

Hume Fergus

The Third. Volume



Fergus Hume

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CHAPTER I

AN OLD FRIEND

When Spenser Tait took his seat at the breakfast table, he cast a look around, according to custom, to see that all was as orderly as he could wish. The neatest and most methodical of men, he was positively old maidish in his love of regularity and tidiness. His valet, Dormer, – with him for over fifteen years, – had been trained by such long service into the particular ways of his master, and was almost as exacting as Tait himself in the matter of domestic details. No woman was permitted to penetrate into those chambers in Earls Street, St. James'; but had one been able to do so, she could have found no fault with them, either on the score of taste or of cleanliness. The shell of this hermit crab was eloquent of the idiosyncrasies of its tenant.

The main characteristic of the breakfast room was one of severe simplicity. The carpet of green drapped brown, the curtains to match, and the furniture of oak, polished and dark. On the white cloth of the table an appetizing breakfast was set out in silver and china, and a vase of flowers showed that the little gentleman was not unmindful of the requirements of an artistic temperament. Even the *Times*, carefully cut and warmed, was neatly folded by the silver ringed napkin, and Dormer, standing stiff and lean by his master's chair, was calmly satisfied that no fault could be found with his work. For the past fifteen years, save on occasions of foreign travel, the same etiquette had been observed, the same actions performed, for, like the laws of the Medes and Persians, the habits of Tait were fixed and determined.

He was a pleasant creature of thirty-four years, small in stature, clean-shaven and brown-locked. His plump little body was clothed in a well-brushed smoking suit of maroon-colored cloth, his neat feet encased in slippers of red morocco, and he scanned the room through a gold-mounted pince nez. Neat and firm as he was, women did not care for him in the least, and he returned the compliment by heartily disliking the female sex. Yet with men he was a great favorite, and the members of his club liked to hear the sententious speeches of this little man, delivered with point and deliberation in the smoking room from eleven till midnight. When the clock struck twelve he invariably went to bed, and no persuasion or temptation could induce him to break this excellent rule.

Dormer, a tall, thin man of Kent, who adored his precise master, was equally as misogynistic as Tait, and silent on all occasions save when spoken to. Then he replied in dry monosyllables, and stood bolt upright during such replies, in a military fashion, which he had picked up many years before in the army. Tait humored his oddities on account of his fidelity, knowing that this ugly, rough-hewn specimen of humanity was as true as steel, and entirely devoted to his interests. Nowadays it is unusual to meet with such equal appreciation between master and servant.

"I think, Dormer," said Tait, while the man ministered to his wants, "that you might call at Mudie's this morning and get me a copy of the new novel, 'A Whim of Fate,' by John Parver. I heard last night that it contained a description of Thorston."

"Very good, sir," replied Dormer, noting the name in his pocketbook.

"And take a seat for me at the Curtain Theater, in the fifth row of the stalls, not too near the side."

"Anything else, sir?"

"I think not," said his master, taking a morsel of toast. "I am going down to Richmond by the twelve o'clock train to luncheon with Mr. Freak. Lay out the serge suit."

Dormer saluted in a military fashion, and disappeared, leaving Tait to skim the paper and finish his breakfast. Methodical as ever, the little man first read the leading articles, thence passed to the city news, perused the general information, and wound up with a glance at the advertisements. In such order he ever proceeded, and never by any chance thought of beginning with the advertisements and working back to the leading article. Habit was everything with Spenser Tait.

As usual, his day's programme was carefully sketched out, and he knew what he was about to do with every moment of his time from noon till midnight. But his plans on this special day were upset at the outset, for scarcely had he lighted his morning pipe than the door was thrown open and a visitor was announced.

"Mr. Larcher," said Dormer stiffly, and ushered in a tall young man with a bright face and a breezy manner.

"Hullo, little Tait!" cried the newcomer, hastily striding across the room; "here I am again. Come from wandering up and down the earth, sir, like a certain person whom I need not mention."

"Dear me," said Tait, welcoming his guest with prim kindness, "it is Claude Larcher. I am very glad to see you, my dear fellow, and rather surprised; for I assure you I thought you were at the Antipodes."

"I have just returned from that quarter of the globe. Yes! Landed at the docks yesterday from one of the Shaw-Saville line. Had a capital passage from New Zealand. Sea like a mill-pond from Wellington Heads to the Lizard."

"Have you had breakfast, Larcher?" asked Tait, touching the bell.

"A trifle! A trifle! I could eat another. What have you? Bacon and eggs, watercress, coffee, and the best of bread and butter. Egad, Spenser, you had the same victuals two years ago when I last called here!"

"I am a creature of habit, Claude," replied Tait sententially; and when Dormer made his appearance gave grave directions for fresh coffee and another dish of eggs and bacon.

Larcher drew in his chair, and with his elbows on the table eyed the little man with friendly eyes. They were old schoolfellows and fast friends, though a greater contrast than that which existed between them can scarcely be imagined. Tait, a prim, chilly misogynist; Larcher, a hot-blooded, impetuous lover of women. The one a stay-at-home, and a slave to habit; the other a roaming engineer, careless and impulsive. Yet by some vein of sympathy the pair, so unlike in looks and temperament, were exceedingly friendly, and always glad to meet when circumstance threw them together. Such friendship, based on no logical grounds, was a standing contradiction to the rule that like draws to like.

It was scarcely to be expected that a well-favored mortal like Larcher should share his friend's distaste for the female sex. Far from disliking them, he sought them on all possible occasions, oftentimes to his own disadvantage; and was generally involved in some scrape connected with a petticoat. Tait, who was the older of the two by five years, vainly exhorted and warned his friend against such follies, but as yet his arguments had come to naught. At the age of thirty, Larcher was still as inflammable, and answered all Tait's expostulations with a laugh of scorn.

It was easy to dower this hero with all the perfections, physical or mental, which lie within the scope of imagination, but the truth must be told at whatever cost. Claude was no Greek god, no prodigy of learning, neither an Apollo for looks, nor an Admirable Crichton for knowledge; he was simply a well-looking young man, clean-limbed, clear-skinned, healthy, athletic, and dauntless, such as can be found by the dozen in England. Thews and sinews he had, but was no Samson or Hercules, yet his strong frame and easy grace won the heart of many a woman, while with his own sex he passed for a true comrade, and a friend worth having.

He was an engineer, and built bridges and railways in divers quarters of the globe, pioneering civilization, as it were, in the most barbarous regions.

For the past ten years he had roamed all over the world, and his adventures, begotten by a daring and reckless spirit, were already sufficient to fill a volume. Master of at least half a dozen

tongues, he could find his way from the tropics to the pole, and was equally at home on the prairie as in Piccadilly. Indeed, he preferred the former, for civilization was little to his taste, and he was infinitely more at ease in Pekin than London. North and South America, Africa, China, India, he knew them all, and on this occasion had returned from a prolonged sojourn in the Antipodes, where he had been building bridges across rapid New Zealand rivers.

"Well, my friend," said he, addressing himself to a second meal with a hearty appetite, "I need not ask how you are. The same prim, finnickish little mortal as ever, I see. Five years have made no difference in you, Spenser. You've not married, I suppose?"

"Not I," returned Tait, with stormy disgust. "You know my views on the subject of matrimony. You might go away for one hundred years and would return to find me still a bachelor. But you, Claude –"

"Oh, I'm still in the market. I wasn't rich enough for the New Zealand belles."

"Eh! You have five hundred a year, independent of your earnings as an engineer."

"What is the use of setting up house on a thousand a year all told," retorted Claude coolly; "but the fact is, despite my inflammability, which you are pleased to reproach, I have not yet seen the woman I care to make Mrs. Larcher."

"Perhaps it is just as well for the woman," answered Tait dryly. "I don't think you are cut out for a domestic life."

"I have had no experience of it, so I can't say," said Larcher, a shade passing over his face. "You must not forget that I was left an orphan at five years of age, Tait. If it had not been for old Hilliston, the lawyer, who looked after me and my small fortune, I don't know what would have become of me. All things considering, I think I have turned out fairly decent. I have worked hard at my profession, I have not spent my substance in riotous living, and have seen much more of life than most young men. All of which is self-praise, and that we know being no recommendation, give me another cup of coffee."

Tait laughed and obeyed. "What are you going to do now?" he demanded, after a pause; "stay in town, or make another dash for the wilds?"

"I'll be here for a few months, till something turns up," said Larcher carelessly. "I did very well out of that Maori land business, and bought some land there with the proceeds. I suppose I'll go and look up Mr. Hilliston, see all the theaters, worry you, and hunt for a wife."

"I shan't assist you in the last," retorted Tait, testily. "However, as you are here you must stay with me for the day. What are your immediate plans?"

"Oh, I wish to call at the club and see if there are any letters! Then I am at your disposal, unless you have a prior engagement."

"I have a luncheon at Richmond, but I'll put that off. It is not very important, and a wire will arrange matters. Finish your breakfast while I dress."

"Go, you effete dandy of an exhausted civilization. I saw you looking at my rig-out, and I dare say it is very bad. It has been packed away for the last five years. However, you can take me to your tailor and I'll get a fresh outfit. You won't walk down Bond Street with me unless I assume a tall hat, patent leathers, and a frock coat."

"Oh, by the way, would you like to go to the Curtain Theater to-night?" asked Tait, vouchsafing no reply to this speech. "They are playing a good piece, and I sent for a seat for myself."

"You selfish little man; just send for two while you're about it."

"With pleasure," replied Tait, who permitted Larcher more freedom of speech than he did any other of his friends. "I won't be more than ten minutes dressing."

"Very good! I'll smoke a pipe during your absence, and see with what further fribbles you have adorned your rooms. Then we'll go to the club, and afterward to the tailor's. I don't suppose my letters will detain me long."

In this Larcher was wrong, for his letters detained him longer than he expected. This opened the way to a new course of life, of which at that moment he knew nothing. Laughing and jesting in his friend's rooms, heart-whole and untrammelled, he little knew what Fortune had in store for him on that fateful morning. It is just as well that the future is hidden from men, else they would hardly go forward with so light a step to face juries. Hitherto Larcher's life had been all sunshine, but now darkens were rising above the horizon, and these letters, to which he so lightly alluded, were the first warnings of the coming storm.

CHAPTER II

A MYSTERIOUS COMMUNICATION

The Athenian Club was the most up-to-date thing of its kind in London. Although it had been established over eight years it was as new as on the day of its creation, and not only kept abreast of the times, but in many instances went ahead of them. The Athenians of old time were always crying out for something new; and their prototypes of London, following in their footsteps, formed a body of men who were ever on the look-out for novelty. Hence the name of this club, which adopted for its motto the classic cry, "Give us something new," and acted well up to the saying. The Athenian Club was the pioneer of everything.

It would take a long time to recount the vagaries for which this coterie had been responsible. If one more daring spirit than the rest invented a new thing or reinstated an old one, his fellows followed like a flock of intelligent sheep and wore the subject threadbare, till some more startling theory initiated a new movement. The opinion of the club took its color from the prevailing "fad" of the hour, and indeed many of the aforesaid "fads" were invented in its smoke room. It should have been called "The Ephemeral Club," from the rapidity with which its fanciers rose to popularity and vanished into obscurity.

After all, such incessant novelty is rather fatiguing. London is the most exhausting city in the world in which to live. From all quarters of the globe news is pouring in, every street is crowded with life and movement; the latest ideas of civilization here ripen to completion. It is impossible to escape from the contagion of novelty; it is in the air. Information salutes one at every turn; it pours from the mouths of men; it thrusts itself before the eye in countless daily and weekly newspapers; it clicks from every telegraph wire, until the brain is wearied with the flood of ephemeral knowledge. All this plethora of intellectual life was concentrated in the narrow confines of the Athenian Club House. No wonder its members complained of news.

"What is the prevailing passion with the Athenian at present?" asked Larcher as he stepped briskly along Piccadilly beside Tait.

"The New Literature!"

"What is that?"

"Upon my word, I can hardly tell you," replied Tait, after some cogitation. "It is a kind of impressionist school, I fancy. Those who profess to lead it insist upon works having no plot, and no action, or no dramatic situations. Their idea of a work is for a man and woman – both vaguely denominated 'he' and 'she' – to talk to one another through a few hundred pages. Good Lord, how they do talk, and all about their own feelings, their own woes, their own troubles, their own infernal egotisms! The motto of 'The New Literature' should be 'Talk! talk! talk!' for it consists of nothing else."

