchristian I own – of revenge.'

The curate's eyes glittered vindictively: 'Scout is no match for the brute,' he said in a tone of manly regret.

'Oh, Scout will be all right. There is not going to be a fight. He is only needed to – give tone to the affair. You will be able to walk him safely through Albany Grove after to-morrow.'

'Won't there be a row if you kill the cat? He is what they think a valuable animal. I never could stand cats myself.'

'The higher vermin,' said Logan. 'But not a hair of his whiskers shall be hurt. He will seek other haunts, that's all.'

'But you don't mean to steal him?' asked the curate anxiously. 'You see, suspicion might fall on me, as I am known to bear a grudge to the brute.'

'I steal him! Not I,' said Logan. 'He shall sleep in his owner's arms, if she likes. But Albany Grove shall know him no more.'

'Then you may take Scout,' said Mr. Wilkinson. 'You have a cab there, shall I drive to your rooms with you and him?'

'Do,' said Logan, 'and then dine at the club.' Which they did, and talked much cricket, Mr. Wilkinson being an enthusiast.

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Next day, about 3.40 P.M., a hansom drew up at the corner of Albany Grove. The fare alighted, and sauntered past Mr. Fulton's house. Rangoon, the Siamese puss, was sitting in a scornful and leonine attitude, in a tree of the garden above the railings, outside the open kitchen windows, whence came penetrating and hospitable smells of good fare. The stranger passed, and as he returned, dropped something here and there on the pavement. It was valerian, which no cat can resist.

Miss Blowser was in a culinary crisis, and could not leave the kitchen range. Her face was of a fiery complexion; her locks were in a fine disorder. 'Is Rangoon in his place, Mary?' she inquired of the kitchen maid.

'Yes, ma'am, in his tree,' said the maid.

In this tree Rangoon used to sit like a Thug, dropping down on dogs who passed by.

Presently the maid said, 'Ma'am, Rangoon has jumped down, and is walking off to the right, after a gentleman.'

'After a sparrow, I dare say, bless him,' said Miss Blowser. Two minutes later she asked, 'Has Rangy come back?'

'No, ma'am.'

'Just look out and see what he is doing, the dear.'

'He's walking along the pavement, ma'am, sniffing at something. And oh! there's that curate's dog.'

'Yelping little brute! I hope Rangy will give him snuff,' said Miss Blowser.

'He's flown at him,' cried the maid ambiguously, in much excitement. 'Oh, ma'am, the gentleman has caught hold of Rangoon. He's got a wire mask on his face, and great thick gloves, not to be scratched. He's got Rangoon: he's putting him in a bag,' but by this time Miss Blowser, brandishing a saucepan with a long handle, had rushed out of the kitchen, through the little garden, cannoned against Mr. Fulton, who happened to be coming in with flowers to decorate his table, knocked him against a lamp-post, opened the garden gate, and, armed and bareheaded as she was, had rushed forth. You might have deemed that you beheld Bellona speeding to the fray.

What Miss Blowser saw was a man disappearing into a hansom, whence came the yapping of a dog. Another cab was loitering by, empty; and this cabman had his orders. Logan had seen to *that*. To hail that cab, to leap in, to cry, 'Follow the scoundrel in front: a sovereign if you catch him,' was to the active Miss Blowser the work of a moment. The man whipped up his horse, the pursuit began, 'there was racing and chasing on Cannobie Lee,' Marylebone rang with the screams of female rage and distress. Mr. Fulton, he also, leaped up and rushed in pursuit, wringing his hands. He had no turn of speed, and stopped panting. He only saw Miss Blowser whisk into her cab, he only heard her yells that died in the distance. Mr. Fulton sped back into his house. He shouted for Mary: 'What's the matter with your mistress, with my cook?' he raved.

'Somebody's taken her cat, sir, and is off, in a cab, and her after him.'

‘After her cat! D- her cat,’ cried Mr. Fulton. ‘My dinner will be ruined! It is the last she shall touch in *this* house. Out she packs – pack her things, Mary; no, don’t – do what you can in the kitchen. I *must* find a cook. Her cat!’ and with language unworthy of a drysalter Mr. Fulton clapped on his hat, and sped into the street, with a vague idea of hurrying to Fortnum and Mason’s, or some restaurant, or a friend’s house, indeed to any conceivable place where a cook might be recruited *impromptu*. ‘She leaves this very day,’ he said aloud, as he all but collided with a lady, a quiet, cool-looking lady, who stopped and stared at him.

‘Oh, Miss Frere!’ said Mr. Fulton, raising his hat, with a wild gleam of hope in the trouble of his eyes, ‘I have had such a misfortune!’

‘What has happened, Mr. Fulton?’

‘Oh, ma’am, I’ve lost my cook, and me with a dinner-party on to-day.’

‘Lost your cook? Not by death, I hope?’

‘No, ma’am, she has run away, in the very crisis, as I may call it.’

‘With whom?’

‘With nobody. After her cat. In a cab. I am undone. Where can I find a cook? You may know of some one disengaged, though it is late in the day, and dinner at seven. Can’t you help me?’

‘Can you trust me, Mr. Fulton?’

‘Trust you; how, ma’am?’

‘Let me cook your dinner, at least till your cook catches her cat,’ said Miss Frere, smiling.

‘You, don’t mean it, a lady!’

‘But a professed cook, Mr. Fulton, and anxious to help so nobly generous a patron of the art.. if you can trust me.’

‘Trust you, ma’am!’ said Mr. Fulton, raising to heaven his obsecrating hands. ‘Why, you’re a genius. It is a miracle, a mere miracle of good luck.’

By this time, of course, a small crowd of little boys and girls, amateurs of dramatic scenes, was gathering.

‘We have no time to waste, Mr. Fulton. Let us go in, and let me get to work. I dare say the cook will be back before I have taken off my gloves.’

‘Not her, nor does she cook again in my house. The shock might have killed a man of my age,’ said Mr. Fulton, breathing heavily, and leading the way up the steps to his own door. ‘Her cat, the hussy!’ he grumbled.

Mr. Fulton kept his word. When Miss Blowser returned, with her saucepan and Rangoon, she found her trunks in the passage, corded by Mr. Fulton’s own trembling hands, and she departed for ever.

Her chase had been a stern chase, a long chase, the cab driven by Trevor had never been out of sight. It led her, in the western wilds, to a Home for Decayed and Destitute Cats, and it had driven away before she entered the lane leading to the Home. But there she found Rangoon. He had just been deposited there, in a seedy old traveller’s fur-lined sleeping bag, the matron of the Home averred, by a very pleasant gentleman, who said he had found the cat astray, lost, and thinking him a rare and valuable animal had deemed it best to deposit him at the Home. He had left money to pay for advertisements. He had even left the advertisement, typewritten (by Miss Blossom).

‘FOUND. A magnificent Siamese Cat. Apply to the Home for Destitute and Decayed Cats, Water Lane, West Hammersmith.’

‘Very thoughtful of the gentleman,’ said the matron of the Home. ‘No; he did not leave any address. Said something about doing good by stealth.’

