

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

Great Porter Square: A Mystery. Volume 3



Benjamin Farjeon

**Great Porter Square:
A Mystery. Volume 3**

«Public Domain»

Farjeon B.

Great Porter Square: A Mystery. Volume 3 / B. Farjeon — «Public Domain»,

Содержание

CHAPTER XXXI	5
CHAPTER XXXII	9
CHAPTER XXXIII	12
CHAPTER XXXIV	14
CHAPTER XXXV	18
CHAPTER XXXVI	21
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	24

B. L. Farjeon

Great Porter Square: A Mystery. v. 3

CHAPTER XXXI

BECKY GIVES A DESCRIPTION OF AN INTERVIEW BETWEEN HERSELF AND RICHARD MANX

MY DEAREST LOVE – How, did you like my little messenger, Fanny? Is she not steady, and bright, and clever? When she woke this morning I had an earnest conversation with her, and as far as was necessary I told her my plans and that I wanted her faithful assistance. She cried for joy. The few words she managed to get out convinced me that, child as she is, I could not be better served by a grown-up person. Besides, I want a child to assist me; a grown-up person might spoil my plans. In what way? Patience, my dear, patience.

Mrs. Preedy noticed that I looked tired, and I told her that I had been kept awake all the night with toothache. She expressed great sympathy with me. It is wonderful the position I hold in the house; I am treated more like a lady than a servant. That is because I have lent my mistress forty pounds, and have agreed to pay for little Fanny's board and lodging. Mrs. Preedy threw out a hint about taking me into partnership, if I would invest my fancied legacy into the business.

"We could keep on this house," she said, "and take another on the other side of the Square."

I said it was worth thinking about, but that, of course, I could do nothing until I received the whole amount of the legacy which would be in three weeks' time. So the matter rests; during these three weeks Mrs. Preedy will be very gracious to me, I expect. She said this morning, when I told her about my toothache,

"You had better lay down, my dear."

Actually! "My dear!"

I did lie down, and I had a good rest, so that my keeping up all night did not hurt me. I feel now quite refreshed, although it is night, and eleven o'clock. Mrs. Preedy, as usual, is out gossiping with Mrs. Beale, and I am writing in the kitchen. When she comes home I shall continue my letter in my bedroom. I have much to tell you. Things seem to move on rapidly. I have no doubt that in a very short time something important will come to light.

After sending Fanny to you this morning, I went up to our bedridden lady-lodger, Mrs. Bailey. From her I obtained some significant news. She had passed a bad night; the noise in the next house, as of some one moving about in the room in which your father met his death, had "come again," she said, and had continued for at least a couple of hours. She declared that it did not sound like mice, and that she did not know really what to think. What she *did* know was that she was almost frightened out of her life. I suggested that Fanny should sleep in her room for a night or two, and I told her about the little girl. "It will be company for you," I said. The old lady was delighted at the suggestion, and with the consent of Mrs. Preedy, I made up a bed for Fanny on the floor, close to the wall, and she is sleeping there now. I am satisfied she is asleep, because Richard Manx is not in the house. I have confided in Fanny, and she is so devoted to my service that I am certain, while she is in her bed, no sound can be made in the room adjoining without her hearing it. Her faculties have been sharpened by a life of want, and her nature is a very grateful one.

It was not without reflection that I have taken advantage of the opportunity to change Fanny's bedroom. It will afford me a better excuse for going upstairs more frequently than usual, and thus keeping a watch on the movements of our young man lodger. It will also give Fanny an opportunity of watching him, for I intend employing her in this way, and in watching another person, too. Richard

Manx has not seen my little detective yet, nor shall he see her, if it can be prevented. My instructions to Fanny are to keep herself carefully out of his sight; it is part of a plan, as yet half formed, that she should be very familiar with his face, and he not at all familiar with hers. Twice during the day has she seen him, without being seen, and this evening she gave me a description of his personal appearance so faithful as to be really startling. Slight peculiarities in him which had escaped my notice have not escaped Fanny's; she has found out even that he wears a wig, and that he paints his face. This poor little child is going to be invaluable to me. If all goes well with us we must take care of her. Indeed, I have promised as much.

Now let me tell you what else I have done, and what has occurred. In the note you sent back by Fanny this morning, you express anxiety concerning me with reference to Richard Manx. Well, my dear, I intend to take great care of myself, and in the afternoon I went out shopping accompanied by Fanny. I paid a visit, being a woman, to a milliner and dressmaker, and bought some clothes. For myself? No, for Fanny, and with them a waterproof to cover her dress completely, from top to toe. Then I made my way to a wig shop in Bow Street, and bought a wig. For myself? No – again for Fanny. And, after that, where do you think I went? To a gunsmith, of all places in the world. There I bought a revolver – the tiniest, dearest little pistol, which I can hold in the palm of my hand without anyone but myself being the wiser. I learnt how to put in the cartridges. It is very easy. With that in my pocket, I feel almost as safe as if you were by my side. Do not be troubled about this, and do not think I am in any danger. I am perfectly safe, and no harm will befall me. Of course, there is only one person to whom it might happen I would show my pretty little pistol – to Richard Manx. And I am convinced that the merest glimpse of it would be enough for him. You can tell by looking into a man's face and eyes whether he is brave as well as bold, and I am satisfied that Richard Manx is a coward.

I saw him this evening. I have not yet had an opportunity to tell you that he endeavoured to make himself very agreeable to me three days ago, when he met me, as I was returning to Great Porter Square from the post-office. He promised to make me a present of some acid drops, of which he seems to be very fond. He did not keep his word until this evening, when he presented me with a sweet little packet, which I put into the fire when I was alone. He spoke of his property and his expectations.

"I wish," said he, as he offered me the sweets, "that this paper was filled with diamonds; it would be – a – more agreeable. But I am poor, miserably poor – as yet. It will be one day that I shall be rich – then shall I present myself to you, and offer to you what I better wish."

"Why should you do so?" I asked. "You are a gentleman, although you have no money –"

"Ah, yes," he said, interrupting me, and placing his hand on his heart, "I am a gentleman. I thank you."

"And," I continued, "I am so much beneath you."

"Never," he said, energetically; "I have said to you before, you are a lady. Think you I do not know a lady when she presents herself? It is not station – it is not birth – it is not rank. It is manner. On my honour I say it – you are a lady."