"Why not adopt Hamlet's recitation," suggested Larcher laughingly, "'Words! words! words!'"

"Oh, 'The New Literature' wants nothing from the past! Not even a quotation," said Tait tartly. "Woman – the new woman – is greatly to the fore in this latest fancy. She writes about neurotic members of her own sex, and calls men bad names every other page. The subjects mostly discussed in the modern novel by the modern woman, are the regeneration of the world by woman, the failure of the male to bridle his appetites, and the beginning of the millennium which will come when women get their own way."

"Haven't they got their own way now?"

"I should think so. I don't know what further freedom they want. We live in a world of petticoats nowadays. Women pervade everything like microbes. And they are such worrying creatures," pursued

Tait plaintively, "they don't take things calmly like men do, but talk and rage and go into hysterics every other minute. If this sort of thing goes on I shall retire with Dormer to an uninhabited island."

"It is easily seen that you are not a friend to the new movement," said Larcher, with a smile, "but here we are. Wait in the smoke room, like a good fellow, while I see after my correspondence."

"You will find me in the writing room," replied Tait. "I have lost my morning pipe, and do not intend to smoke any more till after luncheon."

"I don't believe you're a man, Tait, but a clockwork figure wound up to act in the same manner at the same moment. And you are such a horribly vulgar piece of mechanism."

Tait laughed, gratified by this tribute to his methodical habits, so, leaving Larcher to see after his letters, he vanished into the writing room. Here he wrote an apologetic telegram to his friend Freak, and sent it off so that it might reach that gentleman before he started for Richmond. Then he scribbled a few notes on various trifling matters of business which called for immediate attention, and having thus disposed of his cares, ensconced himself in a comfortable armchair to wait for Claude.

In a few minutes Larcher made his appearance with a puzzled expression on his face, and two open letters in his hand. Taking a seat close to that of Tait, he at once began to explain that the news contained in the letters was the cause of the expression aforesaid.

"My other letters are nothing to speak of," said he, when seated, "but these two fairly puzzle me. Number one is from Mr. Hilliston, asking me to call; the other is from a Margaret Bezel, with a similar request. Now I know Mr. Hilliston as guardian, lawyer, and banker, but who is Margaret Bezel?"

Tait shook his wise little head. Well-informed as he was in several matters, he had never heard of Margaret Bezel.

"She lives at Hampstead, I see," continued Claude, referring to the letter. "Clarence Cottage, Hunt Lane. That is somewhere in the vicinity of Jack Straw's Castle. I wonder who she is, and why she wants to see me."

"You have never heard of her?" asked Tait dubiously. He was never quite satisfied with Larcher's connections with the weaker sex.

"Certainly not," replied the other, with some heat. "If I had I would assuredly remember so odd a name. Bezel! Bezel! Something to do with a ring, isn't it?"

"It might have something to do with a wedding ring," said Tait, with a grim smile. "The lady may have matrimonial designs on you."

"Bah! She may be a washerwoman for all you know, or a wife, or a widow, or Heaven only knows what. But that is not the queerest part of the affair, for Mr. Hilliston – But here, read the lady's letter first, the gentleman's next, and tell me what you think of them. Upon my word, I can make neither top nor tail of the business!"

(The First Letter.)

"April 18, 1892.

"Dear Sir: Will you be so kind as to call and see me at Clarence Cottage, Hunt Lane, Hampstead, as I have an important communication to make to you regarding your parents.

"Yours truly,

"Margaret Bezel."

(The Second Letter.)

"Lincoln's Inn Fields, June 10, 1892.

"Dear Claude: Call and see me here as soon as you arrive in town, and should you receive a communication from one Margaret Bezel, bring it with you. On no account see the lady before you have an interview with me. This matter is more important than you know of, and will be duly explained by me when you call.

"Yours sincerely,

"Francis Hilliston."

Tait read these two letters carefully, pinched his chin reflectively, and looked at Claude in a rather anxious manner.

"Well, sir," said the latter impatiently, "what is your opinion?"

Tait's opinion was given in one word, and that not of the nicest meaning.

"Blackmail."

"Blackmail!" repeated Larcher, taken aback, as well he might be. "What do you mean?"

"I may be wrong," said Tait apologetically, "but this is the only conclusion to which I can come. I read the matter this way: Margaret Bezel knows something about your parents, and wishes to reveal it to you, possibly on condition that you pay her a sum of money. Hilliston evidently knows that such is her intention, and wishes to put you on your guard. Hence he asks you to see him before you accept the invitation of the lady."

"H'm! This is feasible enough. But what possible communication can this woman be likely to make to me which would involve blackmail. My parents both died when I was four years of age. She can't have any evil to say of them after twenty-five years."

"You must question Hilliston as to that," replied Tait, shrugging his shoulders. "I think you ought to see him this afternoon. He knows you are in town. I suppose?"

"I wrote from Wellington to tell him that I was returning in the *Kailargatin*," said Claude, glancing at the letter. "He must have been informed by the paper of her arrival yesterday, for this note is dated the same day. To-day is the eleventh."

"But surely Hilliston knew you would call as soon as you arrived?"

"He might be certain that I would do so within the week, at all events," answered Larcher reflectively. "That is what makes his letter the more puzzling. The matter must be very urgent when he demands an immediate interview."

"I am certain he wishes to forestall this lady," said Tait, picking up the letter of Margaret Bezel. "She, at all events, knows nothing of your movements, for the note is dated the 10th of April, when you were in New Zealand."

"Humph! It is very odd, Tait."

"It is extremely odd, and too important to be neglected. Call on Mr. Hilliston this afternoon, and send him a wire now to make an appointment."

"I hope I am not going to have a bad quarter of an hour," observed Claude, as he wrote out the telegram. The mystery of the matter ruffled his usual serenity.

"I sincerely trust you are not," replied the other, touching the bell for the waiter; "but I must say I do not like the look of those two epistles."

The telegram was duly dispatched, and after a few more conjectures as to the motive of the communications, Larcher went upstairs to luncheon with his friend. Halfway through the meal he was struck with an idea.

"Margaret Bezel must be old, Tait."

"How do you know?"

"If she knows anything of my parents she must have been their friend or servant, and as they died twenty-five years ago she can be no chicken."

"True enough! But don't go out and meet your troubles halfway, Claude. It will be time enough to worry should Hilliston give you bad news. By the way, I suppose you'll stay with him to-night?"

"No doubt. He has bought a new house in Kensington Gore, and wishes me to have a look at it. I shall be glad to see his wife again. Dear old lady, she has been a second mother to me, and he like a father."

"And I like a brother," interposed Tait, laughing. "As a lonely orphan you have to depend upon public charity for your relatives. But talking about new houses, you must see mine."

"What! Are you a householder?"

"A householder, not a landed proprietor," said Tait, with pride. "I have purchased an old Manor House and a few acres at Thorston, about eight miles from Eastbourne. You must come down and see it. I have just had it furnished and put in order. A week or so there will do you good, and give me much pleasure."

"I shall be delighted to come," said Larcher hastily, "that is, if there is no troublesome business to detain me in London."

"Well, you will know shortly. After all, Hilliston may give you good news, instead of bad."

"Bah! You don't believe that, Tait."

"I don't indeed! But I am trying to comfort you."

"After the fashion of Job's friends," retorted Claude promptly. "Well, you may be right, for I do not like the look of things myself. However, I must take bad fortune along with good. Hitherto all has gone well with me, and I sincerely trust this letter from Margaret Bezel is not a forerunner of trouble."

"Should it be so, you will always have at least one friend to stand by you."

"Thank you, Tait," replied Larcher, grasping the outstretched hand. "Should the time come for testing your friendship, I shall have no hesitation in putting it to the proof. And the time is coming," added he, tapping the pocket which held the letter, "of that I am certain."

"What about our theater to-night?" demanded Tait dubiously.

"It all depends on my interview with Hilliston."

Tait said nothing at the moment, and shortly afterward they parted, Larcher to seek his guardian in Lincoln's Inn Fields, Tait to return to his chambers.

"Humph!" said the latter thoughtfully, "there will be no theater for us to-night. I don't like the look of things at all. The deuce take Margaret Bezel!"

CHAPTER III

THE REVELATION OF FRANCIS HILLISTON

Once upon a time popular imagination pictured a lawyer as a cadaverous creature, arrayed in rusty black, with bulging blue-bag, and dry forensic lore on his tongue. So was the child of Themis represented in endless *Adelphia* farces; and his moral nature, as conceived by the ingenious playwright, was even less inviting than his exterior. He was a scamp, a rogue, a compiler of interminable bills, an exactor of the last shilling, a legal *Shylock*, hard-fisted and avaricious. To a great extent this type is a thing of the past, for your latter-day lawyer is an alert, well-dressed personage, social and amiable. Still he is looked on with awe as a dispenser of justice, – very often of injustice, – and not all the fine raiment in the world can rob him of his ancient reputation: when he was a dread being to the dwellers of Grub Street, who mostly had the task of limning his portrait, and so impartial revenge pictured him as above.

All of which preamble leads up to the fact that Francis Hilliston was a lawyer of the new school, despite his sixty and more years. In appearance he was not unlike a farmer, and indeed owned a few arable acres in Kent, where he played the rôle of a modern Cincinnatus. There he affected rough clothing and an interest in agricultural subjects, but in town in his Lincoln's Inn Fields' office he was solemnly arrayed in a frock coat with other garments to match, and conveyed into his twinkling eyes an expression of dignified learning. He was a different man in London to what he was in Kent, and was a kind of Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde for moral transformations. On this special occasion frock-coated legality was uppermost.

Yet he unbent for a moment or so when receiving Claude Larcher, for childless himself, the young man was to him a very Absalom; and he loved him with an affection truly paternal. No one can have the conduct of a child up to the age of twenty – at which period Claude made his *début* in the engineering world, without feeling a tugging at the heart strings. Had Larcher been indeed his son, and he a father in place of a guardian, he could have scarcely received the young man more warmly, or have welcomed him with more heartfelt affection.

But the first outburst over, and Claude duly greeted and seated in a convenient chair, Mr. Hilliston recurred to his legal stiffness, and, with no smile on his lips, sat eyeing his visitor. He had an awkward conversation before him, and was mentally wondering as to the best way of breaking the ice. Claude spared him the trouble by at once plunging headlong into the subject of Margaret Bezel and her mysterious letter.

"Here you are, sir," said he, handing it to his guardian. "I have brought the letter of this woman with me as you wished, and I have also abstained from seeing her in accordance with your desire."

"Humph!" muttered Hilliston, skimming the letter with a legal eye, "I thought she would write."

"Do you know her, sir?"

"Oh, yes!" said the other dryly. "I know her. But," he added after a thoughtful pause, "I have not set eyes on her for at least five-and-twenty years."

"Twenty-five years," repeated Claude, thoughtful in his turn. "It was about that time I came into your house."

Hilliston looked up sharply, as though conceiving that the remark was made with intention, but satisfied that it was not from the absent expression in Larcher's face, he resumed his perusal of the letter and commented thereon.

"What do you think of this communication, Claude?"

"I don't know what to think," replied the young man promptly. "I confess I am curious to know why this woman wishes to see me. Who is she?"

"A widow lady with a small income."

"Does she know anything of my family?"

"Why do you ask that?" demanded Hilliston sharply, and, as it seemed to Claude, a trifle uneasily.

"Well, as I am a stranger to her, she cannot wish to see me on any personal matter, sir. And as you mention that you have not seen her for five-and-twenty years, about which time my parents died, I naturally thought – "

"That I had some object in asking you not to see her?"

"Well, yes."

"You are a man of experience now, Claude," said Hilliston, with apparent irrelevance, "and have been all over the world. Consequently you know that life is full of – trouble."

"I believe so; but hitherto no trouble has come my way."

"You might expect that it would come sooner or later, Claude. It has come now."

"Indeed!" said Larcher, in a joking tone. "Am I about to lose my small income of five hundred a year?"

"No, that is safe enough!" answered Hilliston abruptly, rising to his feet. "The trouble of which I speak will not affect your material welfare. Indeed, if you are a hardened man of the world, as you might be, it need affect you very little in any case. You are not responsible for the sins of a former generation, and as you hardly remember your parents, cannot have any sympathy with their worries."

"I certainly remember very little of my parents, sir," said Larcher, moved by the significance of this speech. "Yet I have a faint memory of two faces. One a dark, handsome face, with kind eyes, the other a beautiful, fair countenance."