‘Stealth, why he stole my cat!’ exclaimed Miss Blowser. ‘He must have had the advertisement printed like that ready beforehand. It’s a conspiracy,’ and she brandished her saucepan.

The matron, who was prejudiced in favour of Logan, and his two sovereigns, which now need not be expended in advertisements, was alarmed by the hostile attitude of Miss Blowser. ‘There’s

your cat,' she said drily; 'it ain't stealing a cat to leave it, with money for its board, and to pay for advertisements, in a well-conducted charitable institution, with a duchess for president. And he even left five shillings to pay for the cab of anybody as might call for the cat. There is your money.'

Miss Blowser threw the silver away.

'Take your old cat in the bag,' said the matron, slamming the door in the face of Miss Blowser.

* * * * *

After the trial for breach of promise of marriage, and after paying the very considerable damages which Miss Blowser demanded and received, old Mr. Fulton hardened his heart, and engaged a male *chef*.

The gratitude of Mrs. Gisborne, now free from all anxiety, was touching. But Merton assured her that he knew nothing whatever of the stratagem, scarcely a worthy one, he thought, as she reported it, by which her uncle was disentangled.

It was Logan's opinion, and it is mine, that he had not been guilty of theft, but perhaps of the wrongous detention or imprisonment of Rangoon. 'But,' he said, 'the Habeas Corpus Act has no clause about cats, and in Scottish law, which is good enough for *me*, there is no property in cats. You can't, legally, *steal* them.'

'How do you know?' asked Merton.

'I took the opinion of an eminent sheriff substitute.'

'What is that?'

'Oh, a fearfully swagger legal official: *you* have nothing like it.'

'Rum country, Scotland,' said Merton.

'Rum country, England,' said Logan, indignantly. '*You* have no property in corpses.'

Merton was silenced.

Neither could foresee how momentous, to each of them, the question of property in corpses was to prove. *O pectora cæca*!

* * * * *

Miss Blowser is now Mrs. Potter. She married her aged wooer, and Rangoon still wins prizes at the Crystal Palace.

V. THE ADVENTURE OF THE OFFICE SCREEN

It is not to be supposed that all the enterprises of the Company of Disentanglers were fortunate. Nobody can command success, though, on the other hand, a number of persons, civil and military, are able to keep her at a distance with surprising uniformity. There was one class of business which Merton soon learned to renounce in despair, just as some sorts of maladies defy our medical science.

'It is curious, and not very creditable to our chemists,' Merton said, 'that love philtres were once as common as seidlitz powders, while now we have lost that secret. The wrong persons might drink love philtres, as in the case of Tristram and Iseult. Or an unskilled rural practitioner might send out the wrong drug, as in the instance of Lucretius, who went mad in consequence.'

'Perhaps,' remarked Logan, 'the chemist was voting at the Comitia, and it was his boy who made a mistake about the mixture.'

'Very probably, but as a rule, the love philtres *worked*. Now, with all our boasted progress, the secret is totally lost. Nothing but a love philtre would be of any use in some cases. There is Lord Methusalem, eighty if he is a day.'

'Methusalem has been unco "wastefu' in wives"!' said Logan.

'His family have been consulting me – the women in tears. He *will* marry his grandchildren's German governess, and there is nothing to be done. In such cases nothing is ever to be done. You can easily distract an aged man's volatile affections, and attach them to a new charmer. But she is just as ineligible as the first; marry he *will*, always a young woman. Now if a respectable virgin or widow of, say, fifty, could hand him a love philtre, and gain his heart, appearances would, more or less, be saved. But, short of philtres, there is nothing to be done. We turn away a great deal of business of that sort.'

The Society of Disentanglers, then, reluctantly abandoned dealings in this class of affairs.

In another distressing business, Merton, as a patriot, was obliged to abandon an attractive enterprise. The Marquis of Seakail was serving his country as a volunteer, and had been mentioned in despatches. But, to the misery of his family, he had entangled himself, before his departure, with a young lady who taught in a high school for girls. Her character was unimpeachable, her person graceful; still, as her father was a butcher, the duke and duchess were reluctant to assent to the union. They consulted Merton, and assured him that they would not flinch from expense. A great idea flashed across Merton's mind. He might send out a stalwart band of Disentanglers, who, disguised as the enemy, might capture Seakail, and carry him off prisoner to some retreat where the fairest of his female staff (of course with a suitable chaperon), would await him in the character of a daughter of the hostile race. The result would probably be to detach Seakail's heart from his love in England. But on reflection, Merton felt that the scheme was unworthy of a patriot.

Other painful cases occurred. One lady, a mother, of resolute character, consulted Merton on the case of her son. He was betrothed to an excitable girl, a neighbour in the country, who wrote long literary letters about Mr. George Meredith's novels, and (when abroad) was a perfect Baedeker, or Murray, or Mr. Augustus Hare: instructing through correspondence. So the matron complained, but this was not the worst of it. There was an unhappy family history, of a kind infinitely more common in fiction than in real life. To be explicit, even according to the ideas of the most abject barbarians, the young people, unwittingly, were too near akin for matrimony.

'There is nothing for it but to tell both of them the truth,' said Merton. 'This is not a case in which we can be concerned.'

The resolute matron did not take his counsel. The man was told, not the girl, who died in painful circumstances, still writing. Her letters were later given to the world, though obviously not intended for publication, and only calculated to waken unavailing grief among the sentimental, and to make the judicious tired. There was, however, a case in which Merton may be said to have succeeded by

a happy accident. Two visitors, ladies, were ushered into his consulting room; they were announced as Miss Baddeley and Miss Crofton.

Miss Baddeley was attired in black, wore a thick veil, and trembled a good deal. Miss Crofton, whose dress was a combination of untoward but decisive hues, and whose hat was enormous and flamboyant, appeared to be the other young lady's *confidante*, and conducted the business of the interview.

'My dear friend, Miss Baddeley,' she began, when Miss Baddeley took her hand, and held it, as if for protection and sympathy. 'My dear friend,' repeated Miss Crofton, 'has asked me to accompany her, and state her case. She is too highly strung to speak for herself.'

Miss Baddeley wrung Miss Crofton's hand, and visibly quivered.

Merton assumed an air of sympathy. 'The situation is grave?' he asked.

'My friend,' said Miss Crofton, thoroughly enjoying herself, 'is the victim of passionate and unavailing remorse, are you not, Julia?' Julia nodded.

'Deeply as I sympathise,' said Merton, 'it appears to me that I am scarcely the person to consult. A mother now – '

'Julia has none.'

'Or a father or sister?'

'But for me, Julia is alone in the world.'

'Then,' said Merton, 'there are many periodicals especially intended for ladies. There is *The Woman of the World*, *The Girl's Guardian Angel*, *Fashion and Passion*, and so on. The Editors, in their columns, reply to questions in cases of conscience. I have myself read the replies to *Correspondents*, and would especially recommend those published in a serial conducted by Miss Annie Swan.'

Miss Crofton shook her head.