I gave him a sharp look, doubtful for a moment whether he was in earnest; but the false ring in his false voice should of itself have convinced me that he was as insincere as it was possible for any human being to be.

"It is," he said, with a wave of his hand towards the Square, "still excitement. People still come to look and see. What do they expect?"

"I suppose," I said, "it is because of that wonderful account in the newspaper about the poor gentleman who was murdered. Did you read it?"

"Did I read it!" he echoed. "I was the first. It is what you say – wonderful. What think you of the lady with the pretty name – I forget it – remind me of it."

"Lydia," I said.

“Ah, yes, Lydia. It is a pretty name – remarkable.” (“Then,” thought I, following his words and manner with close attention, “if you think the name so pretty and remarkable, how comes it that you forget it so soon?” But I did not say this aloud.) “What think you of her?”

“I think she is to be pitied,” I said; “it was a dreadful story she told the reporter. It is like a romance.”

“A romance,” he said, “is something that is not true?”

“It *must* be true,” I said. “Do you suppose any person – especially a lady, as Mrs. Holdfast is – could possibly say what is not true, in such a position as hers?”

“It is not – a – possible,” he replied. “You are right. What say the people? As you say?”

“They can say nothing else. What object could she have to serve in speaking anything but the truth? Her husband is dead; that wicked young man – what was his name?” I asked, serving him in his own coin.

“Frederick,” he said, quickly.

“That wicked young man, Frederick, is dead, and she is left alone, a rich widow. Money is very nice. I should like to have as much. I think it would almost console me for the loss of a husband – especially a husband much older than myself.”

Forgive me, my dear, for speaking in this way, but to say honestly to a man like Richard Manx what is in one’s mind would not be wise.

He smiled at my words.

“It may be,” he said, “that Madame Lydia thinks as you. But you would not have been so – what do you call it? indiscreet? – yes, that word will do – you would not have been so indiscreet as to say to a gentleman of the press as much as she said. It was too candid – there was no – a – necessity. Why proclaim it?”

“Why not proclaim it?” I asked, “It may assist justice.”

“Assist what?”

“Justice,” I replied. “What is that unfortunate lady’s first and most earnest desire? To discover the murderer of her husband, and to make him pay the penalty of his crime. It would be mine. I would even go to see the monster hanged.”

“It is the proper word. Monster – yes, he is, he must be. But you could never – no never! You are too soft – that is, tender. Who is the monster? If you it were who was wronged, I am he who would find him. But this Madame Lydia, she is to me nothing. What say you? Can you suspect? In this Great Porter Square can anyone suspect? Our amiable lady of No. 118 – Mrs. Preedy – even she cannot say. Ah, but it is dark – mysterious. Yet I have a thought – it is here.” He tapped his forehead. “Shall I speak it?”

“Yes.”

“Bah! Why? It is not to me an interest. But if you wish so much to hear! Ah! well – my thought is this. The son, the wicked young man, Frederick, he is, they say, dead. But if he be not dead? What then? The monster, he – in secret to kill the father he betrayed!”

I turned my face from him, for I felt that it had grown suddenly white. My heart beat violently. Swiftly to my mind rushed the thought of your deadly peril. There came to me, in one clear, convincing flash, what, under other circumstances, would have taken me hours to work out. Think for yourself – consider calmly the circumstantial force of all that has passed – and you will see, as I see, how easy it would be to construct a chain of evidence against you from which it is scarcely possible you could escape.

“You are agitated,” said Richard Manx. “You turn from me. Why?”

In an instant I recovered my self-possession. I turned my face to him, and it seemed to me as if I had forced colour into it.

“The thought is so horrible,” I said. “That a son should kill his father in cold blood! I cannot bear to contemplate it. What wickedness there is in the world!”

“It is so,” said Richard Manx, with a smile, as though we were conversing on a pleasant subject. “Then what shall a man do? Live well – eat well – drink well – sleep well. There is a reason. The world is wicked. I cannot alter it. You cannot alter it. A lesson comes. Enjoy. Must you go? Must you leave me? I kiss your hand. No? In my fancy, then. Till again, fair Becky, adieu.”

Our conversation was at an end, and I was thankful. I have been particular in my endeavour to show you the man, from his words and manner of speech. Good-night, my dearest. In my own mind I am satisfied that this day has not been wasted. It leads to days more important to you and to your ever devoted.

CHAPTER XXXII

IN WHICH BECKY NARRATES HOW FANNY BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH MRS. LYDIA HOLDFAST

MY DEAR LOVE, – Again I beg of you, in reply to your expressions of anxiety in the letter Fanny brought to me this morning, not to give yourself unnecessary anxiety about me. You are alarmed at the position in which I have placed myself; you are alarmed because Richard Manx is in the same house with me; you are alarmed because I have bought a revolver. I assure you there is no reason why you should be so distressed. The position in which I have placed myself is, I am more than ever convinced, the only one which will enable me to reach the heart of this mystery. Richard Manx is but one person against many. I, and Mrs. Preedy, and Fanny, and the neighbours, and the policeman, with whom I am on friendly terms, are surely more than a match for him. You are alarmed because I have in my possession a toy pistol. Is not a woman, in an emergency, to be trusted with a weapon? In such circumstances as ours, why should not a woman have as much courage as a man? Why should not a woman undertake a task such as I have undertaken, when her heart is engaged in it, when the honour and safety of the man she loves are engaged in it, when the whole happiness of her life and his is engaged in it? That would be like saying that women are fit for nothing in the world but to wait upon men's actions and to follow them, whichever way they lead. It is not so. In such a crisis as this a woman can do, and do better, what it would be out of the power of a man to accomplish. I would willingly relinquish my task if I thought it could be accomplished without my aid. But it cannot be. You are powerless; there is no one but myself capable and willing to carry it out; and indeed, indeed, I am in no danger! My dear, you underrate our sex. Read this letter carefully, and then confess that your fears are groundless, and that I am doing what is right and best to be done.

Fanny heard nothing last night. There was no sound in the next house. For a reason. Richard Manx was not in his room, and did not make his appearance until this afternoon. Then I remembered that last week, on the same day, it was the same. There is one night in the week, then, in which he has business elsewhere. I shall take advantage of that discovery.