"Your father and mother, Claude."

"Yes. So much I remember of them. But what have they to do with Margaret Bezel – or Mrs. Bezel, as I suppose she is called? Why does she want to see me?"

"To tell you a story which I prefer to relate myself."

"About whom?"

"About your parents."

"But they are dead!"

"Yes," said Hilliston, "they are dead."

He walked about the room, opened a box, and took out a roll of papers, yellow with age. These were neatly tied up with red tape and inscribed "The Larcher Affair." Placing them on the table before him, Hilliston resumed his seat, and looked steadfastly at his ward. Claude, vaguely aware that some unpleasant communication was about to be made to him, sat silently waiting the words of ill omen, and his naturally fresh color faded to a dull white with apprehension.

"I have always loved you like a son, Claude," said Hilliston solemnly, "ever since you came to my house, a tiny boy of five. It has been my aim to educate you well, to advance your interests, to make you happy, and above all," added the lawyer, lowering his voice, "to keep the contents of these papers secret from you."

Claude said nothing, though Hilliston paused to enable him to speak, but sat waiting further explanation.

"I thought the past was dead and buried," resumed his guardian, in a low voice. "So far as I can see it is foolish to rake up old scandals – old crimes."

"Crimes!" said Claude, rising involuntarily to his feet.

"Crimes," repeated Hilliston sadly. "The time has come when you must know the truth about your parents. The woman who wrote this letter has been silent for five-and-twenty years. Now, for some reason with which I am unacquainted, she is determined to see you and reveal all. A few months ago she called here to tell me so. I implored her to keep silent, pointing out that no good could come of acquainting you with bygone evils; but she refused to listen to me, and left this office with the full intention of finding you out, and making her revelation."

"But I have been in New Zealand."

"She did not know that, nor did I tell her," said Hilliston grimly; "in fact, I refused to give her your address, but she is not the woman to be easily beaten, as I well know. I guessed she would find out the name of your club and write to you there, therefore I sent that letter to you so as to counter-plot the creature. I expected that you would find a letter from her at your club on your arrival. I was right. Here is the letter. She has succeeded so far, but I have managed to checkmate her by obtaining the first interview with you. Should you call on her, – and after reading these papers I have little doubt but that you will do so, – she will be able to tell you nothing new. I cannot crush the viper, but at least I can draw its fangs."

"You speak hardly of this woman, sir."

"I have reason to," said Hilliston quietly. "But for this woman your father would still be alive."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that your father, George Larcher, was murdered!"

"Murdered!"

"Yes! Murdered at Horrison, in Kent, in the year 1866."

Stunned by this information, which he was far from expecting, Claude sank down in his chair with a look of horror on his face, while Hilliston spoke rapidly.

"I have kept this secret all these years because I did not want your young life to be shadowed by the knowledge of your father's fate. But now Mrs. Bezel intends to tell you the truth, and will give you a garbled version of the same, making herself out a martyr. I must be beforehand with her, and I wish you to take those papers, and read the account of the case which ended in the acquittal of your mother."

"My mother! Acquitted! Do you mean – "

"I mean that Mrs. Larcher was accused of the murder of her husband, and was tried and acquitted."

"Great Heavens! But she is now dead?"

"I say no more," said Hilliston, evading a direct reply. "You will know the truth when you read these papers."

Larcher mechanically took the packet held out to him, and placed it in his pocket. Then he rose to go. A thousand questions were on the tip of his tongue, but he dare not ask one. It would be better, he thought, to learn the truth from the papers, in place of hearing it from the lips of Francis Hilliston, who might, for all he knew, give as garbled a version of the affair as Mrs. Bezel. Hilliston guessed his thoughts, and approved of the unspoken decision.

"I think you are right," he said, with deliberation; "it is best that you should learn the truth in that way. When you have read those papers come and see me about them."

"One moment, sir! Who killed my father?"

"I cannot say! Your mother was suspected and proved innocent. A friend of your father was also suspected and – "

"And proved innocent?"

"No! He was never arrested – he was never tried. He vanished on the night of the murder and has not been heard of since. Now, I can tell you no more. Go and read the papers, Claude."

Larcher took up his hat and hurried toward the door in a mechanical manner. There he paused.

"Does Mrs. Bezel know the truth?"

Hilliston, arranging the papers on the table, looked up with a face which had unexpectedly grown gray and old.

"Yes!" he said quickly. "I think Mrs. Bezel knows the 'truth.'"

CHAPTER IV

WHAT OCCURRED AT HORRISTON

After that fatal interview Claude went neither to the house at Kensington Gore nor to the chambers of his friend Tait. With the papers given to him by Hilliston in his pocket, he repaired to a quiet hotel in Jermyn Street, where he was well-known, and there secured a bedroom for the night. A wire speedily brought his luggage from the railway station, and thus being settled for the moment, he proceeded to acquaint himself with the tragedy of his parents' lives.

It was some time before he could make up his mind to read the papers, and, dreading the disagreeable relation, he put off the perusal till such time as he retired to bed. A note dispatched to the Club intimated to Tait that the second seat at the Curtain Theater would be unoccupied, and then Claude tried to rid himself of distracting thoughts by a rapid walk in the Park. So do men dally with the inevitable, and vainly attempt to stay the march of Fate.

Dinner was a mere farce with the young man, for he could neither eat nor drink, and afterward he dawdled about the smoke room, putting off the reading of the papers as long as he could. A superstitious feeling of coming evil withheld him from immediately learning the truth; and it was not until the clock struck ten that he summoned up sufficient courage to repair to his bedroom.

With the papers spread out on a small table, he sat down at half-past ten, reading by the light of a single candle. A second and a third were needed before he arose from his chair, and the gray dawn was glimmering through the window blinds as he laid down the last sheet. Then his face was as gray as the light spreading over street and house, for he knew that his dead father had been foully murdered, and that his dead mother had been morally, if not legally, guilty of the crime. The tragedy – a strange mixture of the sordid and the romantic – took place at Horrison, in Kent, in the year 1866, and the following are the main facts, as exhibited by the provincial press:

In the year 1860 George Larcher and his wife came to settle at Horrison, attracted thereto by the romantic beauty of the scenery and the cheerful society of that rising watering-place. Since that time Horrison, after a feeble struggle for supremacy, has succumbed to powerful rivals, and is once more a sleepy little provincial town, unknown to invalid or doctor. But when Mr. and Mrs. Larcher settled there it was a popular resort for visitors from all quarters of the three kingdoms, and the young couple were extremely liked by the gay society which filled the town. For five years they lived there, but during the sixth occurred the tragedy which slew the husband, and placed the wife in the dock.

The antecedents of the pair were irreproachable in every respect. He was a fairly rich man of thirty-five, who, holding a commission in the army, had met with his wife – then Miss Barker – at Cheltenham. She was a beautiful girl, fond of dress and gayety, the belle of her native town, and the greatest flirt of the country side. Handsome George Larcher, in all the bravery of martial trappings, came like the young prince of the fairy tale, and carried off the beauty from all rivals. She, knowing him to be rich, seeing him to be handsome, and aware that he was well-connected, accepted his hand, and so they were married, to the great discomfiture of many sighing swains. There was love on his side at least, but whether Julia Barker returned that passion in any great degree it is hard to say. The provincial reporter hinted that a prior attachment had engaged her heart, and though she married Larcher for his money, and looks, and position, yet she only truly loved one man – one Mark Jeringham, who afterward figured in the tragedy at Horrison.

To all outward appearance Captain and Mrs. Larcher were a pattern couple, and popular with military and civil society. Then, in obedience to the wish of his wife, George Larcher sold out, and within a few months of their marriage they came to live at Horrison. Here they took a house known as The Laurels, which was perched on a cliff of moderate height, overlooking the river Sarway; and proceeded to entertain the gay society of the neighborhood. One son was born to them a year after

they took up their abode at The Laurels, and he was five years of age when the tragedy took place which caused the death of his parent. Claude had no difficulty in recognizing himself as the orphan so pathetically alluded to by the flowery provincial reporter.

The household of George Larcher consisted of six servants, among whom two were particularly interesting. The one was the captain's valet, Denis Bantry, an Irish soldier in the same regiment as his master, who had been bought out by Larcher when he took leave of military glory. Attached to the captain by many acts of kindness, Denis was absolutely devoted to him, and was no unimportant personage in the new home. The other servant was Mona Bantry, the sister of Denis, a handsome, bright-eyed lass from County Kerry, who acted as maid to Mrs. Larcher. The remaining servants call for no special mention, but this Irish couple must be particularly noted as having been mixed up with the tragedy.

For some months all went well at The Laurels, and it seemed as though the Larchers were devoted to one another. But this was only outwardly, for the character of Julia developed rapidly after marriage into that of a vain, frivolous woman, eager of admiration, extravagant as regards dress, and neglectful of the infant son. Larcher, a thoroughly domesticated man, greatly resented the attitude taken up by his wife, and the resentment led to frequent quarrels. He was annoyed by her frivolity and continuous absence from home; while she began to dislike her grave husband, who would have made her – as she expressed it – a mere domestic drudge. But the pair managed to hoodwink the world as to their real feelings to one another, and it was only when the trial of Mrs. Larcher came on that the truth was revealed. In all Kent there was no more unhappy home than that at The Laurels.

To make matters worse, Mark Jeringham paid a visit to Horrison, and having known Mrs. Larcher from childhood, naturally enough became a frequent visitor. He was everywhere at the heels of the former belle of Cheltenham, who encouraged him in his attentions. Larcher remonstrated with his wife on her folly, but she saucily refused to alter her line of conduct. But for the scandal of the thing Larcher would have forbidden Jeringham the house; and, to mark his disapprobation, gave him the cold shoulder on every occasion. Nevertheless, this inconvenient person persisted in thrusting himself between husband and wife, to the anger of the former and the delight of the latter. The introduction of this third element only made matters worse.

The house was divided into camps, for Mona supported her mistress in her frivolity, and, indeed, seemed herself to have an admiration for handsome Mark Jeringham, who was very generous in money matters. Denis, in whose eyes his master was perfect, hated the interloper as much as Larcher, and loudly protested against the attention of Mona and his mistress. Another friend who supported Larcher was Francis Hilliston, then a gay young lawyer of thirty-five, who often paid a visit to Horrison. He also frequented The Laurels, but was much disliked by Mrs. Larcher, who greatly resented his loyal friendship for her husband. Things were in this position on the 23d of June, 1866, when events occurred which resulted in the murder of Captain Larcher, the disappearance of Jeringham, and the arrest of Mrs. Larcher on a charge of murder.

A masked ball in fancy dress was to be given at the Town Hall on that night, and hither Mrs. Larcher was going as Mary, Queen of Scots, accompanied by Jeringham in the character of Darnley. George Larcher refused to be present, and went up to London on the night in question, leaving his faithful friend Hilliston to look after his matrimonial interests at the ball. Before he left a terrible scene took place between himself and his wife, in which he forbade her to go to the dance, but she defied him, and said she would go without his permission. Whereupon Larcher left the house and went up to London, swearing that he would never return until his wife asked his pardon and renounced the friendship of Jeringham.

Now, here began the mystery which no one was able to fathom. Mrs. Larcher went to the ball with Jeringham, and having, as she said to Hilliston, who was also at the ball, enjoyed herself greatly, returned home at three in the morning. The next day she was ill in bed, although she had left the Town Hall in perfect health, and Mark Jeringham had disappeared. Larcher was not seen

in the neighborhood for five days, and presumably was still in London; so during his absence Mrs. Larcher kept her bed. Then his body, considerably disfigured, was found at the mouth of the river Sarway, some four miles down. Curious to state it was clothed in a fancy dress similar to that worn by Jeringham on the night of the ball.

On the discovery of the body public curiosity was greatly excited, and a thousand rumors flew from mouth to mouth. That a crime had been committed no one doubted for a moment, as an examination proved that George Larcher had been stabbed to the heart by some slender, sharp instrument. The matter passed into the hands of the police, and they paid a visit to The Laurels for the purpose of seeing what light Mrs. Larcher could throw on the matter. At this awful period of her frivolous life Francis Hilliston stood her friend, and it was he who interviewed the officers of the law when they called.