'Miss Baddeley's social position is not that of the people who are answered in periodicals.'

'Then why does she not consult some discreet and learned person, her spiritual director? Remorse (entirely due, no doubt, to a conscience too delicately sensitive) is not in our line of affairs. We only advise in cases of undesirable matrimonial engagements.'

'So we are aware,' said Miss Crofton. 'Dear Julia *is* engaged, or rather entangled, in – how many cases, dear?'

Julia shook her head and sobbed behind her veil.

'Is it one, Julia – nod when I come to the exact number – two? three? four?'

At the word 'four' Julia nodded assent.

Merton very much wished that Julia would raise her veil. Her figure was excellent, and with so many sins of this kind on her remorseful head, her face, Merton thought, must be worth seeing. The case was new. As a rule, clients wanted to disentangle their friends and relations. *This* client wanted to disentangle herself.

'This case,' said Merton, 'will be difficult to conduct, and the expenses would be considerable. I can hardly advise you to incur them. Our ordinary method is to throw in the way of one or other of the engaged, or entangled persons, some one who is likely to distract their affections; of course,' he added, 'to a more eligible object. How can I hope to find an object more eligible, Miss Crofton, than I must conceive your interesting friend to be?'

Miss Crofton caressingly raised Julia's veil. Before the victim of remorse could bury her face in her hands, Merton had time to see that it was a very pretty one. Julia was dark, pale, with 'eyes like billiard balls' (as a celebrated amateur once remarked), with a beautiful mouth, but with a somewhat wildly enthusiastic expression.

'How can I hope?' Merton went on, 'to find a worthier and more attractive object? Nay, how can I expect to secure the services not of one, but of *four*– '

'Three would do, Mr. Merton,' explained Miss Crofton. 'Is it not so, Julia dearest?'

Julia again nodded assent, and a sob came from behind the veil, which she had resumed.

'Even three,' said Merton, gallantly struggling with a strong inclination to laugh, 'present difficulties. I do not speak the idle language of compliment, Miss Crofton, when I say that our staff would be overtaxed by the exigencies of this case. The expense also, even of three – '

'Expense is no object,' said Miss Crofton.

'But would it not, though I seem to speak against my own interests, be the wisest, most honourable, and infinitely the least costly course, for Miss Baddeley openly to inform her suitors, three out of the four at least, of the actual posture of affairs? I have already suggested that, as the lady takes the matter so seriously to heart, she should consult her director, or, if of the Anglican or other Protestant denomination, her clergyman, who I am sure will agree with me.'

Miss Crofton shook her head. 'Julia is unattached,' she said.

'I had gathered that to one of the four Miss Baddeley was – not indifferent,' said Merton.

'I meant,' said Miss Crofton severely, 'that Miss Baddeley is a Christian unattached. My friend is sensitive, passionate, and deeply religious, but not a member of any recognised denomination. The clergy – '

'They never leave one alone,' said Julia in a musical voice. It was the first time that she had spoken. 'Besides – ' she added, and paused.

'Besides, dear Julia *is*– entangled with a young clergyman whom, almost in despair, she consulted on her case – at a picnic,' said Miss Crofton, adding, 'he is prepared to seek a martyr's fate, but he insists that she must accompany him.'

'How unreasonable!' murmured Merton, who felt that this recalcitrant clergyman was probably not the favourite out of the field of four.

'That is what *I* say,' remarked Miss Crofton. 'It is unreasonable to expect Julia to accompany him when she has so much work to overtake in the home field. But that is the way with all of them.'

'All of them!' exclaimed Merton. 'Are all the devoted young men under vows to seek the crown of martyrdom? Does your friend act as recruiting sergeant, if you will pardon the phrase, for the noble army of martyrs?'

'*Three* of them have made the most solemn promises.'

'And the fourth?'

'*He* is not in holy orders.'

'Am I to understand that all the three admirers about whom Miss Baddeley suffers remorse are clerics?'

'Yes. Julia has a wonderful attraction for the Church,' said Miss Crofton, 'and that is what causes her difficulties. She *can't* write to *them*, or communicate to *them* in personal interviews (as you advised), that her heart is no longer – '

'Theirs,' said Merton. 'But why are the clergy more privileged than the laity? I have heard of such things being broken to laymen. Indeed it has occurred to many of us, and we yet live.'

'I have urged the same facts on Julia myself,' said Miss Crofton. 'Indeed I *know*, by personal experience, that what you say of the laity is true. They do not break their hearts when disappointed. But Julia replies that for her to act as you and I would advise might be to shatter the young clergymen's ideals.'

'To shatter the ideals of three young men in holy orders!' said Merton.

'Yes, for Julia *is* their ideal – Julia and Duty,' said Miss Crofton, as if she were naming a firm. 'She lives only,' here Julia twisted the hand of Miss Crofton, 'she lives only to do good. Her fortune, entirely under her own control, enables her to do a great deal of good.'

Merton began to understand that the charms of Julia were not entirely confined to her *beaux yeux*.

'She is a true philanthropist. Why, she rescued *me* from the snares and temptations of the stage,' said Miss Crofton.

'Oh, *now* I understand,' said Merton; 'I knew that your face and voice were familiar to me. Did you not act in a revival of *The Country Wife*?'

'Hush,' said Miss Crofton.

'And Lady Teazle at an amateur performance in the Canterbury week?'

'These are days of which I do not desire to be reminded,' said Miss Crofton. 'I was trying to explain to you that Julia lives to do good, and has a heart of gold. No, my dear, Mr. Merton will much misconceive you unless you let me explain everything.' This remark was in reply to the agitated gestures of Julia. 'Thrown much among the younger clergy in the exercise of her benevolence, Julia naturally awakens in them emotions not wholly brotherly. Her sympathetic nature carries her off her feet, and she sometimes says "Yes," out of mere goodness of heart, when it would be wiser for her to say "No"; don't you, Julia?'

Merton was reminded of one of M. Paul Bourget's amiable married heroines, who erred out of sheer goodness of heart, but he only signified his intelligence and sympathy.

'Then poor Julia,' Miss Crofton went on hurriedly, 'finds that she has misunderstood her heart. Recently, ever since she met Captain Lestrange – of the Guards – '

'The fourth?' asked Merton.

Miss Crofton nodded. 'She has felt more and more certain that she *had* misread her heart. But on each occasion she *has* felt this – after meeting the – well, the next one.'

'I see the awkwardness,' murmured Merton.

'And then Remorse has set in, with all her horrors. Julia has wept, oh! for nights, on my shoulder.'

'Happy shoulder,' murmured Merton.

'And so, as she *dare* not shatter their ideals, and perhaps cause them to plunge into excesses, moral or doctrinal, this is what she has done. She has said to each, that what the Church, any Church, needs is martyrs, and that if they will go to benighted lands, where the crown of martyrdom may still be won, *then*, if they return safe in five years, then she – will think of naming a day. You will easily see the attractions of this plan for Julia, Mr. Merton. No ideals were shattered, the young men being unaware of the circumstances. They *might* forget her – '

'Impossible,' cried Merton.