When Fanny returned with your letter this morning, I prepared for a masterstroke. Its success depended much upon chance, much upon Fanny's shrewdness. I cut her hair short, and fitted the wig I bought yesterday on her head. It is a wig of fair hair, with long curls. She looks lovely in it. When night fell, I dressed her in her new clothes, which were not new, but second-hand; and, covered with the waterproof, there she was, ready for her task.

My desire was that she should manage to become acquainted with Mrs. Lydia Holdfast, and so ingratiate herself with that person as to be able to bring me reports of her movements and proceedings. Having impressed this upon her, I asked her whether she would undertake the task. Her answer was that she would go through fire and water to serve me; that she knew exactly what I wanted, and was going to do it. I was so satisfied with her readiness that it was with a feeling of great confidence I sent her on her mission. I waited for my opportunity, and no one saw her leave the house. Whether what I called my masterstroke will really turn out to be one will be proved in a very short time. Something has already been achieved. Fanny has become acquainted with Mrs. Lydia Holdfast.

She returned an hour ago, and is now abed in old Mrs. Bailey's room. Exactly at ten o'clock I went into the Square, and found Fanny waiting for me. I whipped off her wig, and brought her home. The nights are dark, and there is little fear of detection; and even in that case I have an amusing story ready, which will easily account for what will look like a harmless freak.

When she left Great Porter Square, Fanny went at once to the house in which your father lived, and which his widow still inhabits. She waited outside for a long time until at length a lady came out whom, from my description of her, Fanny recognised to be Mrs. Lydia Holdfast. A carriage was at

the door, and as Mrs. Holdfast stepped towards it, Fanny pulled her dress. Mrs. Holdfast snatched her dress away impatiently, without speaking, and walked to her carriage, Fanny following her.

"If you please, ma'am," said Fanny.

"What do you want? What do you want?" cried Mrs. Holdfast.

"I want to speak to you," said Fanny.

"Well, speak!" exclaimed Mrs. Holdfast. "Don't you see I'm in a hurry?"

A coachman stood at the carriage door to wait upon his mistress.

"I want to speak to you alone, please," said Fanny.

"You can't," cried Mrs. Holdfast. "Take this beggar-girl away."

The coachman endeavoured to obey the order, but little Fanny was too quick for him. She slipped between his arms, and again stood by the side of Mrs. Holdfast.

"Ain't you Mrs. Holdfast?" she asked, looking up into the lady's face.

"Yes," was the reply.

"Mrs. Grace Holdfast," said Fanny, as bold as brass. I think it would be difficult to find her equal.

Mrs. Holdfast, as she heard this name, Grace, which Fanny spoke loudly, gave a scream, and seizing Fanny by the arm, hurried back with her into the house. There were servants standing about, but Mrs. Holdfast took no notice of them; she put her hand on Fanny's lips, and dragged her into an empty room. Closing the door, and locking it, she bent down to Fanny and shook her roughly.

Fanny did not speak or scream, but twisted herself as soon as she could from Mrs. Holdfast's grip, and said,

"There! You have made my wig all crooked."

Heaven only knows where this child got her wits from, but if she had been drilled for a month she could not have acted the spirit of her part with greater cleverness. The words I did not teach her; I simply told her what I wanted her to do, and left the rest to herself.

"There!" she cried. "You have made my wig all crooked."

And she ran to the looking-glass and set it straight again. There must have been something in her manner which made Mrs. Holdfast laugh, but as Fanny described it, her laugh was broken off in the middle.

"Come here directly," said Mrs. Holdfast.

Fanny obeyed. Mrs. Holdfast knelt upon the ground, and, holding Fanny's face between her hands, looked long and hard at her.

"I don't know you," she said; and then she coloured up, for she saw that Fanny was returning the earnest gaze.

"If you please, my lady," said Fanny, "I beg your pardon for calling you Grace; my sister said you wouldn't like it, but you were running away, and I couldn't help it."

"Who is your sister?" asked Mrs. Holdfast.

And now imagine Fanny, instead of at once answering the question, fainting dead away. A real swoon? Not a bit of it. A sham, to gain time to study the ground of action.

Mrs. Holdfast, at first, did not appear to know what to do. She allowed Fanny to lie on the ground, and although the child's eyes were nearly quite closed, she declares that not a movement nor an expression of Mrs. Holdfast escaped her. I am entirely inclined to believe every word spoken by Fanny as she related the adventure. She says that Mrs. Holdfast looked at her for a moment, then turned away for a moment, then looked at her again, as though wishing that she was dead. Upon which Fanny gave a sigh, and murmured something about being faint and hungry.

Mrs. Holdfast rang a bell, and going to the door, unlocked it, and spoke to a servant, from whom she received a decanter of wine. She locked the door again, and returning to Fanny, raised the child's head, and put the decanter to her lips. Fanny allowed herself gradually to recover, and presently opened her eyes, and struggled to her feet.

“Now,” repeated Mrs. Holdfast, “who is your sister, and what has brought you here?”

CHAPTER XXXIII

IN WHICH BECKY NARRATES HOW FANNY BECAME ACQUAINTED WITH MRS. LYDIA HOLDFAST

BY this time Fanny had invented a cunning little story.

“If you please, my lady,” she replied, “my sister is an actress, and I’ve come here to ask you to help me.”

“But you don’t know me; you’ve never spoken to me before,” said Mrs. Holdfast.

“I’ve never spoken to you,” said Fanny, “but I remember you well. You used to go to the theatre in the country, where Nelly was engaged. That’s the reason she sent me to you.”

“Is Nelly your sister?”

“Yes, my lady. She was in the front row, and I used to come on in the crowd. I got a shilling a night, and Nelly had a pound a week. We lived near you in Oxford, and often saw you pass. Nelly was always talking of you, and saying how beautiful you were, and what a lady, and how lucky to have such swell friends. She used to wish she was like you, and when you went away she wondered where you had gone to. Well, things got bad, and Nelly and I came to London a month ago; and now she has left me, and I don’t know what I am to do.”

“Why didn’t your sister take you with her?” asked Mrs. Holdfast.

