

Hope Anthony

Mr. Witt's Widow: A Frivolous Tale



Anthony Hope
Mr. Witt's Widow:
A Frivolous Tale

http://www.litres.ru/pages/biblio_book/?art=23144643

Mr. Witt's Widow: A Frivolous Tale:

Содержание

CHAPTER I.	4
CHAPTER II.	14
CHAPTER III.	22
CHAPTER IV.	31
CHAPTER V.	41
Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.	45

Anthony Hope

Mr. Witt's Widow:

A Frivolous Tale

CHAPTER I.

HOW GEORGE NESTON JUMPED

The Nestons, of Tottlebury Grange in the county of Suffolk, were an ancient and honourable family, never very distinguished or very rich, but yet for many generations back always richer and more distinguished than the common run of mankind. The men had been for the most part able and upright, tenacious of their claims, and mindful of their duties; the women had respected their betters, exacted respect from their inferiors, and educated their brothers' wives in the Neston ways; and the whole race, while confessing individual frailties, would have been puzzled to point out how, as a family, it had failed to live up to the position in which Providence and the Constitution had placed it. The error, if any, had indeed been on the other side in one or two cases. The last owner of the Grange, a gay old bachelor, had scorned the limits of his rents and his banking-account, and added victories on the turf to the family laurels at a heavy cost

to the family revenues. His sudden death had been mourned as a personal loss, but silently acknowledged as a dynastic gain, and ten years of the methodical rule of his brother Roger had gone far to efface the ravages of his merry reign. The younger sons of the Nestons served the State or adorned the professions, and Roger had spent a long and useful life in the Office of Commerce. He had been a valuable official, and his merits had not gone unappreciated. Fame he had neither sought nor attained, and his name had come but little before the public, its rare appearances in the newspapers generally occurring on days when our Gracious Sovereign completed another year of her beneficent life, and was pleased to mark the occasion by conferring honour on Mr. Roger Neston. When this happened, all the leader-writers looked him up in "Men of the Time," or "Whitaker," or some other standard work of reference, and remarked that few appointments would meet with more universal public approval, a proposition which the public must be taken to have endorsed with tacit unanimity.

Mr. Neston went on his way, undisturbed by his moments of notoriety, but quietly pleased with his red ribbon, and, when he entered into possession of the family estate, continued to go to the office with unabated regularity. At last he reached the pinnacle of his particular ambition, and, as Permanent Head of his Department, for fifteen years took a large share in the government of a people almost unconscious of his existence, until the moment when it saw the announcement that on his retirement he had been raised to the peerage by the title of Baron

Tottlebury. Then the chorus of approval broke forth once again, and the new lord had many friendly pats on the back he was turning to public life. Henceforth he sat silent in the House of Lords, and wrote letters to the *Times* on subjects which the cares of office had not previously left him leisure to study.

But fortune was not yet tired of smiling on the Nestons. Lord Tottlebury, before accepting his new dignity, had impressed upon his son Gerald the necessity of seeking the wherewith to gild the coronet by a judicious marriage. Gerald was by no means loth. He had never made much progress at the Bar, and felt that his want of success contrasted unfavourably with the growing practice of his cousin George, a state of things very unfitting, as George represented a younger branch than Gerald. A rich marriage, combined with his father's improved position, opened to him prospects of a career of public distinction, and, what was more important, of private leisure, better fitted to his tastes and less trying to his patience; and, by an unusual bit of luck, he was saved from any scruples about marrying for money by the fact that he was already desperately in love with a very rich woman. She was of no high birth, it is true, and she was the widow of a Manchester merchant; but this same merchant, to the disgust of his own relatives, had left her five thousand a year at her absolute disposal. The last fact easily outweighed the two first in Lord Tottlebury's mind, while Gerald rested his action on the sole ground that Neaera Witt was the prettiest girl in London, and, by Jove, he believed in the world; only, of course, if she had

money too, all the better.