Mrs. Larcher was still in bed, and, under the doctor's orders, refused to rise therefrom, or to receive her visitors. She protested to Hilliston, who in his turn reported her sayings to the police, that she knew nothing about the matter. She had not seen her husband since he left her on the 23d of June, and no one was more astonished or horror-struck than she at the news of his death. According to her story she had left the ball at three o'clock, and had driven to The Laurels with Jeringham. He had parted from her at the door of the house, and had walked back to Horriston. His reason for not entering, and for not using the carriage to return, was that he did not wish to give color to the scandal as to the relations which existed between them, which Mrs. Larcher vowed and protested were purely platonic.

Furthermore, she asserted that her illness was caused by a discovery which she had made on the night of the ball: that Mona Bantry was about to become a mother, and to all appearance she believed that the father of the coming child was none other than her husband. Far from thinking that he had been murdered, she had been waiting for his return in order to upbraid him for his profligacy, and to demand a divorce. Mona Bantry had disappeared immediately after the discovery of her ruin, and Mrs. Larcher professed that she did not know where she was.

This story, which was feasible enough, satisfied the police authorities for the moment, and they retired, only to return three days later with a warrant for the arrest of Mrs. Larcher. In the interval a dagger had been found in the grounds of The Laurels, on the banks of the river, and, as it was stained with blood and exactly fitted the wound, it was concluded that with this weapon the crime had been committed. Inquiry resulted in the information being obtained that Mrs. Larcher, in her character of Mary, Queen of Scots, had worn this dagger on the night of the ball. Hence it was evident, so said the police, that she had killed her husband.

The theory of the police was that Captain Larcher had returned from London on the night of the ball, and had witnessed the parting of his wife and Jeringham at the door. Filled with jealous rage he had upbraided his wife in the sitting room, the window of which looked out on the cliff overhanging the river. In a moment of fury she had doubtless snatched the dagger from her girdle and stabbed him to the heart, then, terrified at what she had done, had thrown the body out of the window, trusting that the stream would carry it away, and so conceal her crime. This the river had done, for the body had been discovered four miles down, where it had been carried by the current. As to the dagger being in the grounds in place of the room, the police, never at a loss for a theory, suggested that Mrs. Larcher had stolen out of the house, and had thrown the dagger over the bank where it was subsequently discovered.

Mrs. Larcher asserted her innocence, and reiterated her statement that she had not seen her husband since the day of the ball. He had not returned on that night, as the servants could testify. The only domestics who had not retired to bed when she returned at three o'clock were Mona and Denis. Of these the first had gone away to hide her shame, and all inquiries and advertisements failed to find her. But at the trial Denis – much broken down at the ruin of his sister – swore that Captain Larcher had not returned from London on that evening, and that Mrs. Larcher had gone straight to the

sitting room, where she first made the discovery of Mona's iniquity, and then had afterward retired to bed. Mrs. Larcher asserted that the dagger had been lost by her at the ball, and she knew not into whose hands it had fallen.

The trial, which took place at Canterbury, was a nine days' wonder, and opinions were divided as to the guilt of the erring wife. One party held that she had committed the crime in the manner stated by the police, while the others asserted that Jeringham was the criminal, and had disappeared in order to escape the consequences of his guilt. "Doubtless," said they, "he had been met by Larcher after leaving the house, and had killed him during a quarrel." The use of the dagger was accounted for by these wiseacres by a belief that Mrs. Larcher had given it to Jeringham as a love token when she parted from him at the door of The Laurels.

The evidence of Denis, that he had been with or near Mrs. Larcher till she retired to bed, and that the captain had not set foot in the house on that evening, turned the tide of evidence in favor of the unfortunate woman. She was acquitted of the crime, and went to London, but there died – as appeared from the newspapers – a few weeks afterward, killed by anxiety and shame.

The child Claude was taken charge of by Mr. Hilliston, who had been a good friend to Mrs. Larcher during her troubles, and so the matter faded from the public mind.

What became of Jeringham no one ever knew. His victim – as some supposed Larcher to be – was duly buried in the Horrison Cemetery, but all the efforts of the police failed to find the man who was morally, if not legally, guilty of the crime. Denis also was lost in the London crowd, and all those who had been present at the tragedy at The Laurels were scattered far and wide. New matters attracted the attention of the fickle public, and the Larcher affair was forgotten in due course.

The mystery was never solved. Who was guilty of the crime? That question was never answered. Some accused Mrs. Larcher despite her acquittal and death. Others insisted that Jeringham was the criminal; but no one could be certain of the truth. Hilliston, seeing that Mr. and Mrs. Larcher were dead, that Mona, Denis, and Jeringham had disappeared, wisely kept the matter secret from Claude, deeming that it would be folly to disturb the mind of the lad with an insoluble riddle of so terrible a nature. So for five-and-twenty years the matter had remained in abeyance. Now it seemed as though it were about to be reopened by Mrs. Bezel.

"And who – " asked Claude of himself, as he finished this history in the gray dawn of the morning, "who is Mrs. Bezel?"

To say the least, he had a right to ask himself this question, for it was curious that the name of Mrs. Bezel was not even mentioned in connection with that undiscovered crime of five-and-twenty years before.

CHAPTER V

A STRANGE COINCIDENCE

In spite of Tait's methodical habits, circumstances beyond his control often occurred to upset them. On the previous day the unexpected arrival of Claude had altered his plans for the day, and after his return from the theater on the same evening, he had – contrary to his rule – passed the night in reading. The invaluable Dormer had procured "A Whim of Fate" from Mudie's, and Tait found it lying on the table in company with biscuits and wine. Excited by the performance, he did not feel inclined to retire at his usual hour of midnight, and while sipping his wine, picked up the first volume to while away the time till he should feel sleepy.

Alas! this novel, about which everyone in London was talking, proved anything but soporific, and for the whole of that night Tait sat in his comfortable chair devouring the three volumes. The tale was one of mystery, and until he learned the solution Tait, conventional and incurious as he was, could not tear himself from the fascination of the printed page. When the riddle was read, when the criminal was hunted down, when the bad were punished, and the good rewarded, the dawn was already breaking in the east. In his Jermyn Street hotel, Claude Larcher was rising, stiff and tired, from the perusal of a tragedy in real life; in his Earls Street chambers, Spenser Tait was closing the third volume of John Parver's work. Each had passed a wakeful night, each had been fascinated by the account of a crime, the one real, the other fictional. So does Fate, whose designs no one can presume to explain, duplicate our lives for the gaining of her own ends.

Rather disgusted by his departure from the conventional, and heartily blaming the too ingenious John Parver for having caused such departure, Tait tumbled hastily into bed, in order to snatch a few hours' sleep. Dormer, ignorant of his master's vigil, woke him remorselessly at his usual hour, with the unexpected intelligence that Mr. Larcher was waiting to see him in the sitting room. From the telegram of the previous night, and this early visit, Tait rightly concluded that his friend was in trouble, so without waiting to take his bath, he hurriedly slipped on a dressing gown, and appeared sleepy and disheveled in the sitting room. Larcher, who looked likewise dissipated, arose to his feet as the little man entered, and they eyed one another in astonishment, for the appearance of each was totally at variance with his usual looks.

"Well," said Tait interrogatively, "I see you've been making a night of it."

"I might say the same of you," replied Larcher grimly; "a more dissipated looking wretch I never saw. Have you fallen into bad habits at your age?"

"That depends on what you call bad habits, Claude. I have not been round the town, if that is what you mean. But, seduced by the novel of a too ingenious author, I have sat up all night devouring his three volumes. Such a thing has not occurred with me since I unfortunately tried to read myself to sleep with 'Jane Eyre.' Charlotte Brontë and John Parver are both answerable for my white nights. But you," continued Tait, surveying his friend in a quizzical manner; "am I to understand that –"

"You are to understand that my night has been a duplicate of your own," interrupted Larcher curtly.

"What! Have you been reading 'A Whim of Fate'?"

"No, my friend, I have not. While you were devouring fiction, I have been making myself acquainted with a tragedy in real life."

Larcher thereupon savagely threw on the breakfast table a roll of papers, and looked defiantly at his friend. Tone and expression failed to elicit surprise.

"Oh!" said Tait reflectively, "then Hilliston gave you bad news, after all. I guessed he had from your refusal to accompany me to the theater last night."

"You guessed rightly. He gave me such news as I never expected to hear. You will find it amply set forth in those papers, which I have been reading all night."

"Dear me. I trust it is nothing serious. Has Mrs. Bezel – "

"I don't know anything about Mrs. Bezel," said Larcher loudly. "So far as she is concerned I am as much in the dark as ever. But my parents – "

"What of them?" interrupted Tait, uttering the first thought which came into his mind. "Are they alive, after all?"

"No. They are dead, sure enough," muttered Claude gloomily.

"In that case what can Mr. Hilliston or Mrs. Bezel have to say about them," demanded the other, looking puzzled. "No scandal about Queen Elizabeth, I hope?"

"Confound it, man, don't be so flippant! I've had bad news, I tell you. My father," – here Larcher gulped down his emotion with some difficulty – "my father was murdered!"

"Murdered!" repeated Tait, looking aghast, as well he might.

"Yes! And my mother was accused of having murdered him. There you have it."

It was some little time before Tait could face the skeleton so unexpectedly produced from the Larcher cupboard. Hitherto his acquaintance with crime had been mainly derived from fiction after the style of John Parver, or from the columns of the press; but now he was brought face to face with a tragedy indirectly connected with his dearest friend, and naturally enough did not like the situation. Nevertheless, like the wise little man he was, he made no comment on the truth so suddenly blurted out, but pushed his friend into a comfortable chair, and proposed breakfast.

"Breakfast!" cried Claude, clutching his hair; "I could not eat a morsel. Have you no feelings, you little monster, to propose breakfast to me, after hearing such hideous news. Why don't you give me sympathy, and try and help me, instead of sitting at your confounded rasher of bacon like a graven image."

"I'll do all in my power later on," said Tait quietly; "but you are upset by this news, and no wonder. Try and eat a little, then you can tell me all about it, and I'll give you the best advice in my power."

Thus adjured, Claude drew in his chair, and managed to eat a morsel of toast and drink a cup of coffee, after which he lighted his pipe, and smoked furiously, while Tait, anxious that his friend should regain his self-control, made a lengthened meal, and talked of divers matters. Breakfast over, he also filled his favorite pipe, and, drawing a chair close to that of Larcher's, waited for an explanation.

"Well, Claude," said he, after a pause, during which the other showed no disposition to speak, "tell me your trouble."

"I have told you," grumbled Larcher angrily; "if you want to know any more about it, read those papers."

"It would take too long, and, as it happens, I am already tired with reading. Tell me about the affair as shortly as possible, and then we can go through the papers together. You say your father was murdered. Who committed the crime?"

"No one knows! The criminal is still at large."

"After five-and-twenty years he is likely to remain so."

"No!", cried Larcher vehemently, striking the table; "I'll hunt him down, and find him out, and put a rope round his neck, so help me God!"

"You say your mother was accused of the crime," said Tait, ignoring this outburst.

"Yes. But she was acquitted on the evidence of my father's valet. Shortly afterward she died in London. I don't wonder at it," said poor Claude distractedly; "the shame, the disgrace! If she survived she was bitterly punished. I should like to see the man who would dare to asperse her memory."

"No one will do so," said Tait soothingly. "Control yourself, my dear fellow, and we will look into this matter together. I have just been reading about a crime, but I did not think I would be so soon concerned in dealing with one."

"You will help me, Tait? You will stand by me?"

"My dear friend, can you ask? I am completely at your service, and together we will do all in our power to discover the murderer of your father and clear the memory of your mother."

"It is clear. She was acquitted by the jury. Don't you dare to –"

"I don't dare to say anything," interrupted Tait impatiently. "Do be reasonable, my good fellow. So long as I am ignorant, I can say nothing. Tell me the particulars and we may arrive at some conclusion. Now then, give me a *précis* of the case."

Dominated by the superior calm of his friend, Claude related the Larcher affair as succinctly as possible. The details of the case had impressed themselves too strongly on his brain for him to hesitate in the narration, and, keeping his emotions well in hand, he managed to give a fairly minute account of the tragedy which had taken place at Horrison in the year 1866.

The effect on Tait was surprising. A look of blank astonishment overspread his face as Larcher proceeded with his story, and when it was finished he looked anxiously at his friend. Apart from the details of the case, he was deeply interested in the matter from another point of view. Larcher waited to hear what his friend thought of the case, but instead of commenting thereon Tait both acted and spoke in an apparently irrelevant manner.