'They might forget her, or, perhaps they – '

Miss Crofton hesitated.

'Perhaps they might never – ?' asked Merton.

'Yes,' said Miss Crofton; 'perhaps they might *not*. That would be all to the good for the Church; no ideals would be shattered – the reverse – and dear Julia would – '

'Cherish their pious memories,' said Merton.

'I see that you understand me,' said Miss Crofton.

Merton did understand, and he was reminded of the wicked lady, who, when tired of her lovers, had them put into a sack, and dropped into the Seine.

'But,' he asked, 'has this ingenious system failed to work? I should suppose that each young man, on distant and on deadly shores, was far from causing inconvenience.'

'The defect of the system,' said Miss Crofton, 'is that none of them has gone, or seems in a hurry to go. The first – that was Mr. Bathe, Julia?'

Julia nodded.

'Mr. Bathe was to have gone to Turkey during the Armenian atrocities, and to have *forced* England to intervene by taking the Armenian side and getting massacred. Julia was intensely interested in the Armenians. But Mr. Bathe first said that he must lead Julia to the altar before he went; and then the massacres fell off, and he remains at Cheltenham, and is very tiresome. And then there is Mr. Clancy, *he* was to go out to China, and denounce the gods of the heathen Chinese in the

public streets. But *he* insisted that Julia should first be his, and he is at Leamington, and not a step has he taken to convert the Boxers.'

Merton knew the name of Clancy. Clancy had been his fag at school, and Merton thought it extremely improbable that the Martyr's crown would ever adorn his brow.

'Then – and this is the last of them, of the clergy, at least – Mr. Brooke: he was to visit the New Hebrides, where the natives are cannibals, and utterly unawakened. He is as bad as the others. He won't go alone. Now, Julia is obliged to correspond with all of them in affectionate terms (she keeps well out of their way), and this course of what she feels to be duplicity is preying terribly on her conscience.'

Here Julia sobbed hysterically.

'She is afraid, too, that by some accident, though none of them know each other, they may become aware of the state of affairs, or Captain Lestrange, to whom she is passionately attached, may find it out, and then, not only may their ideals be wrecked, but – '

'Yes, I see,' said Merton; 'it is awkward, very.'

The interview, an early one, had lasted for some time. Merton felt that the hour of luncheon had arrived, and, after luncheon, it had been his intention to go up to the University match. He also knew, from various sounds, that clients were waiting in the ante-chamber. At this moment the door opened, and the office boy, entering, laid three cards before him.

'The gentlemen asked when you could see them, sir. They have been waiting some time. They say that their appointment was at one o'clock, and they wish to go back to Lord's.'

'So do I,' thought Merton sadly. He looked at the cards, repressed a whistle, and handed them silently to Miss Crofton, bidding the boy go, and return in three minutes.

Miss Crofton uttered a little shriek, and pressed the cards on Julia's attention. Raising her veil, Julia scanned them, wrung her hands, and displayed symptoms of a tendency to faint. The cards bore the names of the Rev. Mr. Bathe, the Rev. Mr. Brooke, and the Rev. Mr. Clancy.

'What is to be done?' asked Miss Crofton in a whisper. 'Can't you send them away?'

'Impossible,' said Merton firmly.

'If we go out they will know me, and suspect Julia.'

Miss Crofton looked round the room with eyes of desperate scrutiny. They at once fell on a large old-fashioned screen, covered with engravings, which Merton had picked up for the sake of two or three old mezzotints, barbarously pasted on to this article of furniture by some ignorant owner.

'Saved! we are saved! Hist, Julia, hither!' said Miss Crofton in a stage whisper. And while Merton murmured 'Highly unprofessional,' the skirts of the two ladies vanished behind the screen.

Miss Crofton had not played Lady Teazle for nothing.

'Ask the gentlemen to come in,' said Merton, when the boy returned.

They entered: three fair young curates, nervous and inclined to giggle. Shades of difference of ecclesiastical opinion declared themselves in their hats, costume, and jewellery.

'Be seated, gentlemen,' said Merton, and they sat down on three chairs, in identical attitudes.

'We hope,' said the man on the left, 'that we are not here inconveniently. We would have waited, but, you see, we have all come up for the match.'

'How is it going?' asked Merton anxiously.

'Cambridge four wickets down for 115, but – ' and the young man stared, 'it must be, it is Pussy Merton!'

'And you, Clancy Minor, why are you not converting the Heathen Chinee? You deserve a death of torture.'

'Goodness! How do you know that?' asked Clancy.

'I know many things,' answered Merton. 'I am not sure which of you is Mr. Bathe.'

Clancy presented Mr. Bathe, a florid young evangelist, who blushed.

‘Armenia is still suffering, Mr. Bathe; and Mr. Brooke,’ said Merton, detecting him by the Method of Residues, ‘the oven is still hot in the New Hebrides. What have you got to say for yourselves?’

The curates shifted nervously on their chairs.

‘We see, Merton,’ said Clancy, ‘that you know a good deal which we did not know ourselves till lately. In fact, we did not know each other till the Church Congress at Leamington. Then the other men came to tea at my rooms, and saw – ’

‘A portrait of a lady; each of you possessed a similar portrait,’ said Merton.

‘How the dev – I mean, how do you know *that*?’

‘By a simple deductive process,’ said Merton. ‘There were also letters,’ he said. Here a gurgle from behind the screen was audible to Merton.

‘We did not read each others’ letters,’ said Clancy, blushing.

‘Of course not,’ said Merton.

‘But the handwriting on the envelopes was identical,’ Clancy went on.

‘Well, and what can our Society do for you?’

‘Why, we saw your advertisements, never guessed they were *yours*, of course, Pussy, and – none of us is a man of the world – ’

‘I congratulate you,’ said Merton.

‘So we thought we had better take advice: it seemed rather a lark, too, don’t you know? The fact is – you appear to have divined it somehow – we find that we are all engaged to the same lady. We can’t fight, and we can’t all marry her.’

‘In Thibet it might be practicable: martyrdom might also be secured there,’ said Merton.

‘Martyrdom is not good enough,’ said Clancy.

‘Not half,’ said Bathe.

‘A man has his duties in his own country,’ said Brooke.

‘May I ask whether in fact your sorrows at this discovery have been intense?’ asked Merton.

‘I was a good deal cut up at first,’ said Clancy, ‘I being the latest recruit. Bathe had practically given up hope, and had seen some one else.’ Mr. Bathe drooped his head, and blushed. ‘Brooke laughed. Indeed we *all* laughed, though we felt rather foolish. But what are we to do? Should we write her a Round Robin? Bathe says he ought to be the man, because he was first man in, and I say *I* ought to be the man, because I am not out.’

‘I would not build much on *that*,’ said Merton, and he was sure that he heard a rustle behind the screen, and a slight struggle. Julia was trying to emerge, restrained by Miss Crofton.

‘I knew,’ said Clancy, ‘that there was *something*– that there were other fellows. But that I learned, more or less, under the seal of confession, so to speak.’

‘At a picnic,’ said Merton.