Accordingly, the engagement was an accomplished fact. Mrs. Witt had shown no more than a graceful disinclination to become Mrs. Neston. At twenty-five perpetual devotion to the memory of such a mere episode as her first marriage had been was neither to be desired nor expected, and Neaera was very frankly in love with Gerald Neston, a handsome, open-faced, strapping fellow, who won her heart mainly because he was so very unlike the late Mr. Witt. Everybody envied Gerald, and everybody congratulated Neaera on having escaped the various chasms that are supposed to yawn in the path of rich young widows. The engagement was announced once, and contradicted as premature, and then announced again; and, in a word, everything pursued its pleasant and accustomed course in these matters. Finally, Lord Tottlebury in due form entertained Mrs. Witt at dinner, by way of initiation into the Neston mysteries.

It was for this dinner that Mr. George Neston, barrister-at-law, was putting on his white tie one May evening in his chambers off Piccadilly. George was the son of Lord Tottlebury's younger brother. His father had died on service in India, leaving a wife, who survived him but a few years, and one small boy, who had developed into a rising lawyer of two or three-and-thirty, and was at this moment employed in thinking what a lucky dog Gerald was, if all people said about Mrs. Witt were true. Not that George envied his cousin his bride. His roving days were over. He had found what he wanted for himself, and Mrs. Witt's beauty, if she

were beautiful, was nothing to him. So he thought with mingled joy and resignation. Still, however much you may be in love with somebody else, a pretty girl with five thousand a year is luck, and there's an end of it! So concluded George Neston as he got into his hansom, and drove to Portman Square.

The party was but small, for the Nestons were not one of those families that ramify into bewildering growths of cousins. Lord Tottlebury of course was there, a tall, spare, rather stern-looking man, and his daughter Maud, a bright and pretty girl of twenty, and Gerald, in a flutter ill concealed by the very extravagance of *nonchalance*. Then there were a couple of aunts and a male cousin and his wife, and George himself. Three of the guests were friends, not relatives. Mrs. Bourne had been the chosen intimate of Lord Tottlebury's dead wife, and he honoured his wife's memory by constant attention to her friend. Mrs. Bourne brought her daughter Isabel, and Isabel had come full of curiosity to see Mrs. Witt, and also hoping to see George Neston, for did she not know what pleasure it would give him to meet her? Lastly, there towered on the rug the huge form of Mr. Blodwell, Q.C., an old friend of Lord Tottlebury's and George's first tutor and kindly guide in the law, famous for rasping speeches in court and good stories out of it, famous, too, as one of the tallest men and quite the fattest man at the Bar. Only Neaera Witt was wanting, and before Mr. Blodwell had got well into the famous story about Baron Samuel and the dun cow Neaera Witt was announced.

Mrs. Witt's widowhood was only two years old, and she was

at this time almost unknown to society. None of the party, except Gerald and his father, had seen her, and they all looked with interest to the door when the butler announced her name. She had put off her mourning altogether for the first time, and came in clothed in a gown of deep red, with a long train that gave her dignity, her golden hair massed low on her neck, and her pale, clear complexion just tinged with the suspicion of a blush as she instinctively glanced round for her lover. The entry was, no doubt, a small triumph. The girls were lost in generous admiration; the men were startled; and Mr. Blodwell, finishing the evening at the House of Commons, remarked to young Sidmouth Vane, the Lord President's private secretary (unpaid), "I hope, my boy, you may live as long as I have, and see as many pretty women; but you'll never see a prettier than Mrs. Witt. Her face! her hair! and Vane, my boy, her waist!" But here the division-bell rang, and Mr. Blodwell hastened off to vote against a proposal aimed at deteriorating, under the specious pretence of cheapening, the administration of justice.

Lord Tottlebury, advancing to meet Neaera, took her by the hand and proudly presented her to his guests. She greeted each gracefully and graciously until she came to George Neston. As she saw his solid jaw and clean-shaved keen face, a sudden light that looked like recollection leaped to her eyes, and her cheek flushed a little. The change was so distinct that George was confirmed in the fancy he had had from the first moment she came in, that somewhere before he had seen that golden hair

and those dark eyes, that combination of harmonious opposites that made her beauty no less special in kind than in degree. He advanced a step, his hand held half out, exclaiming —

“Surely — ”

But there he stopped dead, and his hand fell to his side, for all signs of recognition had faded from Mrs. Witt’s face, and she gave him only the same modestly gracious bow that she had bestowed on the rest of the party. The incident was over, leaving George sorely puzzled, and Lord Tottlebury a little startled. Gerald had seen nothing, having been employed in issuing orders for the march in to dinner.