Without a word he heard Claude to the end, then rose from his seat, and walking to the other end of the room returned with three volumes bound in red cloth.

"This book is called 'A Whim of Fate,'" said he placing the volumes at Larcher's elbow. "Have you read it?"

"Confound it, what do you mean?" burst out Claude, with justifiable wrath. "I tell you of a serious matter which nearly concerns myself, and you prattle about the last fashionable novel."

"Wait a minute," said Tait, laying a detaining hand on his friend's coat sleeve. "There is more method in my madness than you give me credit for."

"What do you mean?"

"The story you tell me is most extraordinary. But the information I am about to impart to you is more extraordinary still. You say this crime at Horrison was committed five-and-twenty years ago."

"Yes, you can see by the date of those newspapers."

"It has very likely faded out of all memories."

"Of course! I don't suppose anyone is now alive who gives it a thought."

"Well," said Tait, "it is certainly curious."

"What is curious? Explain yourself."

"The story you tell me now was known to me last night."

Larcher looked at his friend in unconcealed surprise, and promptly contradicted what seemed to be a foolish assertion.

"That is impossible, Tait. I heard it only last night myself."

"Nevertheless, I read it last night."

"Read it last night!" repeated Larcher skeptically.

"In this book," said Tait, laying his hand on the novel.

"What do you mean?" demanded the other impatiently.

"I mean that John Parver, the author of this book, has utilized the events which took place at Horrison in 1866 for the purpose of writing a work of fiction. The story you tell me is told in these pages, and your family tragedy is the talk of literary London."

CHAPTER VI

TRUTH IS STRANGER THAN FICTION

This astonishing statement was received by Claude with a disbelieving smile; and so convinced was he of its untruth that he affected anger at what he really believed to be the flippancy of Tait's conduct.

"It is no doubt very amusing for you to ridicule my story," said he, with cold dignity, "but it is hardly the act of a friend. Some matters are too serious to form the subject of a jest; and this –"

"I am not jesting," interrupted Tait eagerly. "I assure you that the tragedy which concerned your parents forms the subject-matter of this novel. You can read the book yourself, and so be convinced that I am speaking the truth. The names and places are no doubt fictional, but the whole story is narrated plainly enough."

Larcher turned over the three volumes with a puzzled expression. That a story with which he had only become acquainted within the last twenty-four hours should be printed in a book, and that the book itself should be brought so speedily under his notice, seemed to him quite inexplicable. The strangeness of the occurrence paralyzed his will, and, contrary to his usual self-dependence, he looked to Tait for guidance.

"What do you think of it?" he asked irresolutely.

"Ah! That requires some consideration, my friend. But before we go into the matter let us understand our position toward each other. You believe this story of your father's death?"

"Certainly. Mr. Hilliston would not tell me an untruth, and moreover this bundle of extracts from provincial newspapers confirms his statement. I truly believe that my father, George Larcher, was murdered at Horrison in 1866 by – and there you have me – I know not by whom. My own opinion is that Jeringham is –"

"One moment, Claude! Let us settle all preliminaries. Are you resolved to take up this matter!"

"I am! I must clear the memory of my mother, and avenge the death of my father."

"Would it not be better to let sleeping dogs lie?" suggested Tait, with some hesitation.

"I do not think so," replied Claude quietly. "I am not a sentimental man, as you know; and my nature is of too practical a kind to busy itself with weaving ropes of sand. Yet in this instance I feel that it is my duty to hunt down and punish the coward who killed my father. When I find him, and punish him, this ghost of '66 will be laid aside; otherwise, it will continue to haunt and torture me all my life."

"But your business?"

"I shall lay aside my business till this matter is settled to my satisfaction. As you know, I have a private income, and am not compelled to work for my daily bread. Moreover, the last four years have brought me in plenty of money, so that I can afford to indulge my fancy. And my fancy," added Claude in a grim tone, "is to dedicate the rest of my life to discovering the truth. Do you not approve of my decision?"

"Yes, and no," said Tait evasively. "I think your hunt for an undescribed criminal, whose crime dates back twenty-five years, is rather a waste of time. All clues must have disappeared. It seems hopeless for you to think of solving the mystery. And if you do," continued the little man earnestly, "if you do, what possible pleasure can you derive from such a solution? Your father is a mere name to you, so filial love can have nothing to do with the matter. Moreover, the criminal may be dead – he may be –"

"You have a thousand and one objections," said Larcher impatiently, "none of which have any weight with me. I am in the hands of Fate. A factor has entered into my life which has changed my

future. Knowing what I now know, I cannot rest until I learn the truth. Do you know the story of Mozart?" he added abruptly.

"I know several stories of Mozart. But this special one I may not know."

"It is told either of Mozart or Mendelssohn! I forget which," pursued Larcher, half to himself. "When Mozart – let us say Mozart – was ill in bed, one of his friends struck a discord on the piano, which required what is technically known as a resolution for its completion. The omission so tortured the sensitive ear of the musician that, when his friend departed, he rose from his bed and completed the discord in accordance with musical theory. Till that was done he could not rest."

"And the point of your parable?"

"Can you not see? This incomplete case of murder is my discord. I must complete it by discovering the criminal, and so round off the case, or submit to be tortured by its hinted mystery all my life. It is not filial love, it is not sentiment, it is not even curiosity, it is simply a desire to complete a matter hitherto left undone. Till I know the sequel to the Horrison tragedy, I shall feel in a state of suspense – and suspense," added Claude emphatically, "is torture to men of my temperament."

"Your reason is a trifle whimsical," said Tait, smiling at the application of this musical theory to the present instance, "but I can understand your feelings. Indeed, I feel the same way myself."

"You!"

"Why not? In reading 'A Whim of Fate,' I could not go to rest without knowing the end, and I feel a like curiosity toward this tragedy of real life. I shall not be content till I learn the truth. My feelings are precisely the same as your own. Therefore," pursued Tait, with emphasis, "I propose to assist you in your search. We will discuss the matter calmly, and see what is best to be done. In spite of the lapse of five-and-twenty years, who knows but what we may lay hands on the murderer of your father, who is no doubt now living in fancied security."

"Unless he is dead."

"Who is making the objections now?" said Tait, smiling. "Well, Claude, will you accept me as your brother detective in this matter?"

"Willingly, and I thank you for this proof of your friendship."

"I am afraid there is an element of selfishness mixed up in my offer," said Tait, shrugging his shoulders. "It is not every day that one can find an interesting case like this to dissect. Excitement is the joy of life, and I rather think we will be able to extract a great deal from this investigation. Come! We now understand one another."

Larcher grasped the hand held out to him, and gratefully accepted the aid thus offered. From that moment the two dedicated themselves to hunt down the criminal at whose hands George Larcher had met his death. It was as strange a compact as had ever been made. Halting Nemesis, who had rested all these years, once more resumed her stealthy progress, and before her ran these two young men, as ministers of her long-delayed revenge. This junction of unforeseen circumstances savored of the dramatic.

"The first thing to be done," said Tait, when the compact was thus concluded, "is to read both cases."

"Both cases!" repeated Claude curiously.

"Yes! You remember how Browning gives half a dozen aspects of the same case in his 'Ring and the Book.' In a minor degree we benefit in the same manner. There," said Tait, pointing to the roll of newspapers, "is the case from the real point of view, and here, in these three volumes, we will find the same case as considered in a fictional fashion by the novelist. By reading both we may come to some conclusion whence to start in our talk. Last night you read the newspapers; I the novel. To-day we will reverse the process. I will view the affair as set forth by the provincial press, and you will devour the three volumes of John Parver as I did last night."

"And afterward?"

"Eh! Who can say?" replied Tait, shrugging his shoulders. Several sojourns in Paris had left their trace in Gallic gestures, and possibly in Gallic flippancy. "We must know what foundation we have before we build."

Claude nodded. He was of the same way of thinking himself, and commented on his friend's speech after his own fashion.

"Yes," said he a trifle vindictively, "we must build our gallows stanch and strong. You can proceed with your toilet, and afterward we will read novels and newspapers, as you suggest. The result of our reading must appear in our actions. I rather think," he added slowly, "that the result will be a visit to Mr. Hilliston."

"Without doubt. He was an eye-witness, and it is always preferable to obtain evidence first hand."

"Then," said Claude reflectively, "there is Mrs. Bezel."

"Quite so! The enterprising lady who started the whole thing. Was she also an eye-witness?"

"I can't say. Her name does not appear in the newspapers."

"Humph!" muttered Tait, scratching his chin. "Nor in those three volumes can I find a character likely to develop into Mrs. Bezel of Hampstead."

"I wonder who she can be," said Claude curiously, "or what she can have to do with the case."

"That we must find out. Depend upon it, there is more in this case than in newspapers or novel. We must find out all about Mrs. Bezel, and," said Tait, with emphasis, "we must learn all that is to be learned concerning John Parver."

"Who is John Parver?"

"Who was the Man in the Iron Mask?" replied Tait, in a bantering tone. "I cannot say. But whomsoever he may be, he knows all about this case."

"There is that possibility, certainly," assented the other smoothly, "but I think it hardly likely. A man of to-day would not readily come across the account of a tragedy occurring in a little known town twenty-five years ago. Do you know," he added, after a pause, "that it occurs to me that the publication of this book, containing an account of the case, may have been the cause which incited Mrs. Bezel to write the letter."

"I thought so myself. Mrs. Bezel may think that John Parver is a *nom de plume* assumed by Claude Larcher."

"Or another alternative. Mrs. Bezel may be John Parver herself. It is the fashion nowadays for women to write under the names of men."

There was a few minutes' silence, during which each man was intent on his own thoughts. Tait, whose brain turned quicker than that of Larcher, was the first to break the silence.

"Well," said he, moving briskly toward his bedroom door, "before we can say or do anything we must learn the facts of the case."

As he vanished into his room Claude laid his hand on the first of the three volumes.

CHAPTER VII

"LET SLEEPING DOGS LIE."

On the journey of life we sometimes come to a dead stop. Obstacles arise which bar our further progress, and circumstances, impossible to do away with, confront us on all sides. We cannot go back, for in life there is no retrogression; we cannot proceed, owing to blocked paths, and so stand hopeless and powerless, waiting for the word or action of Fate. She, unseen but almighty deity, alone can remove the hindrance which prevents our progress, and until she speaks or acts, we can do nothing but wait. It is on such occasions that we feel how truly we are the puppets of some unknown power.

Francis Hilliston had arrived at some such stoppage. Hitherto his keen brain, his strong will, his capability for decisive action, had carried him onward from past to present, through present to future. When obstacles had arisen they had been easily swept away, and with his own life in his hands, he was perfectly satisfied of his power to mold it to his liking. Possibly Fate, who is a somewhat jealous deity, felt angered at the egotistic self-reliance of the man; for without warning she brought him to a dead stop, then grimly waited to see how his boasted cunning would outwit her. As she probably foresaw, the man did nothing but await her decision. It was the only thing he could do.

For five-and-twenty years the Horrison tragedy had been unmentioned, unthought of; Hilliston deemed that it was relegated to the category of unknown crimes, and having in mind his friendship for the parents, and his love for the son, was not unwilling that it should be so. He did not wish Claude to know of the matter, he was not desirous that he should come in contact with Mrs. Bezel; and hitherto had managed so well that neither contingency had eventuated. Congratulating himself on his dexterity, he remained lulled in fancied security, when Fate, observant of his complacency, sent a bolt from the blue, and brought him up short. Now, Hilliston, forced by circumstances to tell the truth to Larcher, did not know what to do. He could only wait for the fiat of the higher power.

Grimly satisfied that she had brought home his fault, and had shown him his moral weakness, Fate made the next move, and sent Larcher and his friend to Lincoln's Inn Fields to again set Hilliston on his former journey. The paralysis of will which had seized the elder man did not extend to the younger; for Claude arrived full of anxiety to begin the search for the undiscovered criminal. The first result of his compact with Tait was this visit to the lawyer.

"Claude Larcher; Spenser Tait," muttered Hilliston, glancing at the cards brought in by his clerk. "I thought as much; the matter is out of my hands now. Show the gentlemen in," he added sharply.

The clerk departed, and Hilliston walked quickly to the window, where he stood biting his nails. All geniality had vanished from his face; he looked older than his years, and an unaccustomed frown wrinkled his expansive forehead. A crisis had come which he knew not how to meet; so, after the fashion of men when they feel thus helpless, he left the decision in the hands of Fate. Which was precisely what Fate wanted.