“She could tell you; I can’t, except that she said two’s company and three’s none. She said yesterday morning, ‘I’m off, Dot; I can’t stand this any longer. No engagement and no money. You must look after yourself, Dot. I tell you what to do if you’re hard up. You go to this address’ – (and she gave me the address of your house) – ‘and ask for Mrs. Holdfast. Don’t say Grace Holdfast – she mightn’t like it – and say I knew her in Oxford, and ask her to help you. She’ll do it. She’s got a kind heart, and knows what it is to be unfortunate.’ Well, that’s all – except that in the afternoon a gentleman came, and asked for Nelly. She goes down to him, and I hear what they say. It ain’t much. ‘Are you ready?’ the gentleman asks. ‘Oh, yes,’ says Nelly, in a kind of saucy way, ‘I’m ready enough.’ Then Nelly asked him for some money, and he gave her a sovereign. She runs up to me, whips on her hat, kneels down, kisses me, puts the sovereign in my hand, and says, ‘Good-bye, Dot, I can’t help leaving you; what’s the use of stopping here to starve? Get away from this house as soon as you can, for there’s rent owing that I can’t pay. Mrs. Holdfast will give you a lift if you want one.’ She kisses me quick, over and over again, and runs down stairs, and out of the house. Well, I’m crying and the landlady comes in and asks, sharp, where Nelly has gone, and when I tell her, she flies into a passion, and says there’s three weeks’ rent owing, besides other money. My hand is shut tight, with the sovereign in it, and the landlady must have seen it through my fingers, for she tries to force them open, but she can’t till she digs her knuckles into the back of my hand, when, of course, the sovereign rolls out. ‘Oh,’ says the landlady, ‘your sister’s left this on account. All right; I hope she’ll pay the rest when she comes back.’ She pockets the sovereign, and this morning she turns me out of the house, and tells me she has let the room. So I am obliged to go, and I didn’t know what else to do except to come to you.”

I am not in a position to describe the exact effect this story, as related by Fanny, produced upon Mrs. Holdfast. For my part, I was amazed at the child’s ingenuity. I doubt whether she could have invented anything that would be likely better to serve our purpose. I am of opinion that Mrs. Holdfast was both amused and frightened, and I think she has some plan in her head with reference to Fanny. At all events, she gave Fanny five shillings, and bade her come again to-morrow, in the evening; and before Fanny left her, she made the child promise not to mention to a soul in the world anything about ever having seen her anywhere else but in London. Fanny promised, and left the house. To come straight home to me? No. The cunning little creature waited outside Mrs. Holdfast’s house until the

lady came out. She watched her get into her carriage, and when it started she ran ahead of the horses until she was out of breath. Then she called a cab, and paying the man out of her five shillings, told him to follow the carriage. It stopped at the Criterion Theatre, and Fanny, jumping from the cab, saw Mrs. Holdfast enter the theatre.

That is all I have to tell you to-night. You may be assured that Mrs. Holdfast does not feel any poignant grief at the loss of her husband. Otherwise she would keep from theatres for a little while. The state of widowhood is evidently one which gives her satisfaction. I wonder what the Reporter of the newspaper who wrote the "Romance of Real Life," partly from her own lips, would say, if he saw Mrs. Holdfast laughing in the theatre so shortly after the discovery of the murder of her husband. Because the piece they are playing at the Criterion is taken from the French, and is intended to make you laugh. All the actors and actresses who play in it are comedians, and do their best to create fun. The Reporter would put on his "Considering Cap," as the children's books say. If she had gone to see a tragedy, where she could cry her eyes out, she might have offered some excuse. But a laughable play, the morality of which is not very nice! That is a different pair of shoes. Undoubtedly it is a risk for Mrs. Holdfast to run; but unless I am much mistaken in her, she loves to run risks. She could not live without excitement. Your father's widow, my dear, was not cut out for a nun.

I feel like a person with a chess board before her, in the middle of a game which, to lose, would ruin her. I shall not lose it. Every hour the position of the pieces is becoming more clear to me, and I am discussing in my mind the advisability of two or three bold moves. But I will wait a little; something of importance will very soon be revealed to me. Good night, my dear. Sleep well. Every moment that passes brings our happiness nearer and nearer.

CHAPTER XXXIV

MR. PELHAM MAKES HIS APPEARANCE ONCE MORE

MY DEAR LOVE, – My note written last night was short, because I had scarcely anything to say, and I postponed what I had to tell until to-night. Mrs. Holdfast did not detain Fanny long yesterday. She asked but one question, which, if the little girl had not been prepared to answer, would have removed Fanny from the game, and increased the difficulties of our task. In the story Fanny invented for the mystification of Mrs. Holdfast I saw one great danger. Mrs. Holdfast is not playing alone; there is a master mind behind her. Who that master mind is it was necessary for me to discover, and I have made the discovery. I shall not be surprised if, in the letter I shall write to you to-morrow night I am able to tell you something of the very greatest moment.

Fanny's danger was this: She had told a clever story; had invented a sister, and had furnished a tolerably fair excuse for forcing herself upon a lady of Mrs. Holdfast's position. But she had spoken of herself and her sister living in lodgings in London. If there is one thing Mrs. Holdfast desires at present to avoid it is the slightest chance of anything coming before the public which would tend to prove that she and Grace who destroyed Sydney Campbell are one and the same person. Perhaps the only person who, in an indirect way, is aware of this fact (that is, to Mrs. Holdfast's knowledge) is Fanny. Here was a risk; and between Fanny's first and second visit to Mrs. Holdfast, the suggestion had in some way arisen that the little girl might have been instructed in her part by an unseen enemy. It was necessary, therefore, to test the truth of Fanny's story, and there was only one point which could be seized upon. In what street in London, in what house, did Fanny and her sister live before the sister ran away? This occurred to my sharp mind before it had been suggested to Mrs. Holdfast, and I determined to manufacture evidence. I enlisted Mrs. Preedy on my side. I bought her a new gown, a cloak, and a hat, and I made her a present of them. Then, having entirely won her heart – she told me that she looked upon me as a daughter – I cautiously imparted to her what I wanted her to do for me. It appeared that nothing was easier. For a few shillings a friend of Mrs. Preedy, living half a mile from Great Porter Square, undertook, in case a lady called to ask there, to give certain answers to certain questions about two lodgers, one called Nelly and the other Dot. The lesson was a simple one, and was easily learned. Armed with the address, Fanny went to Mrs. Holdfast, according to appointment. I may inform you that I am placing fuller reliance than ever upon little Fanny, and that I have related to her a great deal of Grace's life in Oxford, which, in case of need, she can turn to useful account. As I anticipated, Mrs. Holdfast asked Fanny in what house she and her sister lived in London. Without hesitation, Fanny gave the address of Mrs. Preedy's friend, and Mrs. Holdfast dismissed her, desiring her to call again on the following day – this morning. I ascertained to-day that Mrs. Holdfast called at the address, and received the answers prepared for her.