The dinner was a success. Lord Tottlebury unbent; he was very cordial and, at moments, almost jovial. Gerald was in heaven, or at least sitting directly opposite and in full view of it. Mr. Blodwell enjoyed himself immensely: his classic stories had never yet won so pleasant a reward as Neaera’s low rich laugh and dancing eyes. George ought to have enjoyed himself, for he was next to Isabel Bourne, and Isabel, heartily recognising that she was not to-night, as, to do her justice, she often was, the prettiest girl in the room, took the more pains to be kind and amusing. But George was ransacking the lumber-rooms of memory, or, to put it less figuratively, wondering, and growing exasperated as he wondered in vain, where the deuce he’d seen the girl before. Once or twice his eyes met hers, and it seemed to him that he had caught her casting an inquiring apprehensive glance at him. When she saw that he was looking, her expression changed

into one of friendly interest, appropriate to the examination of a prospective kinsman.

“What do you think of her?” asked Isabel Bourne, in a low voice. “Beautiful, isn’t she?”

“She is indeed,” George answered, “I can’t help thinking I’ve seen her somewhere before.”

“She is a person one would remember, isn’t she? Was it in Manchester?”

“I don’t think so. I haven’t been in Manchester more than two or three times in my life.”

“Well, Maud says Mrs. Witt wasn’t brought up there.”

“Where was she brought up?”

“I don’t know,” said Isabel, “and I don’t think Maud knew either. I asked Gerald, and he said she probably dropped down from heaven somewhere a few years ago.”

“Perhaps that’s how I come to remember her,” suggested George.

Failing this explanation, he confessed himself puzzled, and determined to dismiss the matter from his thoughts for the present. Aided by Isabel Bourne, he was very successful in this effort: a pretty girl’s company is the best modern substitute for the waters of Lethe.

Nevertheless, his interest remained strong enough to make him join the group which Gerald and Mr. Blodwell formed with Neaera as soon as the men went upstairs. Mr. Blodwell made no secret of the fact that it was with him a case of love at first sight,

and openly regretted that his years prevented him fighting Gerald for his prize. Gerald listened with the complacent happiness of a secure lover, and Neaera gravely apologised for not having waited to make her choice till she had seen Mr. Blodwell.

“But at least you had heard of me?” he urged.

“I am terribly ignorant,” she said. “I don’t believe I ever did.”

“Neaera’s not one of the criminal classes, you see, sir,” Gerald put in.

“He taunts me,” exclaimed Mr. Blodwell, “with the Old Bailey!”

George had come up in time to hear the last two remarks. Neaera saw him, and smiled pleasantly.

“Here’s a young lady who knows nothing about the law, George,” continued Blodwell. “She never heard of me – nor of you either, I dare say. It reminds me of what they used to say about old Dawkins. Old Daw never had a brief, but he was Recorder of some little borough or other – place with a prisoner once in two years, you know – I forget the name. Let’s see – yes, Peckton.”

“Peckton!” exclaimed George Neston, loudly and abruptly.

Neaera made a sudden motion with one hand – a sudden motion suddenly checked – and her fan dropped with a clatter on the polished boards.

Gerald dived for it, so did Mr. Blodwell, and their heads came in contact with such violence as to drive all reminiscences of Recorder Dawkins out of Mr. Blodwell’s brain. They were

still indulging in recriminations, when Neaera swiftly left them, crossed to Lord Tottlebury, and took her leave.

George went to open the door for her. She looked at him curiously.

“Will you come and see me, Mr. Neston?” she asked.

He bowed gravely, answering nothing.