At this moment the screen fell with a crash, and Julia emerged, her eyes blazing, while Miss Crofton followed, her hat somewhat crushed by the falling screen. The three young men in Holy Orders, all of them desirable young men, arose to their feet, trembling visibly.

‘Apostates!’ cried Julia, who had by far the best of the dramatic situation and pressed her advantage. ‘Recreants! was it for such as *you* that I pointed to the crown of martyrdom? Was it for *your* shattered ideals that I have wept many a night on Serena’s faithful breast?’ She pointed to Miss Crofton, who enfolded her in an embrace. ‘You!’ Julia went on, aiming at them the finger of conviction. ‘I am but a woman, weak I may have been, wavering I may have been, but I took you for men! I chose you to dare, perhaps to perish, for a Cause. But now, triflers that you are, boys, mere boys, back with you to your silly games, back to the thoughtless throng. I have done.’

Julia, attended by Miss Crofton, swept from the chamber, under her indignation (which was quite as real as any of her other emotions) the happiest woman in London. She had no more occasion for remorse, no ideals had she sensibly injured. Her entanglements were disentangled. She inhaled the

fragrance of orange blossoms from afar, and heard the marriage music in the chapel of the Guards. Meanwhile the three curates and Merton felt as if they had been whipped.

'Trust a woman to have the best of it,' muttered Merton admiringly. 'And now, Clancy, may I offer a hasty luncheon to you and your friends before we go to Lord's? Your business has been rather rapidly despatched.'

The conversation at luncheon turned exclusively on cricket.

VI. A LOVER IN COCKY

It cannot be said that the bearers of the noblest names in the land flocked at first to the offices of Messrs. Gray and Graham. In fact the reverse, in the beginning, was the case. Members even of the more learned professions held aloof: indeed barristers and physicians never became eager clients. On the other hand, Messrs. Gray and Graham received many letters in such handwritings, such grammar, and such orthography, that they burned them without replying. A common sort of case was that of the young farmer whose widowed mother had set her heart on marriage with 'a bonny labouring boy,' a ploughman.

'We can do nothing with these people,' Merton remarked. 'We can't send down a young and elegant friend of ours to distract the affections of an elderly female agriculturist. The bonny labouring boy would punch the fashionable head; or, at all events, would prove much more attractive to the widow than our agent.

'Then there are the members of the Hebrew community. They hate mixed marriages, and quite right too. I deeply sympathise. But if Leah has let her affections loose on young Timmins, an Anglo-Saxon and a Christian, what can we do? How stop the mésalliance? We have not, in our little regiment, one fair Hebrew boy to smile away her maiden blame among the Hebrew mothers of Maida Vale, and to cut out Timmins. And of course it is as bad with the men. If young Isaacs wants to marry Miss Julia Timmins, I have no Rebecca to slip at him. The Semitic demand, though large and perhaps lucrative, cannot be met out of a purely Aryan supply.'

Business was pretty slack, and so Merton rather rejoiced over the application of a Mrs. Nicholson, from The Laburnums, Walton-on-Dove, Derbyshire. Mrs. Nicholson's name was not in Burke's 'Landed Gentry,' and The Laburnums could hardly be estimated as one of the stately homes of England. Still, the lady was granted an interview. She was what the Scots call 'a buddy;' that is, she was large, round, attired in black, between two ages, and not easily to be distinguished, by an unobservant eye, from buddies as a class. After greetings, and when enthroned in the client's chair, Mrs. Nicholson stated her case with simplicity and directness.

'It is my ward,' she said, 'Barbara Monypenny. I must tell you that she was left in my charge till she is twenty-six. I and her lawyers make her an allowance out of her property, which she is to get when she marries with my consent, at whatever age.'

'May I ask how old the lady is at present?' said Merton.

'She is twenty-two.'

'Your kindness in taking charge of her is not not wholly uncompensated?'

'No, an allowance is made to me out of the estate.'

'An allowance which ends on her marriage, if she marries with your consent?'

'Yes, it ends then. Her uncle trusted me a deal more than he trusted Barbara. She was strange from a child. Fond of the men,' as if that were an unusual and unbecoming form of philanthropy.

'I see, and she being an heiress, the testator was anxious to protect her youth and innocence?'

Mrs. Nicholson merely sniffed, but the sniff was affirmative, though sarcastic.

'Her property, I suppose, is considerable? I do not ask from impertinent curiosity, nor for exact figures. But, as a question of business, may we call the fortune considerable?'

'Most people do. It runs into six figures.'

Merton, who had no mathematical head, scribbled on a piece of paper. The result of his calculations (which I, not without some fever of the brow, have personally verified) proved that 'six figures' might be anything between 100,000*l.* and 999,000*l.* 19*s.* 11¾*d.*

'Certainly it is very considerable,' Merton said, after a few minutes passed in arithmetical calculation. 'Am I too curious if I ask what is the source of this opulence?'

'"Wilton's Panmedicon, or Heal All," a patent medicine. He sold the patent and retired.'

Merton shuddered.

'It would be Pammedicum if it could be anything,' he thought, 'but it can't, linguistically speaking.'

'Invaluable as a subterfuge,' said Mrs. Nicholson, obviously with an indistinct recollection of the advertisement and of the properties of the drug.

Merton construed the word as 'febrifuge,' silently, and asked: 'Have you taken the young lady much into society: has she had many opportunities of making a choice? You are dissatisfied with the choice, I understand, which she has made?'

'I don't let her see anybody if I can help it. Fire and powder are better kept apart, and she is powder, a minx! Only a fisher or two comes to the Perch, that's the inn at Walton-on-Dove, and *they* are mostly old gentlemen, pottering with their rods and things. If a young man comes to the inn, I take care to trapes after her through the nasty damp meadows.'

'Is the young lady an angler?'

'She is – most unwomanly I call it.'

Merton's idea of the young lady rose many degrees. 'You said the young lady was "strange from a child, very strange. Fond of the men." Happily for our sex, and for the world, it is not so very strange or unusual to take pity on us.'

'She has always been queer.'

'You do not hint at any cerebral disequilibrium?' asked Merton.

'Would you mind saying that again?' asked Mrs. Nicholson.

'I meant nothing wrong *here*?' Merton said, laying his finger on his brow.

'No, not so bad as that,' said Mrs. Nicholson; 'but just queer. Uncommon. Tells odd stories about – nonsense. She is wearing with her dreams. She reads books on, I don't know how to call it – Tipsy-cake, Tipsicakical Search. Histories, *I* call it.'

'Yes, I understand,' said Merton; 'Psychical Research.'

'That's it, and Hyptonism,' said Mrs. Nicholson, as many ladies do.

'Ah, Hyptonism, so called from its founder, Hypton, the eminent Anglo-French chemist; he was burned at Rome, one of the latest victims of the Inquisition,' said Merton.

'I don't hold with Popery, sir, but it served *him* right.'

'That is all the queerness then!'

'That and general discontentedness.'

'Girls will be girls,' said Merton; 'she wants society.'

'Want must be her master then,' said Mrs. Nicholson stolidly.