I must tell you what Mrs. Preedy said to me during the evening.

“My dear, you are not what you pretend to be.”

I gave her a spirited answer, knowing by this time how to manage her.

“You are a clever woman,” I replied, looking at her admiringly; “you have guessed my secret; not one in a thousand would have done it. I am *not* a servant-of-all-work, and I came here to be out of the way, let me say, of my young man. Well now, there's no harm in that, is there?”

“Not a bit of harm,” she said. “But what is it all about?”

“I can't tell you just now,” I said. “You may be certain of one thing. If things go on as they've been going on lately, you will be none the worse off for it. If I don't go into partnership with you, I shall make you a very handsome present, and I shan't ask you for any wages. I have broken a lot of

things since I've been here, but I've bought new ones in their place. Mrs. Preedy, you leave everything to me, and I will show you that Becky can be grateful."

"Well, my dear," said Mrs. Preedy, "so long as there's no harm done, I don't mind. You're a good sort, and I dare say have seen a lot of trouble. So have I. Women are born to be imposed upon."

"Does our young man lodger pay his rent regularly?" I asked, pretending to know nothing.

"My dear," said Mrs. Preedy, sadly, "since he has lived here I haven't seen the colour of his money."

"Now," I said, smiling, "suppose I pay it for him. Not for his sake – for yours. I'm not sweet on him, though he pretends to be on me. It's a shame that you should be taken in by a foreign gentleman like him – you can't afford it."

I found out how many weeks' rent he owed, and I paid it. I don't think anything is wanting to complete the conquest of my mistress's heart. You see I am spending some of the money you gave me; I couldn't get along without it.

To-day Mrs. Holdfast received Fanny very graciously, called her a nice little thing, said she was growing quite fond of her, and was almost inclined to take her into the house to live with her.

"Oh, how I wish you would!" cried Fanny.

However, it appears that at present Mrs. Holdfast, even if she is in earnest, cannot take Fanny into her house. If it *were* done Fanny would find a way to communicate with me, and tell me all that is going on.

Mrs. Holdfast expressed great curiosity about Fanny's sister, and asked the child whether Nelly did not give her an address to write to.

"O, yes," said Fanny, prepared for any emergency; "Nelly's gone to Paris. She said I might write to her at the post-office there."

What does Mrs. Holdfast do but write a letter to Fanny's sister, and address it to the Poste Restante, Paris. She did not give the letter to Fanny to post. What is in the letter? Nothing important, perhaps, but written in the endeavour to more completely verify the truth of Fanny's story. Or perhaps Mrs. Holdfast really knew some actresses in the country, and is anxious to ascertain if Nelly is one of her old acquaintances.

Now I will tell you something more important.

"You are a shrewd little thing," said Mrs. Holdfast to Fanny; "I have a good mind, although I can't let you sleep in the house, to take you into my service."

"O, do, ma'am, do!" cried Fanny.

"Well, I'll try you. But mind – you must keep my secrets. Do you know any person in London besides me?"

"Not a blessed soul!" replied Fanny. "And I'll keep your secrets – you try me. O, I don't believe there's a kinder lady in the world than you are!"

"She's an artful one," said Fanny to me, as she gave me the particulars of this conversation, "but I'm an artfuller!"

Mrs. Holdfast is so extraordinarily vain that even this deserted child's praise was agreeable to her.

"Be true to me," said Mrs. Holdfast, "and I'll make a lady of you. Are you fond of babies?"

To which Fanny replied that she doted on them. Mrs. Holdfast rang a bell, and desired the maid who answered it to take Fanny into the nursery.

"I'll come up to you presently," said Mrs. Holdfast.

Fanny went into the nursery, where she saw what she describes as the loveliest baby in the world, all dressed in laces and silks, "more like a beautiful wax doll," said Fanny, "than anything else." It was Mrs. Holdfast's baby, the maid told Fanny, and her mistress doted on it.

"I've seen a good many babies and a good many mothers," said the maid, "but I never saw a mother as fond of a baby as Mrs. Holdfast is of hers."

Fanny's account agrees with the maid's words. When Mrs. Holdfast came into the nursery, and took her baby, and sat in a rocking chair, singing to the child, Fanny said it was very hard to believe that a woman like that could do anything wrong. If Fanny were not truthful and faithful to me, and would rather have her tongue cut out than deceive me, I should receive her version of this wonderful mother's love with a great deal of suspicion. But there can be no doubt of its truth. I remember that the Reporter of the *Evening Moon* spoke of this, and that it won his admiration, as it could not fail to win the admiration of any person who did not know how wicked is the heart that beats in Mrs. Holdfast's bosom. Can you reconcile it with your knowledge of her? I cannot. It does not raise the character of the woman in my eyes; it debases it.

In the nursery Mrs. Holdfast gave Fanny a letter, with instructions to deliver it to the gentleman in person, and to wait for an answer.

My dear, this letter was addressed "Mr. Pelham, 147, Buckingham Palace Road."

Here at once is established the fact of the continuance of the intimacy between Mr. Pelham and Mrs. Holdfast. Is it possible that your father, after you left the country, discovered that his wife was deceiving him, and flew from the shame of her presence? It must be so. What, then, took place between husband and wife, and to whose advantage would it be that he should be made to disappear? I shudder to contemplate the answer. I can find but one; it is horrible to think of.

Fanny received the letter without remark, and went to the address in Buckingham Palace Road. Mr. Pelham was in, and Fanny was desired to walk up-stairs. There, in a handsomely-furnished room, she saw Mr. Pelham, lounging on a sofa, smoking and drinking. "A regular swell," said Fanny. He tore the letter open, and tossed it away passionately, without reading it.

"You haven't taken anything out of it?" he cried to Fanny.

"Oh, no, sir," replied Fanny, "it's just as Mrs. Holdfast gave it to me. I was to wait for an answer."