The party broke up, and as George was seeing Mr. Blodwell’s bulk fitted into a four-wheeler, the old gentleman asked,

“Why did you do that, George?”

“What?”

“Jump, when I said Peckton.”

“Oh, I used to go sessions there, you know.”

“Do you always jump when people mention the places you used to go sessions at?”

“Generally,” replied George.

“I see,” said Mr. Blodwell, lighting his cigar. “A bad habit, George; it excites remark. Tell him the House.”

“Good night, sir,” said George. “I hope your head is better.”

Mr. Blodwell snorted indignantly as he pulled up the window, and was driven away to his duties.

CHAPTER II.

WHY GEORGE NESTON JUMPED

“How could I ever have forgotten?” said George, aloud, as he walked home. “I remember her now as if it was yesterday.”

Memory, like much else that appertains to man, is a queer thing, and the name of Peckton had supplied the one link missing in his recollection. How, indeed, had he ever forgotten it? Can a man forget his first brief any more than his first love? – so like are they in their infinite promise, so like in their very finite results!

The picture was now complete in his mind: the little, muggy court at Peckton; old Dawkins, his wig black with age, the rest of him brown with snuff; the fussy clerk; the prosecuting counsel, son to the same fussy clerk; he himself, thrusting his first guinea into his pocket with shaking hand and beating heart (nervous before old Daw! Imagine!); the fat, peaceful policeman; the female warder, in her black straw-bonnet trimmed with dark-blue ribbons; and last of all, in the dock, a young girl, in shabby, nay, greasy, black, with pale cheeks, disordered hair, and swollen eyelids, gazing in blank terror on the majesty of the law, strangely expressed in the Recorder’s ancient person. And, beyond all doubt or imagination of a doubt, the girl was Gerald’s bride, Neaera Witt.

“I could swear to her to-day!” cried George.

She had scraped together a guinea for his fee. "I don't know where she got it from," the fat policeman said with professional cynicism as he gave it to George. "She pleads guilty and wants you to address the court." So George had, with infinite trepidation, addressed the court.

The girl had a father – drunk when not starving, and starving when not drunk. Now he was starving, and she had stolen the shoes (oh! the sordidness of it all!) to pawn, and buy food – or drink. It was a case for a caution merely – and – and – and George himself, being young to the work, stammered and stuttered as much from emotion as from fright. You see the girl was pretty!

All old Daw said was, "Do you know anything about her, policeman?" and the fat policeman said her father was a bad lot, and the girl did no work, and —

"That's enough," said old Daw; and, leaning forward, he pronounced his sentence:

"I'll deal lightly with you. Only" – shaking a snuffy forefinger – "take care you don't come here again! One calendar month, with hard labour."

And the girl, gazing back at honest old Daw, who would not have hurt a fly except from the Bench, softly murmured, "Cruel, cruel, cruel!" and was led away by the woman in the black straw bonnet.

Whereupon George did a very unprofessional thing. He gave his guinea, his firstborn son, back to the fat policeman, saying, "Give it her when she comes out. I can't take her money." At

which the policeman smiled a smile that convicted George of terrible youthfulness.

It was all complete – all except the name by which the fussy clerk had called on the girl to plead, and which old Dawkins had mumbled out in sentencing her. That utterly escaped him. He was sure it was not “Neaera” – of course not “Neaera Witt;” but not “Neaera Anything,” either. He would have remembered “Neaera.”

“What on earth was it?” he asked himself as he unlocked his door and went upstairs. “Not that it matters much. Names are easily changed.”

George Neston shared his chambers in Half Moon Street with the Honourable Thomas Buchanan Fillingham Myles, commonly known (as the peerage has it) as Tommy Myles. Tommy also had a small room in the Temple Chambers, where the two Nestons and Mr. Blodwell pursued their livelihood; but Tommy’s appearances at the latter resort were few and brief. He did not trouble George much in Half Moon Street either, being a young man much given to society of all sorts, and very prone to be in bed when most people are up, and *vice versâ*. However, to-night he happened to be at home, and George found him with his feet on the mantelpiece, reading the evening paper.

“Well, what’s she like?” asked Tommy.