"Good-morning, Claude! Good-morning, Mr. Tait!" said Hilliston, welcoming the young men with artificial enthusiasm. "I expected to see you today."

"Surely you did not expect to see me?" said Tait, in a silky tone, as he placed his hat on the table.

"Indeed, I did! Where Damon is Phintias is sure to be. That Claude's perusal of those papers would result in your accompanying him to this office, I felt sure. I was right. Here you are!"

Mr. Hilliston affected a cheerfulness he was far from feeling. With increasing age a distaste had come for violent excitements, and with one of Claude's temperament he knew that the chances were that the ensuing quarter of an hour would be somewhat stirring. Contrary to his expectations, however, Larcher was eager, but calm, and Hilliston, assuring himself that the calmness was genuine, began to hope that the interview would pass off better than he expected. Still, none of us like to reopen

a disagreeable chapter of the book of life, and this Mr. Hilliston, against his will and inclination, was about to do.

"Well, sir," said Claude, when they were all seated, and the hush of expectancy was in the air, "I have read those papers."

"Yes," said Mr. Hilliston interrogatively; "and what do you think of the matter?"

"I think it is a very black case."

"You are quite right, Claude. It is a very black case indeed. I did all in my power to bring the criminal to justice, but without success."

"Who is the criminal?" asked Larcher, with a keen glance at his guardian.

Hilliston shuffled his feet uneasily, by no means relishing the directness of the question.

"That is a difficult question to answer," he said slowly; "in fact an impossible one. My suspicions point to Jeringham."

From this point Tait made a third in the conversation.

"That is because Jeringham disappeared on the night of the murder," he said leisurely.

"Yes. I think that circumstance alone is very suspicious."

"He was never found again?"

"Never. We advertised in all the papers; we employed detectives, inquired privately, but all to no result. The last person who saw Jeringham was Mrs. Larcher. He parted from her at the door of The Laurels, and vanished into the night. It still hides him."

"What do you conclude from that, sir?" asked Claude, after a pause.

"I can only conclude one thing," replied Hilliston, with great deliberation, "that your father, suspicious of Jeringham, returned on that night from London, and saw the parting. The result is not difficult to foresee. It is my own opinion that there were words between the men, possibly a struggle, and that the matter ended in the murder of your father by Jeringham. Hence the discovery of the body thrown into the river, hence the flight of the murderer."

"Was this the generally received opinion at the time?"

"Yes. I can safely say that it was believed Jeringham was guilty, and had fled to escape the consequences of his crime."

"In that case, how was it that Mrs. Larcher was arrested?" asked Tait skeptically.

"You cannot have read the case carefully, to ask me that," replied Hilliston sharply. "She was arrested on the evidence of the dagger. Without doubt the crime was committed with the dagger, and as she had worn it, the inference was drawn that she was the guilty person. But she was acquitted, and left the court – as the saying is – without a stain on her character."

"Nevertheless she died, Mr. Hilliston."

"Shame killed her," said the lawyer sadly. "She was a foolish woman in many ways, – your pardon, Claude, for so speaking, – but she was not the woman to commit so foul a crime. Indeed, I believe she was fondly attached to her husband till Jeringham came between them."

"Ah!" interposed Tait composedly, "that is John Parver's view."

"John Parver?" repeated Hilliston, with well-bred surprise. "I do not know that name in connection with the case."

"Nor do we know the name of Mrs. Bezel," said Claude quickly.

Hilliston started, and looked at Claude as though he would read his very soul. The inscrutability of the young man's countenance baffled him, and he turned off the remark with a dry laugh.

"With Mrs. Bezel we will deal hereafter," he said shortly; "but who is this John Parver!"

"He is the author of a book called 'A Whim of Fate.'"

"A novel?"

"Yes. A novel which embodies the whole of this case."

"That is strange," said Hilliston quietly, "but no doubt the author has come across the details in some old provincial journal, and made use of them. The Larcher affair caused a great deal of

talk at the time, but it is certainly remarkable that a novelist should have made use of it for fictional purposes after the lapse of so many years. I must read the book. Just note the name of it here, Mr. Tait, if you please."

Tait did so, and Hilliston continued:

"Is my character in the book?"

"I think so. Under the name of Michael Dene!"

"I trust the author has been flattering to me. By the way, who does he say committed the crime?"

"Michael Dene."

Hilliston went gray on the instant, as though a sudden blow had been struck at his heart. Two pairs of keen eyes were fixed on his face with some surprise, and uneasy at the scrutiny, he strove to recover his composure.

"Upon my word," he said, with quivering lips, "I am infinitely obliged to John Parver for describing me as a murderer. And what motive does he ascribe to me, or rather to Michael Dene, for the committal of the crime?"

"Love for the wife," said Tait, smiling.

"Eh! That is rather the rôle of Jeringham, I should say," replied Hilliston, the color coming back to lips and cheek. "I must read this novel, and if possible discover the identity of the author."

"Oh, we will do that!"

"Claude!" cried the lawyer, in astonishment.

"I and Tait. We intend to follow out this case to the end."

"It is useless! Five-and-twenty years have elapsed."

"Nevertheless, I am determined to hunt down the murderer of my father," said Claude decisively. "Besides, we have two eye-witnesses to the tragedy. Yourself and Mrs. Bezel."

"Ah! Mrs. Bezel! I forgot her. Certainly, I will do all in my power to help you, Claude. Your father was my dearest friend, and I shall only be too glad to avenge his fate. But if I could not do it at the moment, how can I hope to do so now – after so long a period has elapsed?"

"Leave that to us, sir. Tait and I will attend to the active part of the business. All we ask you to do is to give us such information as lies in your power."

"I will do that with pleasure," said Hilliston, who by this time was thoroughly master of himself. "What is it you wish to know."

"We wish to know all about Mrs. Bezel. Who is she? What has she to do with the case? Why is not her name mentioned in these pages?"

"For answers to these questions you had better apply to the lady herself. You have her address. Why not call on her?"

"I intend to do so to-morrow."

The old man rose from his seat, and took a turn up and down the room. Then he paused beside Claude, and laid a trembling hand on the young man's shoulder.

"I have been a good friend to you, Claude."

"You have been my second father – my real father," said Larcher gently. "I shall never forget your kindness. I would return it if I could."

"Then do so, by letting sleeping dogs lie."

"What do you mean by that, Mr. Hilliston?" asked the other, with a subtle change in his tone.

"Abandon this case. Do not call on Mrs. Bezel. You can do no good by reopening the affair. It was a mystery years ago, it is a mystery still; it will remain a mystery till the end of time."

"Not if I can help it. I am sorry to disoblige you, sir, but my mind is made up. I am determined to find out the truth."

Hilliston sighed, passed his hand across his forehead, and returned to his seat, hopeless and baffled. He was sufficiently acquainted with Claude's character to know that he was not easily turned

from his purpose, and that his resolution to solve the mystery would be resolutely carried out. Yet he made one more attempt to bend the young man to his will.

"If you are wise you will not call on Mrs. Bezel."

"Why not, sir?"

"It will give you great pain."

"All my pain is past," replied Claude quickly. "I can suffer no more than I did when reading these papers. I must call on Mrs. Bezel; I must know the truth, and," added he significantly, "I have your promise to assist me."

"I will do all in my power," answered Hilliston wearily, "but you do not know what are you doing. I am older and more experienced than you, and I give you my best advice. Do not see Mrs. Bezel, and leave the Larcher affair alone."

The result of this well-meant advice was that Claude called the next morning on Mrs. Bezel.

CHAPTER VIII

BOTH SIDES OF THE QUESTION

Man's life has frequently been compared to a river. In childhood it is a trickling thread, in youth a stream, in manhood a majestic river, and finally in old age is swallowed up in the ocean of death. A very pretty parable, but somewhat stale. It is time that life was indicated by a new metaphor. Let us therefore compare the life of man to the ocean itself. Like the ocean life has its calms and storms, its sullen rages, its caressing moments; and like the ocean – for this is the main point of the illustration – it has its profound depths, containing a hundred secrets unknown to the outer world. Francis Hilliston was like the ocean: all knew the surface, few were acquainted with the depths below.

A man who leads a double life need never feel dull. He may be nervous, anxious, fearful lest his secret should be discovered, but the constant vigilance required to hide it preserves him from the curse of ennui. He ever keeps the best side of his nature uppermost; his smiles are for the world, his brow is smoothed to lull suspicion. But to continue the simile of the ocean: in the depths lie many terrible things which never come to the surface; things which he scarcely dare admit even to himself. Francis Hilliston was one of these men.

Everyone knew Hilliston of Lincoln's Inn Fields, or thought they did, which is quite a different thing. He was widely respected in the profession; he was popular in society; hand and glove with prominent and wealthy personages. His house at Kensington Gore was richly furnished; his wife was handsome and fashionable; he gave splendid entertainments, at which none was more jocund than the host himself; he was, outwardly, all that was prosperous and popular. In his professional capacity he was the repository of a thousand secrets, but of all these none was more terrible than the one locked up in his own breast.

Long years of training, constant necessity, had taught him how to control his emotions, to turn his face into a mask of inscrutability; yet he succeeded ill at times, as witness his interview with the two young men. Not all his powers of self-repression could keep his face from turning gray; nor prevent the perspiration beading his brow; nor steady his voice to well-bred indifference. Usually he succeeded in masking his emotion; this time he had failed, and, worst of all, he knew that he had failed.

It was not Claude that he feared, for the young man was not of a suspicious nature; and even had he been so, would certainly have scoffed at the idea of attributing any evil to the one who had been to him a father. Tait, silent, observant, and cynical, was the person to be dreaded. Accustomed by his profession to read faces, Hilliston had seen that the quiet little man was possessed of one of those inquisitive penetrative natures, which suspect all men, and from a look, a gesture, a pause, can draw evidence to support any suspicion they may entertain.

Certainly Tait had no reason to distrust Hilliston when he entered the room, but during the interview he appeared dissatisfied with the lawyer's manner. That Hilliston should attempt to dissuade Claude from prosecuting a search for his father's murderer seemed strange; but that he should betray such marked agitation at the idea of such searching taking place was stranger still. Altogether Tait left the office in a very dissatisfied state of mind. Hilliston had sufficient penetration to note this, and when left alone was at his wit's end how to baffle the unwarrantable curiosity of this intruder.

"I don't mind Claude," he said, pacing up and down the room, "he has not sufficient brain power to find out anything. I do not want him to know. But this Tait is dangerous. He is one of those dogged creatures, who puts his nose to the scent, and never leaves the trail till the prey is captured. It is with him I have to deal, not with Claude."

His agitation almost mastered him, and he hurriedly took a small bottle from a drawer in his desk. Dropping the contents of this into a glass of water, he drank off the draught, and in a short

space of time regained his composure, in some measure. Then he sat down to think, and plot, and plan how to baffle the vigilance of Tait.

"That infernal woman has done it all," he muttered savagely; "she has lighted the fire. Let us see how she will put it out. But she cannot put it out," he added, striking his forehead with his clenched fist; "it will blaze and burn. I shall burn with it unless –"

There was a strange smile on his lips, as an idea entered his mind, and he glanced quickly at his watch.

"Four o'clock. Claude can't possibly call on Margaret to-day, so I have yet time to prepare her for his visit. I must silence her at any cost. She must hold her tongue or ruin us both. Great Heavens! to think that she should break out like this after five-and-twenty years. It is enough to drive me mad."

By this time he had put on his gloves, and stretched his hand toward his hat, which stood on a side table. A glance in the glass showed him how old and gray he looked, and the sight was so unexpected that he started in dismay.

"Bah! I look as though I were going to fail," he said to himself, "but I must not fail. I dare not fail. At sixty, rich, honored, respected, I am not going to fall from the pedestal I have reached. I shall reassure Claude. I shall baffle Tait. I shall silence Margaret. The first move in the game is mine."

Calm, dignified, easy, he left his office, and stepped into the brougham waiting at the door. To judge by appearance, one would have thought him the most respectable and upright man in London. No one knew what lurked behind that benevolent expression. His mask had fallen for the moment when Tait was present; now it was on again, and he went forth to deceive the world. Yet he had an uneasy consciousness that one man at least guessed his real character.

"Never mind," he thought, as the footman closed the door of the brougham, "it will be strange if, with my age and experience and reputation and money, I cannot baffle him."