Fanny says he looked as savage as if he had expected to find the envelope full of money, and didn't find a penny. He drew the letter to him and read it; then rose, and took some paper from a desk, scribbled an answer, which he put carelessly into an envelope and threw over to Fanny, saying, "Give her that!" Fanny states that he is not an agreeable-looking gentleman, and that there is something about him that reminds her of – but here Fanny stopped, and would not finish what she intended to say. She roused my curiosity, but she would not satisfy it.

"Wait a bit," she said. "I've got an idea in my head. If it's a right one I shall astonish you. If it ain't, it would be foolish to speak about it."

I could get nothing more than this out of her, and I let the subject drop, but there is evidently something very weighty on her mind.

She hurried into the street with Mr. Pelham's answer to Mrs. Holdfast's note, and getting into a quiet nook, where she was free from observation, asked a girl to read it to her. Mr. Pelham had scarcely wetted the gum, and the envelope was easily unfastened. Fanny endeavoured to commit the letter to memory, but she failed; the girl who read it to her could not quite make out the words. The letter contained a demand for money, and Mr. Pelham said in it that before the week was out he must have a cheque for five hundred pounds. One remark Fanny perfectly remembered. "If you are going to turn niggardly and stingy," wrote Mr. Pelham, "I shall have to keep the purse myself. Don't forget that the money is as much mine as yours, more mine than yours indeed, and that I could ruin you with one word."

Fanny says that when Mrs. Holdfast read the letter (which she delivered properly fastened) and came to those words – of course Fanny could only guess that – Mrs. Holdfast said aloud:

"And yourself, too, Pelham. It would go harder with you than with me."

For a moment – only for a single moment, as I gather from Fanny – Mrs. Holdfast's face grew haggard, but she became gay again instantly, and began to sing and talk lightly. Can such a nature as hers really feel?

Again, for the second time this week, Richard Manx has not come to his room in Great Porter Square. I make sure of this by putting the chain on the street door after mid-night. I attach importance to the slightest circumstance now, and do not allow anything to escape me. Do not for a moment let your courage and your hopefulness fail you. We have not yet obtained a tangible link to start from, but it appears to me as if events were coming closer; something will come to light presently which will assist in the discovery of your father's murderer. You are never absent from my thoughts; you are for ever in my heart. I am yours till death.

CHAPTER XXXV

FANNY DISCOVERS WHO RICHARD MANX IS

MY DARLING – What has occurred to-day must be related with calmness, although my mind is in a whirl of excitement. The presentiment I felt last night that we were on the threshold of an important discovery has come true. A discovery *has* been made which neither you nor I could ever have dreamt of, and we have to thank Fanny for it. How wonderfully all the circumstances of life seem to be woven into one another! Little did I think, when I first met the poor, hungry little girl, and was kind to her, that she would repay me as she has repaid me, and that we should owe to her, perhaps, the happiness of our lives. I may be mistaken; I may be speaking more out of my heart than my head, more out of my hopes than my reason. But surely what Fanny has discovered will lead to a discovery of greater moment. It is, as yet, the most important link in the chain. We must consider what is best to be done. At noon, Fanny said to me:

“I want a holiday; I’ve got something to do.”

She spoke abruptly, and with great earnestness.

“You don’t intend to run away from me, Fanny,” I said, and immediately repented my words, for Fanny seized my hands, and kissed them, with tears running down her face.

“Run away from you!” she cried. “Never – never – never! How could you think it of me. I would die for you – indeed, indeed I would!”

I quieted her, trying to excuse myself by saying that it was only because she was keeping something secret from me that the words escaped me.

“But I’m doing it for you,” she said. “To-night I’ll tell you everything.”

Now, read how Fanny passed the day. I will relate it as nearly as possible out of her lips.

“When I went into Mr. Pelham’s room, yesterday,” she said, “in Buckingham Palace Road, I didn’t suspect anything at first. I didn’t like his looks, but that was nothing. There are lots of people I don’t like the looks of. I remained there while he threw away the letter, and while he drank and smoked. He was drinking wine, and he emptied three glasses one after another. It wasn’t till he got up and went to his desk that I noticed something – a twitch of his left shoulder upwards, just as a man does when he shrugs his shoulders. But Mr. Pelham did not shrug his two shoulders, he shrugged one – the left one. I only knew one other man who did with his left shoulder what Mr. Pelham did, and I thought it funny. While he was writing his letter he threw away his cigar, and took a cigarette, and the way he put it into his mouth and rolled it between his lips was just the same as the other man who twitched his shoulder as Mr. Pelham did. Well, as I walked back to Mrs. Holdfast’s house, I seemed to see the two men – Mr. Pelham and the other, shrugging their left shoulders, and rolling their cigarettes in their mouths, and what they did was as like as two peas, though they were two different men, though one was poor and the other rich. I couldn’t help calling myself a little fool when the idea came to me that they were not different men at all, and I said to myself, ‘What do they mean by it? No good, that’s certain.’ So I made up my mind to do something, and I did it to-day.

“First, there was Richard Manx. I watched him out of the house. He came down from his garret a little after twelve; I stood in the dark passage, and watched him coming downstairs; he seemed to be out of temper, and he gave the wall a great blow with his hand. I think he would have liked to hear it cry out, so that he might be sure he had hurt it. I thought I shouldn’t like him to strike *me* in that way – but I don’t suppose he would if any one was looking. He would have hit me as he hit the wall, if he had known what I was up to – that is, if nobody was near.

“He went out of the house, closing the street door, O, so quietly behind him. Have you noticed how quietly he does everything? He walks like a cat – well, so can other people. I waited a minute after he closed the street door, and then I slipped out after him. I looked all ways, and I saw him

just turning out of the Square into Great King Street. I soon turned the corner too, and there I was walking behind him on the other side of the way, with my eyes glued to him. Well, as good as glued. I can walk a long way behind a person, and never lose sight of him, my eyes are so sharp, and I didn't lose sight of Mr. Richard Manx, as he calls himself. He walked Lambeth way, and I noticed that he was looking about in the funniest manner, as though he was afraid he was being watched. The farther he got from Great Porter Square the more he looked about him; but no one took any notice of him – only me. Well, he went down a street where half the houses were shops and half not, and at the corner of the street was a coffee-shop. There were two doors facing him, one going into the shop where people are served, and the other going into a passage, very narrow and very dark. A little way up this passage was a door, which pushed open. Mr. Manx, after looking about him more than ever, went into the narrow dark passage, and pushed open the door.