“She’s uncommonly pretty, and very pleasant,” said George. Why say more, before his mind was made up?

“Who was she?” pursued Tommy, rising and filling his pipe.

“Ah! I don’t know. I wish I did.”

“Don’t see that it matters to you. Anybody else there?”

“Oh, a few people.”

“Miss Bourne?”

“Yes, she was there.”

Tommy winked, sighed prodigiously, and took a large drink of brandy and soda.

“Where have you been?” asked George, changing the subject.

“Oh, to the Escorial – to a vulgar, really a very vulgar entertainment – as vulgar as you could find in London.”

“Are you going out again?”

“My dear George! It’s close on twelve!” said Tommy, in reproving tones.

“Or to bed?”

“No. George, you hurt my feelings. Can it be that you wish to be alone?”

“Well, at any rate, hold your tongue, Tommy. I want to think.”

“Only one word. Has she been cruel?”

“Oh, get out. Here, give me a drink.”

Tommy subsided into the *Bull’s-eye*, that famous print whose motto is *Lux in tenebris* (meaning, of course, publicity in shady places), and George set himself to consider what he had best do in the matter of Neaera Witt.

The difficulties of the situation were obvious enough, but to George’s mind they consisted not so much in the question of what to do as in that of how to do it. He had been tolerably

clear from the first that Gerald must not marry Neaera without knowing what he could tell him; if he liked to do it afterwards, well and good. But of course he would not. No Neston would, thought George, who had his full share of the family pride. Men of good family made disgraceful marriages, it is true, but not with thieves; and anyhow nothing of the kind was recorded in the Neston annals. How should he look his uncle and Gerald in the face if he held his tongue? His course was very clear. Only – well, it was an uncommonly disagreeable part to be cast for – the denouncer and exposé of a woman who very probably was no worse than many another, and was unquestionably a great deal better-looking than most others. The whole position smacked unpleasantly of melodrama, and George must figure in the character of the villain, a villain with the best motives and the plainest duty. One hope only there was. Perhaps Mrs. Witt would see the wisdom of a timely withdrawal. Surely she would. She could never face the storm. Then Gerald need know nothing about it, and six months' travel – say to America, where pretty girls live – would bind up his broken heart. Only – again only – George did not much fancy the interview that lay before him. Mrs. Witt would probably cry, and he would feel a brute, and —

“Mr. Neston,” announced Tommy's valet, opening the door.

Gerald had followed his cousin home, very anxious to be congratulated, and still more anxious not to appear anxious. Tommy received him with effusion. Why hadn't he been asked to the dinner? Might he call on Mrs. Witt? He heard she was a

clipper; and so forth. George's felicitations stuck in his throat, but he got them out, hoping that Neaera would free him from the necessity of eating them up at some early date. Gerald was radiant. He seemed to have forgotten all about "Peckton," though he was loud in denouncing the unnatural hardness of Mr. Blodwell's head. Oh, and the last thing Neaera said was, would George go and see her?

"She took quite a fancy to you, old man," he said affectionately. "She said you reminded her of a judge."

George smiled. Was Neaera practising *double entente* on her betrothed?

"What an infernally unpleasant thing to say!" exclaimed Tommy.

"Of course I shall go and see her," said George, – "to-morrow, if I can find time."

"So shall I," added Tommy.

Gerald was pleased. He liked to see his taste endorsed with the approbation of his friends. "It's about time old George, here, followed suit, isn't it, Tommy? I've given him a lead."

George's attachment to Isabel Bourne was an accepted fact among his acquaintance. He never denied it: he did like her very much, and meant to marry her, if she would have him. And he did not really doubt that she would. If he had doubted, he would not have been so content to rest without an express assurance. As it was, there was no hurry. Let the practice grow a little more yet. He and Isabel understood one another, and, as soon as she was

ready, he was ready. But long engagements were a nuisance to everybody. These were his feelings, and he considered himself, by virtue of them, to be in love with Isabel. There are many ways of being in love, and it would be a want of toleration to deny that George's is one of them, although it is certainly very unlike some of the others.