He did not go direct home, as it was yet early, and he had one or two things to do in connection with his new task. First he drove to Tait's chambers, and ascertained from the porter that the two young men were within.

"Never mind sending up my name, I won't disturb them," he said, when the porter requested his card. "I only wished to speak to Mr. Tait about a box at the theater."

"If it is the Lyceum you mean, sir, I have just got two stalls for Mr. Tait."

"Ah! I may see them there," replied Hilliston negligently; and as he drove away reflected: "Good! They have not yet been to Hampstead; nor do they intend to go to-night. Mr. Tait has yet to learn the value of time."

Driving through Piccadilly he stopped at a bookshop, and with some difficulty, for the demand was large, obtained a copy of "A Whim of Fate." He began to read it in the brougham, and skimmed its pages so rapidly that by the time he reached Kensington Gore he had nearly finished the first volume. He did not recognize himself in the character of Michael Dene, and became more convinced than ever that the coincidence of the Larcher affair forming the plot of a novel, was due to the author's reading the case in some old provincial newspaper. On every page it betrayed that, to him, the story was hearsay.

Fortunately Mrs. Hilliston was driving in the Park, so the lawyer shut himself up in his library, and went on reading the story. He did not see his wife till dinner, which took place at eight o'clock, and then descended in his ordinary clothes, looking ill and pale. Something he had read in the novel had startled him more than he cared to confess – even to himself.

"You must excuse my dress, Louise," he said, on taking his seat, "but I have been so engrossed with a novel that I did not hear the dressing bell."

"It has not had a pleasant effect on you," replied his wife, smiling; "you do not look at all well."

"I am not well," said Hilliston, who merely trifled with his food; "you must excuse me going with you to the Lamberts' to-night, as I think I shall call in and see my doctor."

"Are you so bad as all that?" questioned Mrs. Hilliston anxiously. "Why not send for Dr. Bland?"

"I prefer going to see him, Louise. You will probably not be back till three in the morning, so I will go to bed immediately on my return. Have no fear, my dear, it is only a trifling indisposition."

After these plain statements it was rather strange that Hilliston, in place of driving to Dr. Bland's, who lived in Hill Street, should direct the cab, which he picked up by the Park railings, to drive to Hampstead.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. BEZEL

One cannot always judge by appearances either as regards human beings or houses. Mr. Hilliston was one excellent illustration of this rule; Clarence Cottage was another. It was in a narrow and crooked lane trending downward to the right, at the summit of Fitzjohn's Avenue; an unpretentious two-story building, divided from the public thoroughfare by a well-cultivated garden. Therein grew thyme and lavender, marigolds and pansies; for the owner of the cottage loved those homely flowers, and daily gazed at them from the bow-window wherein her couch was placed.

Mrs. Bezel never walked in her garden, for the all-sufficient reason that she was a helpless paralytic, and had not used her limbs for over ten years. Still a moderately young woman of forty-five, she possessed the remains of great beauty, ravaged by years of anxiety and mental trouble. Those passing along the lane usually saw her pale face at the window, and pitied the sufferings written in every line; sufferings which were apparent even to a casual glance. Noting the homely garden, the mean-looking dwelling, the anxious expression of the invalid, they deemed her to be some poor sickly creature, the scapegoat of nature and the world, who had sought this secluded spot in order to hide her troubles. This view was not entirely correct.

She was in ill-health, it is true; she dwelt in a small house certainly; and the anxious expression was seldom absent from her face. But she was in easy circumstances, untroubled by pecuniary worries, and the interior of the cottage was furnished with a magnificence more suggestive of Park Lane than of Hampstead. The outward aspect of the house, like that of Mr. Hilliston, was a lie.

Her sitting room resembled the boudoir of some Mayfair beauty. The curtains were of silk, the carpet velvet pile, the walls were adorned with costly pictures, and every corner of the small apartment was filled with sumptuous furniture. All that art could contribute, all that affection could suggest, were confined in the tiny space, and had Mrs. Bezel possessed the mines of Golconda she could not have been more luxuriously lodged. The house was a gem of its kind, perfect and splendid.

Mrs. Bezel took little interest in these material comforts. Her life was passed between a couch in the bow-window, a well-cushioned chair by the fire, and a downy bed in the next room. She had little appetite and did not enjoy her food; mental anxiety prevented her interesting herself in the splendors around her; and the only pleasure she took was her dreary journey in a Bath-chair when the weather permitted. Then, as she inhaled the fresh breeze blowing across the Heath, she gazed with longing eyes at London, almost hidden under its foggy veil, far below, and always returned with reluctance to the familiar splendors of her narrow dwelling. Fortune had given her much, but by way of compensation had deprived her of the two things she most desired – of health and of love.

Even on this warm June evening a fire burned in the grate, for Mrs. Bezel was a chilly creature, who shrunk at the least breath of wind. According to custom, she had left the window couch at seven o'clock, and had taken her simple meal while seated in her large chair to the right of the fireplace. After dinner she took up a novel which was placed on a small table at her elbow, and tried to read; but her attention was not fixed on the book, and gradually it fell from her hands, while she gazed idly at the fire.

What she saw therein Heaven only knows. We all have our moments of retrospection, and can picture the past in the burning coals. Some even picture the future, but there was none for this woman. She was old, weary, diseased, worn-out, and therefore saw in the fire only the shadows of past years. Faces looked out of the flaming valleys, scenes arranged themselves in the red confusion; but among them all there was always one face, one scene, which never vanished as did the others. This special face, this particular scene, were fixed, immovable, cruel, and insistent.

The chime of the clock striking half-past nine roused her from her reverie, and she again addressed herself to the novel with a sigh. Tortured by her own thoughts, Mrs. Bezel was not accustomed to retire before midnight, and there were nearly three hours to be got through before that time. Her life was as dreary, and weary, and heart-breaking as that of Mariana in the Moated Grange.

The tread of a firm footfall in the distance roused her attention, and she looked expectantly toward the door, which faced her chair. The newcomer passed up the narrow garden path, entered the house, and, after a pause in the hall, presented himself in the sitting room. Mrs. Bezel knew who it was before the door opened; for standing on the threshold was the man with the face she had lately pictured amid the burning coals. Francis Hilliston and the woman who called herself Mrs. Bezel looked steadily at one another, but no sign of welcome passed between them. He was the first to break the awkward silence.

"How are you this evening, Margaret?" he asked, advancing toward her; "better, I hope. There is more color in your cheeks, more brightness in your eyes."

"I am the same as ever," she replied coldly, while he drew a chair close to the fire, and stretched out his hands to the blaze. "Why have you come here at this hour?"

"To see you."

"No doubt! But with what purpose?"

Hilliston pinched his nether lip between finger and thumb, frowning the while at the fire. Whatever had been, there was now no love between this woman and himself. But on no occasion had he noted so hostile a tone in her voice. He was aware that a duel of words and brains was about to ensue, and, knowing his antagonist, he took the button off his foil. There was no need for fine speaking or veiled hints in this conversation. It was advisable that all should be plain and straightforward, for they knew each other too well to wear their masks when alone. Under these circumstances he spoke the truth.

"I think you can guess my errand," he said suavely. "It concerns the letter you wrote to Claude Larcher."

"I thought as much! And what more have you to say in connection with that affair?"

"I have merely to inform you that the man whom you desire to see is in London, and will no doubt answer your kind invitation in person."

Mrs. Bezel stretched out her hand and selected a letter from the little pile on her table.

"If you will look at that," she said coldly, "you will see that Claude intends to call on me at three o'clock to-morrow."

Taking the letter in silence, Hilliston turned frightfully pale, and the perspiration stood in large beads on his forehead. He expected some such appointment to be made, yet the evidence in his hand startled him all the same. The promptitude of action spoke volumes to one of his acute perceptions. To defend his good name would require all his skill and experience, for he had to do with men of action, who acted as quickly as they thought. The duel would be more equal than he had thought.

"Are you still determined to tell all," he said in a low tone, crushing the paper up in his hand.

"Yes."

The monosyllable was uttered in so icy a manner that Hilliston lost his temper completely. Before this woman there was no need for him to retain his smiling mask, and in a frenzy of rage he hurried into rapid speech, frantic and unconsidered.

"Ah, you would ruin me!" he cried, springing to his feet; "you would drag up those follies of '66, and make London too hot to hold me! Have I not implored, threatened, beseeched, commanded – done everything in my power to make you hold your peace? Miserable woman, would you drag the man you love down to –"

"The man I loved you mean," responded Mrs. Bezel, in nowise moved by this torrent of abuse. "Pray do not be theatrical, Francis. You know me well enough to be aware that when my mind is

made up I am not easily moved. A man of your brains," she added scornfully, "should know that loss of temper is but the prelude to defeat."

Recognizing the truth of this remark, Hilliston resumed his seat, and subdued his anger. Only the look of hatred in his eyes betrayed his real feelings; otherwise he was calm, suave, and self-controlled.

"Have you weighed the cost of your action?" he demanded quietly.

"Yes. It means ruin to us both. But the loss is yours, not mine. Helpless and deserted, life has no further charms for me, but you, Mr. Hilliston, doubtless feel differently."

"Margaret," he said entreatingly, "why do you speak like this? What harm have I done you that –"

"What harm!" she interrupted fiercely. "Have you not ruined me, have you not deserted me, have you not robbed me of all that I loved? My life has been one long agony, and you are to blame for it all. Not a word," she continued imperiously. "I shall speak. I insist upon your knowing the truth!"

"Go on," he said sullenly; "I listen."

"I loved you once, Francis. I loved you to my own cost. For your sake I lost everything – position, home, respect, and love. And you – what did you do?"

Hilliston looked round the room, and shrugged his shoulders. Look and gesture were so eloquent that she commented on them at once.

"Do you think I valued this splendor? I know well enough that you gave me all material comforts. But I wanted more than this. I wanted love."

"You had it."

"Aye! I had the passion such as you call love. Did it endure? You know well that it did not. So long as I was healthy and handsome and bright your attentions continued, but when I was reduced to this state, ten years ago, what did you do? Left me to marry another woman."

"It was not my fault," he muttered uneasily; "my affairs were involved, and, as my wife had money, I was forced to marry her."

"And you did marry her, and no doubt neglect her as you do me. Is Mrs. Hilliston any happier in her splendid house at Kensington Gore than I in this miserable cottage? I think not. I waited and waited, hoping your love would return. It did not; so I took my own course – revenge!"

"And so wrote to Claude Larcher!"

"Yes. Listen to me. I wrote the first letter on the impulse of the moment. I had been reading a book called 'A Whim of Fate,' which contained –"

"I know! I know! I read it myself this evening."

"Then you know that someone else is possessed of your secret. Who is John Parver?"

"I don't know. I intend to find out. Meanwhile I am waiting to hear the conclusion of your story."

Mrs. Bezel drew a long breath, and continued:

"The book, which contained an account of the tragedy at Horrison, brought the fact so visibly before me that I wrote on the impulse telling you that I wished to see Claude, and reveal all. You came and implored and threatened. Then my impulse became a fixed determination. I saw how I could punish you for your neglect, and so persisted in my scheme. I wrote to Claude, and he is coming here to-morrow."

"What do you intend to tell him?"

"So much of the death of his father as I know."

"You must not – you dare not," said Hilliston, with dry lips. "It means ruin!"

"To you, not to me."

"Impossible," he said curtly. "Our relations are too close for one to fall without the other."

"So you think," rejoined Mrs. Bezel coolly; "but I know how to protect myself. And of one thing you may be assured, I will say nothing against you. All I intend to do is to tell him of his father's death."

"He knows it already."

"What?"

"Yes! Did you think I was not going to be beforehand with you," sneered Hilliston triumphantly. "I guessed your intention when you wrote me that letter, and when Claude arrived in town I saw him before he could call here. I did not intend to tell him of the matter till your action forced me to do so. He has read all the papers in connection with his father's death, and intends to hunt down the murderer. Now, do you see what you have done?"

Apparently the brutal plainness of this speech strongly affected Mrs. Bezel. It seemed as though she had not comprehended till that moment what might be the result of her actions. Now an abyss opened at her feet, and she felt a qualm of fear.

"Nevertheless, I intend to go on now that I have begun," she said gloomily. "I will answer any questions Claude may ask me."

"You will put him in possession of a clew."

"It is not improbable; but, as I said, life has no charms for me."

"You don't think of my sufferings," said Hilliston bitterly, rising to his feet.