'But about the man of her choice, have you anything against him?'

'No, but nothing *for* him: I never even saw him.'

'Then where did Miss Monypenny make his acquaintance?'

'Well, like a fool, I let her go to pass Christmas with some distant cousins of my own, who should have known better. They stupidly took her to a dance, at Tutbury, and there she met him: just that once.'

'And they became engaged on so short an acquaintance?'

'Not exactly that. She was not engaged when she came home, and did not seem to mean to be. She did talk of him a lot. He had got round her finely: told her that he was going out to the war, and that they were sister spirits. He had dreamed of meeting her, he said, and that was why he came to the ball, for he did not dance. He said he believed they had met in a state of pre – something; meaning, if you understand me, before they were born, which could not be the case: she not being a twin, still less *his* twin.'

'That would be the only way of accounting for it, certainly,' said Merton. 'But what followed? Did they correspond?'

'He wrote to her, but she showed me the letter, and put it in the fire unopened. He had written his name, Marmaduke Ingles, on a corner of the envelope.'

'So far her conduct seems correct, even austere,' said Merton.

'It was at first, but then he wrote from South Africa, where he volunteered as a doctor. He was a doctor at Tutbury.'

'She opened that letter?'

'Yes, and showed it to me. He kept on with his nonsense, asking her never to forget him, and sending his photograph in cocky.'

'Pardon!' said Merton.

'In uniform. And if he fell, she would see his ghost, in cocky, crossing her room, he said. In fact he knew how to get round the foolish girl. I believe he went out there just to make himself interesting.'

'Did you try to find out what sort of character he had at home?'

'Yes, there was no harm in it, only he had no business to speak of, everybody goes to Dr. Younghusband.'

'Then, really, if he is an honest young man, as he seems to be a patriotic fellow, are you certain that you are wise in objecting?'

'I *do* object,' said Mrs. Nicholson, and indeed her motives for refusing her consent were only too obvious.

'Are they quite definitely engaged?' asked Merton.

'Yes they are now, by letter, and she says she will wait for him till I die, or she is twenty-six, if I don't give my consent. He writes every mail, from places with outlandish names, in Africa. And she keeps looking in a glass ball, like the labourers' women, some of them; she's sunk as low as *that*; so superstitious; and sometimes she tells me that she sees what he is doing, and where he is; and now and then, when his letters come, she shows me bits of them, to prove she was right. But just as often she's wrong; only she won't listen to *me*. She says it's Telly, Tellyopathy. I say it's flat nonsense.'

'I quite agree with you,' said Merton, with conviction. 'After all, though, honest, as far as you hear..'

'Oh yes, honest enough, but that's all,' interrupted Mrs. Nicholson, with a hearty sneer.

'Though he bears a good character, from what you tell me he seems to be a very silly young man.'

'Silly Johnny to silly Jenny,' put in Mrs. Nicholson.

'A pair with ideas so absurd could not possibly be happy.' Merton reasoned. 'Why don't you take her into the world, and show her life? With her fortune and with *you* to take her about, she would soon forget this egregiously foolish romance.'

'And me to have her snapped up by some whipper-snapper that calls himself a lord? Not me, Mr. Graham,' said Mrs. Nicholson. 'The money that her uncle made by the Panmedicon is not going to be spent on horses, and worse, if I can help it.'

'Then,' said Merton, 'all I can do for you is by our ordinary method – to throw some young man of worth and education in the way of your ward, and attempt to – divert her affections.'

'And have *him* carry her off under my very nose? Not much, Mr. Graham. Why where do *I* come in, in this pretty plan?'

'Do not suppose me to suggest anything so – detrimental to your interests, Mrs. Nicholson. Is your ward beautiful?'

'A toad!' said Mrs. Nicholson with emphasis.

'Very well. There is no danger. The gentleman of whom I speak is betrothed to one of the most beautiful girls in England. They are deeply attached, and their marriage is only deferred for prudential reasons.'

'I don't trust one of them,' said Mrs. Nicholson.

'Very well, madam,' answered Merton severely; 'I have done all that experience can suggest. The gentleman of whom I speak has paid especial attention to the mental delusions under which your

ward is labouring, and has been successful in removing them in some cases. But as you reject my suggestion' – he rose, so did Mrs. Nicholson – 'I have the honour of wishing you a pleasant journey back to Derbyshire.'

'A bullet may hit him,' said Mrs. Nicholson with much acerbity. 'That's my best hope.'

Then Merton bowed her out.

'The old woman will never let the girl marry anybody, except some adventurer, who squares her by giving her the full value of her allowance out of the estate,' thought Merton, adding 'I wonder how much it is! Six figures is anything between a hundred thousand and a million!'

The man he had thought of sending down to divert Miss Monypenny's affections from the young doctor was Jephson, the History coach, at that hour waiting for a professorship to enable him to marry Miss Willoughby.

However, he dismissed Mrs. Nicholson and her ward from his mind. About a fortnight later Merton received a letter directed in an uneducated hand. 'Another of the agricultural classes,' he thought, but, looking at the close of the epistle, he saw the name of Eliza Nicholson. She wrote:

> 'Sir, – Barbara has been at her glass ball, and seen him being carried on board a ship. If she is right, and she is not always wrong, he is on his way home. Though I will never give my consent, this spells botheration for me. You can send down your young man that cures by teleopathy, a thing that has come up since my time. He can stay at the Perch, and take a fishing rod, then they are safe to meet. I trust him no more than the rest, but she may fall between two stools, if the doctor does come home.
>
> 'Your obedient servant,
>
> 'Eliza Nicholson.'

'Merely to keep one's hand in,' thought Merton, 'in the present disappointing slackness of business, I'll try to see Jephson. I don't like or trust him. I don't think he is the man for Miss Willoughby. So, if he ousts the doctor, and catches the heiress, why "there was more lost at Shirramuir," as Logan says.'

Merton managed to go up to Oxford, and called on Jephson. He found him anxious about a good, quiet, cheap place for study.

'Do you fish?' asked Merton.

'When I get the chance,' said Jephson.

He was a dark, rather clumsy, but not unprepossessing young don, with a very slight squint.

'If you fish did you ever try the Perch – I mean an inn, not the fish of the same name – at Walton-on-Dove? A pretty quiet place, two miles of water, local history perhaps interesting. It is not very far from Tutbury, where Queen Mary was kept, I think.'

'It sounds well,' said Jephson; 'I'll write to the landlord and ask about terms.'

'You could not do better,' said Merton, and he took his leave.

'Now, am I,' thought Merton as he walked down the Broad, 'to put Jephson up to it? If I don't, of course I can't "reap the benefit of one single pin" for the Society: Jephson not being a member. But the money, anyhow, would come from that old harpy out of the girl's estate. *Olet*! I don't like the fragrance of that kind of cash. But if the girl really is plain, "a toad," nothing may happen. On the other hand, Jephson is sure to hear about her position from local gossip – that she is rich, and so on. Perhaps she is not so very plain. They are sure to meet, or Mrs. Nicholson will bring them together in her tactful way. She has not much time to lose if the girl's glass ball yarn is true, and it *may* be true by a fluke. Jephson is rather bitten by a taste for all that "teleopathy" business, as the old Malaprop calls it. On the whole, I shall say no more to him, but let him play the game, if he goes to Walton, off his own bat.'