Tommy agreed that George was wasting his time, and with real kindness led Gerald back to the subject which filled his mind.

Gerald gladly embraced the opportunity. "Where did I meet her? Oh, down at Brighton, last winter. Then, you know, I pursued her to Manchester, and found her living in no end of a swell villa in the outskirts of that abominable place. Neaera hated it, but of course she had to live there while Witt was alive, and she had kept the house on."

"She wasn't Manchester-born, then?"

"No. I don't know where she was born. Her father seems to have been a romantic sort of old gentleman. He was a painter by trade – an artist, I mean, you know, – landscapes and so on."

"And went about looking for bits of nature to murder, eh?" asked Tommy.

"That's about it. I don't think he was any great shakes at it. At least, he didn't make much; and at last he settled in Manchester, and tried to pick up a living, working for the dealers. Witt was a picture-fancier, and, when Neaera came to sell, he saw her, and –"

"The late Witt's romance began?"

"Yes, confound him! I'm beastly jealous of old Witt, though he is dead."

"That's ungrateful," remarked George, "considering –"

"Hush! You'll wound his feelings," said Tommy. "He's forgotten all about the cash."

"It's all very well for you –" Gerald began.

But George cut in, "What was his name?"

"Witt's? Oh, Jeremiah, I believe."

"Witt? No. Hang Witt! The father's name."

"Oh! – Gale. A queer old boy he seems to have been – a bit of a scholar as well as an artist."

"That accounts for the 'Neaera,' I suppose," said Tommy.

"Neaera Gale," thought George. "I don't remember that."

"Pretty name, isn't it?" asked the infatuated Gerald.

"Oh, dry up!" exclaimed Tommy. "We can't indulge you any more. Go home to bed. You can dream about her, you know."

Gerald accepted this hint, and retired, still in that state of confident bliss that filled George's breast with trouble and dismay.

"I might as well be the serpent in Eden," he said, as he lay in bed, smoking dolefully.

CHAPTER III.

“WHAT ARE QUARTER-SESSIONS?”

The atmosphere was stormy at No. 3, Indenture Buildings, Temple. It was four o'clock, and Mr. Blodwell had come out of court in the worst of bad tempers. He was savage with George Neston, who, being in a case with him, had gone away and left him with nobody to tell him his facts. He was savage with Tommy Myles, who had refused to read some papers for him; savage with Mr. Justice Pounce, who had cut up his speech to the jury, – Pounce, who had been his junior a hundred times! – savage with Mr. Timms, his clerk, because he was always savage with Timms when he was savage with other people. Tommy had fled before the storm; and now, to Mr. Blodwell's unbounded indignation, George also was brushing his hat with the manifest intention of departure.

“In my time, rising juniors,” said Mr. Blodwell, with sarcasm, “didn't leave chambers at four.”

“Business,” said George, putting on his gloves.

“Women,” answered his leader, briefly and scornfully.

“It's the same thing, in this case. I am going to see Mrs. Witt.”

Mr. Blodwell's person expressed moral reprobation. George, however, remained unmoved, and the elder man stole a sharp

glance at him.

"I don't know what's up, George," he said, "but take care of yourself."

"Nothing's up."

"Then why did you jump?"

"Timms, a hansom," cried George. "I'll be in court all day tomorrow, and keep you straight, sir."

"In Heaven's name, do. That fellow Pounce is such a beggar for dates. Now get out."

Mrs. Witt was living at Albert Mansions, the "swell villa" at Manchester having gone to join Mr. Witt in limbo. She was at home, and, as George entered, his only prayer was that he might not find Gerald in possession. He had no very clear idea how to proceed in his unpleasant task. "It must depend on how she takes it," he said. Gerald was not there, but Tommy Myles was, voluble, cheerful, and very much at home, telling Neaera stories of her lover's school-days. George chimed in as he best could, until Tommy rose to go, regretting the convention that drove one man to take his hat five minutes, at the latest, after another came in. Neaera pressed him to come again, but did not invite him to transgress the convention.