"Did you think of mine during all these lonely years?" she retorted, with a sneer. "I shall punish you, as you punished me. There is such a thing as justice in this world."

"Well, I warn you that I shall protect myself."

"That is your lookout. But I will show you this mercy, as I said before. That nothing will be told by me of your connection with this affair. As to myself, I will act as I think best."

"You will tell him who you are?"

"Yes; I will tell him my real name."

"Then I am lost!"

"Surely not," she rejoined scornfully. "Francis Hilliston is old enough in villainy and experience to protect himself against a mere boy."

"It is not Claude I fear, but his friend, Spenser Tait. He is the dangerous person. But enough of this," added Hilliston, striking the table imperiously. "I forbid you to indulge in these follies. You know I have a means whereby to compel your obedience."

"It is your possession of that means that has turned me against you," she retorted dauntlessly. "If you give me back my –"

"Margaret! Not a word more! Let things remain as they are."

"I have said what I intend to do."

Hilliston ground his teeth. He knew that nothing he could say or do would shake the determination of this woman. He had already experienced her resolute will, and not even the means of which he spoke would shake her immovability. There was nothing more but to retire and protect himself as best he could. At all events, she promised to remain neutral so far as he was concerned. That was something gained. Before leaving the house, however, he made one final effort to force her to his will.

"I will not give you any more money."

"I don't care, Francis. This cottage and its contents are settled on me. A sale of this furniture will produce sufficient money to last my life. I can't live long now."

"I will deny all your statements."

"Do so!"

"I will have you declared insane and shut up in an asylum."

Mrs. Bezel laughed scornfully, and pointed toward the door.

"If that is all you have to say you had better go," she said jeeringly. "You know well enough that you cannot harm me without jeopardizing your own position."

They looked at one another fiercely, each trying to outstare the other. Hilliston's eyes were the first to fall, and he hastily turned toward the door.

"So be it," he said, with his hand on the knob; "you want war. You shall have it. See Claude, tell him all. I can defend myself."

On leaving the house a few minutes later, he paused irresolutely by the gate and looked back.

"If I could only find the paper," he muttered, "she could do nothing. As it is – "

He made a gesture of despair and plunged into the darkness.

CHAPTER X

A FEW FACTS CONNECTED WITH THE CASE

When the two young men left Lincoln's Inn Fields after the momentous interview with Hilliston, they walked on in silence for some distance, each busied with his own thoughts. Like most solitaries, Tait had a habit of speaking aloud, and, unmindful of the presence of Claude, he stopped short at the gate of the New Law Courts to give vent to his feelings.

"It is decidedly suspicious," he said in a low tone, "and quite inexplicable."

"What are you talking about?" asked Claude irritably, whereupon Tait became aware that he was not alone, but nevertheless showed no disposition to balk the question.

"I was thinking of Mr. Hilliston," he returned quietly. "I am not at all satisfied with his conduct. He is hostile to us, Claude."

"Hostile? Impossible! He is doing all in his power to help us."

"So it appears," answered Tait dryly. "Nevertheless I think that he intends to thwart us in our plans – if he can."

"Now you are talking nonsense," said Claude, as they resumed their walk. "Why, he first brought the case under my notice."

"And why? Because he wanted to be beforehand with Mrs. Bezel. If he had not told she would have done so, and naturally enough he wished to be first in the field."

"But I can't think ill of him," protested Larcher. "He has been a second father to me."

"No doubt! There is such a thing as remorse."

"Remorse? You are mad!"

"Not at all. I am suspicious. We will discuss Mr. Hilliston later on, when I will give you my reasons for speaking thus. Meanwhile he has decided to play a game against us!"

"Nonsense! He has no motive."

"Pardon me. I think he has, but what it is I am unable to say – as yet. However, he will make two moves in the game within the next twenty-four hours."

"Indeed," said Claude ironically, "perhaps you can tell me what those two moves will be."

"Certainly," answered Tait serenely. "As to the first, he will call at my rooms to find out if we have gone to see Mrs. Bezel to-night, and –"

"Why at your rooms?"

"Because he thinks you are staying with me. And, moreover, knowing that we are acting together, he knows your movements will coincide with mine."

"Ah! And the second move?"

"He will write you a letter asking you to stay with him at Kensington Gore."

"I don't see what there is suspicious about that," said Claude petulantly.

"I know you don't. But it is my belief that he is afraid of your investigations in this case, and wishes to keep you under his eye."

"But good Heavens, man! he advised me to pursue the matter."

"On the contrary, he advised you to let sleeping dogs lie."

"So he did," cried Claude, with a sudden recollection of the interview. "But why? What harm can my investigations do to him?"

"Ah! That is a difficult question to answer," said Tait reflectingly. "To my mind they will show that Hilliston was not the friend of your father he pretended to be."

"But according to those papers he acted like a friend throughout."

"Yes, according to those papers."

Larcher faced round suddenly, struck by the significance of the remark. He was a clever young man, but could not see clearly before him, and honest himself, was far from suspecting dishonesty in others. Instead of agreeing with Tait in his estimate of Hilliston, he vehemently defended the lawyer.

"You must not speak like that, Tait," he said angrily. "Mr. Hilliston is an honest man, and has been like a father to me. I owe all to him."

"Perhaps you do," retorted Tait significantly. "However, we need not quarrel over the matter. I am content to wait, and will bet you five pounds that the inquiry is made to-night, and the letter is sent to-morrow."

Larcher did not accept the bet thus confidently offered, but walked on stiffly with his head in the air. He was seriously annoyed with Tait for daring to cast an imputation on the character of a man to whom he owed all. Never could he bring himself to believe that Hilliston intended him evil, and deemed that the lawyer, despite his manifest reluctance, would help him by all the means in his power to discover the assassin.

Nevertheless, Tait proved to be in the right. As the two young men passed down the stairs on their way to the theater – whence Tait insisted on taking Claude with a view of distracting his mind – they were met by the porter.

"Beg pardon, sir," addressing himself to Tait, "but a gentleman called some time ago and asked for you and Mr. Larcher."

"Who was he? Why did you not show him up?"

"He would not give his name, sir, and did not wish to come up. He only asked if you had a box for the theater, and when I said you had stalls, drove off."

"Ah! Can you describe his appearance?"

"Not very tall, sir. Clean shaven, with white hair and a red face. Looked like a country gentleman, sir."

"Thank you! that will do," replied Tait quietly, and left the house with Claude.

For a few minutes he enjoyed his companion's astonishment at this proof of Hilliston's double-dealing, and it was not till they were in the cab that he spoke.

"Well," he said, smiling, "was I not right when I said that he would make the first move?"

"You are right so far," muttered Claude, who looked ill at ease, "but I cannot bring myself to suspect my guardian."

"You want another proof, perhaps. Well, we will wait for your invitation to Kensington Gore."

Claude shook his head, and seemed so indisposed to talk that Tait judged it wise to humor his silence. The young man's thoughts were anything but pleasant. He had been accustomed to look up to Hilliston as the model of an English gentleman, honest, honorable, upright, and noble. If, then, this suspicion of Tait's should prove correct, – and the last act of Hilliston certainly gave color to it, – where was he to find honest and honorable men? If Hilliston proved false, then Claude felt he could no longer trust the human race. Still he fought against the supposition, and secretly hoped that the second prophecy of his friend would not be fulfilled.

Alas, for his hopes! At eleven the next morning, while they were discussing the situation, a letter was delivered to Claude by special messenger. It proved to be from Hilliston, and contained a warm invitation for Larcher to take up his abode at the Kensington Gore house. "As you may only be in London for a short period, my dear Claude," wrote his guardian, "my wife and I must see as much of you as possible." With a bitter smile Claude tossed the letter across to Tait.

"You see I was right," said the latter, for the second time, after skimming the note. "Mr. Hilliston is playing a double game. He wishes to keep you under his eye, thinking that, as you trust him, you will keep him informed as to your doings, so that being forewarned he may be forearmed."

"Do you really think he is my enemy, Tait?"

"I am really not prepared to say," replied the little man, with some hesitation. "His behavior of yesterday struck me as suspicious. He seemed unnecessarily agitated, and moreover urged you not to

see Mrs. Bezel. Perhaps he thinks she will tell you too much. Taking all these facts into consideration I cannot help thinking that Hilliston is asking you to his house for some motive in connection with our search."

"But he showed me the papers."

"I know that, but as I told you yesterday it was Hobson's choice with him. If he hadn't imparted the information, Mrs. Bezel would have done so. Of two evils he chose the least, and by showing you the papers proved to all outward appearance that he was your firm friend. Should you bring any charge against him, he will meet it by the very argument you have just made use of."

"Good Heavens!" groaned Claude, in despair, "is everybody as treacherous as you think him to be."

"A good number of people are," replied Tait suavely. "A long residence in London does not strengthen one's belief in human nature. It is a city of wild beasts, – of wolves and foxes, – who rend and betray for the gaining of their own ends. If Hilliston is what I believe him to be, we must do our best to baffle him; and so you must continue to be his friend."

"How can I, if he wishes to betray me?"

"Ah, you are so unsophisticated, Claude," said the hardened man of the world; "you betray your feelings too plainly. In this city it is worse than madness to wear your heart on your sleeve. If you are convinced that Hilliston bears you ill – "

"I am not convinced. I can't believe any man would be so base."

"Ah, bah, that is a want of experience," retorted Tait, raising his eyebrows; "I'll pick you out a dozen of my decent friends who are as base or baser than I believe them to be. Respectability is all a question of concealment nowadays, and it must be confessed that your guardian wears his mask very prettily."

"But do you think he is – "

"Never mind what I think," interrupted Tait impatiently. "Hilliston may turn out to be an angel, after all. But his conduct of yesterday and this morning appears to be suspicious, and in dealing with the matters we have in hand it is as well to be careful. Keep your faith in Hilliston if it assists you to continue the friendship. He must suspect nothing."

"Do you then wish me to accept this invitation?"

"No. Why go into the lion's den? Write and thank him and – decline."

"I have no excuse."

"Indeed! Then I will provide you with one. You are engaged to stay with me at Thorston for a month. By the end of that time you will know sufficient of Hilliston to decide for yourself as to the wisdom of accepting or declining his invitation."

"But if we go to Thorston we cannot prosecute our inquiries."

"Yes, we can. I tell you that book, which contains the story of your father's murder, also contains a description of Thorston. I recognize every scene."

"Well?"

"Well," repeated Tait sharply, "can't you see? The author of that book must either live at Thorston or have stayed a few months there. Else he could not have described the village so accurately. We must make inquiries about him there, and should we be fortunate enough to discover him, we must extract his secret."

"What secret?"

"Upon my word, Claude, you are either stupid or cunning. Why, find out where he got his material from. That may put us on the right track. Now, write to Hilliston, and then go up to Hampstead and find out what Mrs. Bezel has to say."

"Won't you come, too?" said Claude, going to the writing desk.

"No. I have my own business to attend to."

"Is it connected with our enterprise?"

"I should think so. It is my intention to call on the firm who published 'A Whim of Fate,' and find out all I can concerning the author. When you return from Mrs. Bezel we will compare notes, and on what information we obtain will depend our future movements."

CHAPTER XI

A STARTLING DISCOVERY

In one of his novels Balzac makes the pertinent remark that "It is impossible for man to understand the heart of woman, seeing that her Creator himself does not understand it." These are not the precise words, but the sentiment is the same. And who, indeed, can understand a woman's heart; who can aver that he has a complete comprehension of her character? Very young men lay claim to such knowledge, but as they grow older, and the vanity of youth gives way to the modesty begotten by experience, they no longer pretend to such omniscience, and humbly admit their inability to solve the riddle of femininity. Had the Sphinx proposed such an enigma to Ædipus he would not have been able to guess it, and so, meeting the fate of other victims, would have deprived Thebes of a king and Sophicles of a tragedy.

Yet, if we bear in mind that women work rather from impulse than from motive, we may arrive at some knowledge of the organ in question. If a woman is impulsive, and most women are, she acts directly on those impulses; and so startles men by paradoxical actions. As a rule, the male intellect has logical reasons wherefrom it deduces motives upon which to act. Not so with women. They obey the impulse of the moment, reckless of the consequence to themselves or to anyone else. Consequently, it is impossible to foretell how a woman will act in a given circumstance, but it may be asserted that she will obey the latest thought in her mind. Even from this point of view, the feminine mind is still a riddle; but one which is more capable of explanation.

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