Presently Merton received a note from Jephson dated 'The Perch, Walton-on-Dove.' Jephson expressed his gratitude; the place suited his purpose very well. He had taken a brace and a half of trout, 'bordering on two pounds' ('one and a quarter,' thought Merton). 'And, what won't interest *you*,' his letter said, 'I have run across a curiously interesting subject, what *you* would call *hysterical*. But what, after all, is hysteria?' &c., &c.

'*L'affaire est dans le sac*!' said Merton to himself. 'Jephson and Miss Monypenny have met!'

Weeks passed, and one day, on arriving at the office, Merton found Miss Willoughby there awaiting his arrival. She was the handsome Miss Willoughby, Jephson's betrothed, a learned young lady who lived but poorly by verifying references and making researches at the Record Office.

Merton at once had a surmise, nor was it mistaken. The usual greetings had scarcely passed, when the girl, with cheeks on fire and eyes aflame, said:

'Mr. Merton, do you remember a question, rather unconventional, which you put to me at the dinner party you and Mr. Logan gave at the restaurant?'

'I ought not to have said it,' said Merton, 'but then it was an unconventional gathering. I asked if you – '

'Your words were "Had I a spark of the devil in me?" Well, I have! Can I – '

'Turn it to any purpose? You can, Miss Willoughby, and I shall have the honour to lay the method before you, of course only for your consideration, and under seal of secrecy. Indeed I was just about to write to you asking for an interview.'

Merton then laid the circumstances in which he wanted Miss Willoughby's aid before her, but these must be reserved for the present. She listened, was surprised, was clearly ready for more desperate adventures; she came into his views, and departed.

'Jephson *has* played the game off his own bat – and won it,' thought Merton to himself. 'What a very abject the fellow is! But, after all, I have disentangled Miss Willoughby; she was infinitely too good for the man, with his squint.'

As Merton indulged in these rather Pharisaical reflections, Mrs. Nicholson was announced. Merton greeted her, and gave orders that no other client was to be admitted. He was himself rather nervous. Was Mrs. Nicholson in a rage? No, her eyes beamed friendly; geniality clothed her brow.

'He has squared her,' thought Merton.

Indeed, the lady had warmly grasped his hand with both of her own, which were imprisoned in tight new gloves, while her bonnet spoke of regardlessness of expense and recent prodigality. She fell back into the client's chair.

'Oh, sir,' she said, 'when first we met we did not part, or *I* did not —*you* were quite the gentleman – on the best of terms. But now, how can I speak of your wise advice, and how much don't I owe you?'

Merton answered very gravely: 'You do not owe me anything, Madam. Please understand that I took absolutely no professional steps in your affair.'

'What?' cried Mrs. Nicholson. 'You did not send down that blessed young man to the Perch?'

'I merely suggested that the inn might suit a person whom I knew, who was looking for country quarters. Your name never crossed my lips, nor a word about the business on which you did me the honour to consult me.'

'Then I owe you nothing?'

'Nothing at all.'

'Well, I do call this providential,' said Mrs. Nicholson, with devout enthusiasm.

'You are not in my debt to the extent of a farthing, but if you think I have accidentally been – '

'An instrument?' said Mrs. Nicholson.

'Well, an unconscious instrument, perhaps you can at least tell me why you think so. What has happened?'

'You really don't know?'

'I only know that you are pleased, and that your anxieties seem to be relieved.'

'Why, he saved her from being burned, and the brave,' said Mrs. Nicholson, 'deserve the fair, not that *she* is a beauty.'

'Do tell me all that happened.'

'And tell you I can, for that precious young man took me into his confidence. First, when I heard that he had come to the Perch, I trampled about the damp riverside with Barbara, and sure enough they met, he being on the Perch's side of the fence, and Barbara's line being caught high up in a tree on ours, as often happens. Well, I asked him to come over the fence and help her to get her line clear, which he did very civilly, and then he showed her how to fish, and then I asked him to tea and left them alone a bit, and when I came back they were talking about teleopathy, and her glass ball, and all that nonsense. And he seemed interested, but not to believe in it quite. I could not understand half their tipsycakical lingo. So of course they often met again at the river, and he often came to tea, and she seemed to take to him – she was always one for the men. And at last a very queer thing happened, and gave him his chance.

'It was a very hot day in July, and she fell asleep on a seat under a tree with her glass ball in her lap; she had been staring at it, I suppose. Any way she slept on, till the sun went round and shone full on the ball; and just as he, Mr. Jephson, that is, came into the gate, the glass ball began to act like a burning glass and her skirt began to smoke. Well, he waited a bit, I think, till the skirt blazed a little, and then he rushed up and threw his coat over her skirt, and put the fire out. And so he saved her from being a Molochaust, like you read about in the bible.'

Merton mentally disengaged the word 'Molochaust' into 'Moloch' and 'holocaust.'

'And there she was, when I happened to come by, a-crying and carrying on, with her head on his shoulder.'

'A pleasing group, and so they were engaged on the spot?' asked Merton.

'Not she! She held off, and thanked her preserver; but she would be true, she said, to her lover in cocky. But before that Mr. Jephson had taken me into his confidence.'

'And you made no objection to his winning your ward, if he could?'

'No, sir, I could trust that young man: I could trust him with Barbara.'

'His arguments,' said Merton, 'must have been very cogent?'

'He understood my situation if she married, and what I deserved,' said Mrs. Nicholson, growing rather uncomfortable, and fidgeting in the client's chair.

Merton, too, understood, and knew what the sympathetic arguments of Jephson must have been.

'And, after all,' Merton asked, 'the lover has prospered in his suit?'

'This is how he got round her. He said to me that night, in private: "Mrs. Nicholson," said he, "your niece is a very interesting historical subject. I am deeply anxious, apart from my own passion for her, to relieve her from a singular but not very uncommon delusion."

'"Meaning her lover in cocky," I said.

'"There is no lover in cocky," says he.

'"No Dr. Ingles!" said I.

'"Yes, there *is* a Dr. Ingles, but he is not her lover, and your niece never met him. I bicycled to Tutbury lately, and, after examining the scene of Queen Mary's captivity, I made a few inquiries. What I had always suspected proved to be true. Dr. Ingles was not present at that ball at the Bear at Tutbury."

'Well,' Mrs. Nicholson went on, 'you might have knocked me down with a feather! I had never asked my second cousins the question, not wanting them to guess about my affairs. But down I sat, and wrote to Maria, and got her answer. Barbara never saw Dr. Ingles! only heard the girls mention him, and his going to the war. And then, after that, by Mr. Jephson's advice, I went and gave Barbara my mind. She should marry Mr. Jephson, who saved her life, or be the laughing stock of the country. I showed her up to herself, with her glass ball, and her teleopathy, and her sham love-letters, that she

wrote herself, and all her humbug. She cried, and she fainted, and she carried on, but I went at her whenever she could listen to reason. So she said “Yes,” and I am the happy woman.’