“What I had to do now was to wait until he came out, and to dodge about so that I shouldn't be seen or caught watching for something I didn't know what. It was a hard job, as hard a job as ever I was at, and it was all that I could do to keep people from watching me. I waited an hour, and another hour, and another hour, and Mr. Manx never came out of the coffee shop. I was regularly puzzled, and tired, and bothered. But I didn't know what a little fool I was till after waiting for at least four hours I found out that the coffee shop had two more doors on the side facing the other street; doors just like the others, one going into the shop, and the other into a narrow dark passage. When I found that out I thought that Mr. Manx must have gone in at one door in one street and come out at the other door in the other street, and I was regularly vexed with myself. But that didn't help me, and I walked away from Lambeth towards Buckingham Palace Road. I wanted to see with my own eyes if Mr. Pelham was at home. He was; I saw him stand for a minute at the window of his room on the front floor. Then I set to watching him. I wanted to find out where he was going to, and what he was up to. I suppose it was seven o'clock, and dark, before he came out. He walked till he met a cab, and as he got in I heard him give the direction of Mrs. Holdfast's house. That was enough for me; I followed him there, my feet ready to drop off, I was that tired. But I wasn't going to give up the job. No one came out of Mrs. Holdfast's house till nine o'clock struck; then the street door was opened, and Mr. Pelham walked into the street. He stood still a little, and I thought to myself he is thinking whether he shall take a cab. He didn't take one till he was half-a-mile from Mrs. Holdfast's house. I ran all the way after it. It was a good job for me that the cab was a four-wheeler, and that it went along slow, for running so hard set my heart beating to that extent that I thought it would jump out of my body. I scarcely knew where we were going, the night was that dark, but I knew it was not in the direction of Buckingham Palace Road. Mr. Pelham rode about a mile, then called out to the cabby, and jumped on to the pavement. He paid the man, and the cab drove away, and then Mr. Pelham walked slowly towards Lambeth, looking about him, although the night was so dark, in exactly the same way as Mr. Manx had done when I followed him from Great Porter Square. I had been on my feet all the day, and had walked miles and miles, and I hadn't had a bit of bread in my mouth since breakfast – but when I was certain that Mr. Pelham was walking to Lambeth I didn't feel hungry or tired. I said to myself, 'Fanny, your idea was right; but what does it all mean?' Well, I couldn't settle that; all I had to settle was that the two men who shrugged their left shoulders, and who rolled their cigarettes in their mouths in the way I had noticed, were not two men at all, but the same man, living in one place as a gentleman and an Englishman, and in another as a poor foreigner without a shilling. So I was not at all surprised to see Mr. Pelham, dressed like a swell, stop at the coffee shop at which Mr. Manx had stopped, and push through the dark passage by the door I had not noticed when I was waiting in the street this morning for Mr. Manx, and I wasn't at all surprised that Mr. Pelham didn't come out again. The man who came was the man I wanted, and I followed him home here to Great Porter Square, and he is in the house now.” And here Fanny concluded the account of her day's adventures by asking, “Who came in five minutes before I did?”

“Richard Manx,” I replied.

“It’s all one,” said Fanny, triumphantly; “Richard Manx is Mr. Pelham. There’s no difference between them, except that one wears a wig, and paints his face, and talks like a foreigner, and that the other lives in a fine house, and drinks wine, and dresses like a gentleman. That was my idea last night. That was what I had to do when I asked you this morning to let me go for the day. There’s something in it; I don’t know what – that’s for you to find out. Are you pleased with me?”

I pressed the faithful child in my arms, and she gave a sigh and fainted. She was so eager to tell me of her discovery, and I was so anxious to hear it, that we both forgot that for fifteen hours not a morsel of food had passed her lips.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BECKY AND FANNY ON THE WATCH

A CUP of hot tea and some bread and butter soon made little Fanny lively again, and when she was quite recovered I questioned her upon many little points, so as to make sure that she was not mistaken. She convinced me. Richard Manx and Mr. Pelham are one and the same man, and Richard Manx's motive for taking lodgings in this house was that he might obtain, in a secret and unsuspected manner, access to the room in which your father was murdered. For what purpose? To destroy every evidence of the crime before the house comes into the possession of a new tenant, who might by chance discover what, up to the present moment, has escaped the eyes of the police? No – scarcely that, in a direct way. He is not seeking to destroy or discover anything which he *knows* to be in existence; he is searching for a document which he *suspects* your father concealed before he met his death. This is but a reasonable explanation of Richard Manx's presence here. Arguing in the dark, as we are, and without positive knowledge, we must have a tangible foundation on which to build our theories. I am speaking and arguing like a man, am I not, my dear? I wonder at myself as I read over some of the things I have written; but they are a proof that I have thrown aside all that is weak in my nature, and that I have courage and decision to meet any emergency.

The document which Richard Manx suspects your father to have hidden, and for which he is searching, must, if it really exist, be of the utmost importance. Shall I tell you what Richard Manx believes this document to be? A second Will, which would make a beggar of the woman who betrayed him, and consequently of Mr. Pelham, who, with your father's widow, is enjoying your father's money —*your* money, my dear! I am not mercenary, but next to the clearing of your name and the punishment of your father's murderer, I want you to enjoy what is your own. Selfish mortal that I am, I want you to be happy and rich, and I want to share your happiness and riches.

If Richard Manx obtains possession of this document, it will be a serious blow to us. Something must be done, and done promptly – and at the same time we must not put Richard Manx on his guard.

Now, pay particular attention to the following little piece of reasoning. Look at the date of the *Evening Moon* in which the public were first made acquainted with the name of the murdered man. And by the side of that date place the significant fact that Mr. Pelham, disguised as Richard Manx, took lodgings here three weeks before that discovery was made. What follows? That Mr. Pelham knew, three weeks before the police became acquainted with the fact, that it was your father who had been murdered. Why, then, should he not have known it on the very night of the murder itself, and why did he keep the knowledge to himself? What was his reason for concealment? A world of dreadful conjecture opens itself to me, and I am almost afraid to put my thoughts on paper. They are not centred alone on Mr. Pelham; Mrs. Holdfast intrudes herself in a way that makes me shudder. My God! Is it possible that there can be such wickedness in the world?