‘And Mr. Jephson is to be congratulated on so sensible and veracious a bride,’ said Merton.

‘Oh, he says it is by no means an uncommon case, and that he has effected a complete cure, and they will be as happy as idiots,’ said Mrs. Nicholson, as she rose to depart.

She left Merton pensive, and not disposed to overrate human nature. ‘But there can’t be many fellows like Jephson,’ he said. ‘I wonder how much the six figures run to?’ But that question was never answered to his satisfaction.

VII. THE ADVENTURE OF THE EXEMPLARY EARL

I. The Earl's Long-Lost Cousin

'A jilt in time saves nine,' says the proverbial wisdom of our forefathers, adding, 'One jilt makes many.' In the last chapter of the book of this chronicle, we told how the mercenary Mr. Jephson proved false to the beautiful Miss Willoughby, who supported existence by her skill in deciphering and transcribing the manuscript records of the past. We described the consequent visit of Miss Willoughby to the office of the Disentanglers, and how she reminded Merton that he had asked her once 'if she had a spark of the devil in her.' She had that morning received, in fact, a letter, crawling but explicit, from the unworthy Jephson, her lover. Retired, he said, to the rural loneliness of Derbyshire, he had read in his own heart, and what he there deciphered convinced him that, as a man of honour, he had but one course before him: he must free Miss Willoughby from her engagement. The lady was one of those who suffer in silence. She made no moan, and no reply to Jephson's letter; but she did visit Merton, and, practically, gave him to understand that she was ready to start as a Corsair on the seas of amorous adventure. She had nailed the black flag to the mast: unhappy herself, she was apt to have no mercy on the sentiments and affections of others.

Merton, as it chanced, had occasion for the services of a lady in this mood; a lady at once attractive, and steely-hearted; resolute to revenge, on the whole of the opposite sex, the baseness of a Fellow of his College. Such is the frenzy of an injured love – illogical indeed (for we are not responsible for the errors of isolated members of our sex), but primitive, natural to women, and even to some men, in Miss Willoughby's position.

The occasion for such services as she would perform was provided by a noble client who, on visiting the office, had found Merton out and Logan in attendance. The visitor was the Earl of Embleton, of the North. Entering the rooms, he fumbled with the string of his eyeglass, and, after capturing it, looked at Logan with an air of some bewilderment. He was a tall, erect, slim, and well-preserved patrician, with a manner really shy, though hasty critics interpreted it as arrogant. He was 'between two ages,' a very susceptible period in the history of the individual.

'I think we have met before,' said the Earl to Logan. 'Your face is not unfamiliar to me.'

'Yes,' said Logan, 'I have seen you at several places;' and he mumbled a number of names.

'Ah, I remember now – at Lady Lochmaben's,' said Lord Embleton. 'You are, I think, a relation of hers..'

'A distant relation: my name is Logan.'

'What, of the Restalrig family?' said the Earl, with excitement.

'A far-off kinsman of the Marquis,' said Logan, adding, 'May I ask you to be seated?'

'This is really very interesting to me – surprisingly interesting,' said the Earl. 'What a strange coincidence! How small the world is, how brief are the ages! Our ancestors, Mr. Logan, were very intimate long ago.'

'Indeed?' said Logan.

'Yes. I would not speak of it to everybody; in fact, I have spoken of it to no one; but recently, examining some documents in my muniment-room, I made a discovery as interesting to me as it must be to you. Our ancestors three hundred years ago – in 1600, to be exact – were fellow conspirators.'

'Ah, the old Gowrie game, to capture the King?' asked Logan, who had once kidnapped a cat.

His knowledge of history was mainly confined to that obscure and unexplained affair, in which his wicked old ancestor is thought to have had a hand.

'That is it,' said the visitor – 'the Gowrie mystery! You may remember that an unknown person, a friend of your ancestor, was engaged?'

'Yes,' said Logan; 'he was never identified. Was his name Harris?'

The peer half rose to his feet, flushed a fine purple, twiddled the obsolete little grey tuft on his chin, and sat down again.

'I think I said, Mr. Logan, that the hitherto unidentified associate of your ancestor was *a member of my own family*. Our name is *not* Harris – a name very honourably borne – our family name is Guevara. My ancestor was a cousin of the brave Lord Willoughby.'

'Most interesting! You must pardon me, but as nobody ever knew what you have just found out, you will excuse my ignorance,' said Logan, who, to be sure, had never heard of the brave Lord Willoughby.

'It is I who ought to apologise,' said the visitor. 'Your mention of the name of Harris appeared to me to indicate a frivolity as to matters of the past which, I must confess, is apt to make me occasionally forget myself. *Noblesse oblige*, you know: we respect ourselves – in our progenitors.'

'Unless he wants to prevent someone from marrying his great-grandmother, I wonder what he is doing with his Tales of a Grandfather *here*,' thought Logan, but he only smiled, and said, 'Assuredly – my own opinion. I wish I could respect *my* ancestor!'

'The gentleman of whom I speak, the associate of your own distant progenitor, was the founder of our house, as far as mere titles are concerned. We were but squires of Northumbria, of ancient Celtic descent, before the time of Queen Elizabeth. My ancestor at that time – '

'Oh bother his pedigree!' thought Logan.

' – was a young officer in the English garrison of Berwick, and *he*, I find, was *your* ancestor's unknown correspondent. I am not skilled in reading old hands, and I am anxious to secure a trustworthy person – really trustworthy – to transcribe the manuscripts which contain these exciting details.'

Logan thought that the office of the Disentanglers was hardly the place to come to in search of an historical copyist. However, he remembered Miss Willoughby, and said that he knew a lady of great skill and industry, of good family too, upon whom his client might entirely depend. 'She is a Miss Willoughby,' he added.

'Not one of the Willoughbys of the Wicket, a most worthy, though unfortunate house, nearly allied, as I told you, to my own, about three hundred years ago?' said the Earl.

'Yes, she is a daughter of the last squire.'

'Ruined in the modern race for wealth, like so many!' exclaimed the peer, and he sat in silence, deeply moved; his lips formed a name familiar to Law Courts.

'Excuse my emotion, Mr. Logan,' he went on. 'I shall be happy to see and arrange with this lady, who, I trust will, as my cousin, accept my hospitality at Rookchester. I shall be deeply interested, as you, no doubt, will also be, in the result of her researches into an affair which so closely concerns both you and me.'

He was silent again, musing deeply, while Logan marvelled more and more what his real original business might be. All this affair of the documents and the muniment-room had arisen by the merest accident, and would not have arisen if the Earl had found Merton at home. The Earl obviously had a difficulty in coming to the point: many clients had. To approach a total stranger on the most intimate domestic affairs (even if his ancestor and yours were in a big thing together three hundred years ago) is, to a sensitive patrician, no easy task. In fact, even members of the middle class were, as clients, occasionally affected by shyness.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.