In the account Mrs. Holdfast gave the Reporter of the *Evening Moon* (I have the paper now before me) from which he wrote his “Romance in Real Life,” she says that in her distress at the mysterious absence of her husband, she went to a friend for advice. This friend had interested himself in her case, and had written to America in her behalf, to ascertain particulars of her husband's movements. Her friend it was who, according to her statement, first suggested that her husband might have been robbed and murdered. He sent her to a lawyer, who, during the interview, made a private memorandum which she read. The lawyer said, “We will find your husband for you, dead or alive;” and then he made the memorandum, as a guide for himself: “Look up the murders. How about the murder in Great Porter Square?” From that she proceeds to describe how she went to a number of shops, and bought a number of newspapers containing accounts of the discovery of the murder and of the accusation brought against Antony Cowrick. Her suspicions were aroused. She gave the lawyer

a portrait of her husband, and in a very little time it was ascertained and made public that it was Mr. Holdfast who had been murdered. Read by itself, the Reporter's description is enthralling; those who read for amusement would not stop to inquire as to whether this was likely or that reasonable; they would accept the statement without question, and give their sincere pity to a lady who had been so foully wronged. But, read by the light of what has come to our knowledge, the traces of collusion, deception, clever acting – of guilt perhaps – are as clear as sunlight. Observe that Mrs. Holdfast does not give the name of her friend – who must have been a very close friend indeed to take such an interest in her. I will give you his name – it is Pelham. Nor does she give the name of the lawyer to whom Mr. Pelham sent her. If you sought him and became acquainted with his antecedents, you would find that he was in Mr. Pelham's pay, and that, up to a certain point, he acted in accordance with instructions. I think I have established the fact that Mr. Pelham knew your father was dead long before it was made public. Mrs. Holdfast must also have known. Why did they wait so long before they took steps towards the discovery? To avert any chance of suspicion being directed towards themselves? It is likely enough, and that is also the reason, when you, as Antony Cowlrick, were brought up at the police-court on suspicion of being implicated in the murder, why Mr. Pelham kept carefully out of sight, and therefore had no opportunity of recognising you. In this excess of caution he over-reached himself.

At length, however, the time arrived when it was imperative the name of the murdered man should be made known, and Mr. Pelham and Mrs. Holdfast acted in concert. Your father's Will, of course, could not be proved in your father's lifetime, so it was necessary that the fact of his death should be established. It was done, and clear sailing was before them, with the exception of one threatening gale which promises to wreck them – the document for which Richard Manx is searching. He has not found it yet, or he would not have struck the wall so viciously as he did this morning when Fanny was watching him. Fate is against him, and is on our side.

Another little point, of which a lawyer would make a mountain. Did it not occur to you as very strange that Mrs. Holdfast so easily obtained from small newspaper shops a quantity of newspapers relating to a murder at least three months old? The shops do not keep a stock of old newspapers on hand: I know that this is so, from personal inquiry.

Just now there comes to my mind the report in the papers that, during the nine days your father lived in the fatal house next door, he had but one visitor – a lady, who came so closely veiled that no person in the house caught a glimpse of her face? Do you think it possible that this lady was Mrs. Holdfast?

Good night, my dearest. By the morning some plan may occur to me which may help us to the end. Fanny went to bed an hour ago. Mrs. Preedy is asleep, and all is quiet in the house. What would I give if I could see into the mind of our young man lodger, Richard Manx!

I re-open my letter; I have something to add to it.

No sooner did I lay my head on my pillow than I fell asleep. I think I must have slept over an hour when I was awoken by the sound of some one opening my bedroom door. I raised myself in bed, and cried in a loud tone, "Who's there?"

"Hush! Don't make a noise. I've come to tell you something."

It was Fanny who spoke, and she was standing at my bedside.

"Are you frightened, Fanny?" I asked. "Shall I light a candle?"

"No," replied Fanny, "it might wake Mrs. Preedy. I'm not frightened. I've been on the look-out."

I passed my hand over Fanny, and discovered that she was fully dressed; but so that she should not be heard she had taken off her boots.

“On the look-out, Fanny!” I exclaimed. “Why you haven’t been in bed! What is the meaning of it?”

“I’ve been in bed,” said Fanny, “but I didn’t undress, and I didn’t go to sleep. I’ve been listening. *He’s* in the next house.”

“Who?” I cried. “Richard Manx!”

And I jumped up, and began to dress myself. Heaven only knows why, for I had no intention of going out of my bedroom.

“Yes, Richard Manx,” replied Fanny.

“Have you heard anything?”

“Yes, like some one taking up the floor.”

“A loud noise then, Fanny.”

“No – everything’s being done soft – like a cat moving; but there’s a crack sometimes, and a wrench, just the noise that would be made if boards were being taken up.”

These words set me all in a fever. Richard Manx was getting desperate, and did not mean to give up his search without examining everything in the room. What if he *should* discover the document he is looking for? It would be he, then, who would hold the winning cards. The thought was torture. It seemed to me as if I were within reach of your happiness, your safety, of the vindication of your honour, and as if they were slipping from me.

“Are you sure it is Richard Manx who is in the next house?” I asked.

“As sure as guns,” said Fanny.

“How can you tell? You can’t see through the walls.”

“No, I wish I could – then I should find out something more. When the noise first came I didn’t move for a long while; I waited till Mr. Manx was deep in his little game; then I got up so quietly that Mrs. Bailey didn’t stir, and I went out of the room, and upstairs to the garret. The door was shut, and I pushed it softly, and it gave way. I slid downstairs like lightning, for if Mr. Manx had been in the room he would have come to the door at once; then, if he didn’t see anyone, he might think it was the wind that had blown the door open. But he didn’t come because he wasn’t in the room, and the door remained just as I left it. I crept up again, and peeped into the room; it was empty, and there *was*

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

Текст предоставлен ООО «ЛитРес».

Прочитайте эту книгу целиком, [купив полную легальную версию](#) на ЛитРес.

Безопасно оплатить книгу можно банковской картой Visa, MasterCard, Maestro, со счета мобильного телефона, с платежного терминала, в салоне МТС или Связной, через PayPal, WebMoney, Яндекс.Деньги, QIWI Кошелек, бонусными картами или другим удобным Вам способом.