George almost hoped she would, for he was, as he confessed to himself, "funking it." There were no signs of any such feeling in Neaera, and no repetition of the appealing attitude she had seemed to take up the night before.

"She means to bluff me," thought George, as he watched her

sit down in a low chair by the fire, and shade her face with a large fan.

"It is," she began, "so delightful to be welcomed by all Gerald's family and friends so heartily. I do not feel the least like a stranger."

"I came last night, hoping to join in that welcome," said George.

"Oh, I did not feel that you were a stranger at all. Gerald had told me so much about you."

George rose, and walked to the end of the little room and back. Then he stood looking down at his hostess. Neaera gazed pensively into the fire. It was uncommonly difficult, but what was the good of fencing?

"I saw you recognised me," he said, deliberately.

"In a minute. I had seen your photograph."

"Not only my photograph, but myself, Mrs. Witt."

"Have I?" asked Neaera. "How rude of me to forget! Where was it? Brighton?"

George's heart hardened a little. Of course she would lie, poor girl. He didn't mind that. But he did not like artistic lying, and Neaera's struck him as artistic.

"But are you sure?" she went on.

George decided to try a sudden attack. "Did they ever give you that guinea?" he said, straining his eyes to watch her face. Did she flush or not? He really couldn't say.

"I beg your pardon. Guinea?"

“Come, Mrs. Witt, we needn’t make it more unpleasant than necessary. I saw you recognised me. The moment Mr. Blodwell spoke of Peckton I recognised you. Pray don’t think I mean to be hard on you. I can and do make every allowance.”

Neaera’s face expressed blank astonishment. She rose, and made a step towards the bell. George was tickled. She had the amazing impertinence to convey, subtly but quite distinctly, by that motion and her whole bearing, that she thought he was drunk.

“Ring, if you like,” he said, “or, rather, ask me, if you want the bell rung. But wouldn’t it be better to settle the matter now? I don’t want to trouble Gerald.”

“I really believe you are threatening me with something,” exclaimed Neaera. “Yes, by all means. Go on.”

She motioned him to a chair, and stood above him, leaning one arm on the mantelpiece. She breathed a little quickly, but George drew no inference from that.

“Eight years ago,” he said, slowly, “you employed me as your counsel. You were charged with theft – stealing a pair of shoes – at Peckton Quarter-Sessions. You retained me at a fee of one guinea.”

Neaera was motionless, but a slight smile showed itself on her face. “What are Quarter-Sessions?” she asked.

“You pleaded guilty to the charge, and were sentenced to a month’s imprisonment with hard labour. The guinea I asked you about was my fee. I gave it to that fat policeman to give back

to you.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Neston, but it’s really too absurd.” And Neaera relaxed her statuesque attitude, and laughed light-heartedly, deliciously. “No wonder you were startled last night – oh, yes, I saw that – if you identified your cousin’s *fiancée* with this criminal you’re talking about.”

“I did and do identify her.”

“Seriously?”

“Perfectly. It would be a poor joke.”

“I never heard anything so monstrous. Do you really persist in it? I don’t know what to say.”

“Do you deny it?”

“Deny it! I might as well deny – but of course I deny it. It’s madness.”

“Then I must lay what I know before my uncle and Gerald, and leave them to act as they think best.”

Neaera took a step forward as George rose from his seat. “Do you mean to repeat this atrocious – this insane scandal?”

“I think I must. I should be glad to think I had any alternative.”

Neaera raised one white hand above her head, and brought it down through the air with a passionate gesture.

“I warn you not!” she cried; “I warn you not!”

George bowed.

“It is a lie, and – and if it were true, you could not prove it.”

George thought this her first false step. But there were no witnesses.

"It will be war between us," she went on in growing excitement. "I will stand at nothing – nothing – to crush you; and I will do it."

"You must not try to frighten me," said George.

Neaera surveyed him from head to foot. Then she stretched out her white hand again, and said,

"Go!"

George shrugged his shoulders, took his hat, and went, feeling very much as if Neaera had detected him in theft. So great is the virtue of a good presence and dramatic instincts.

Suddenly he paused; then he went back again, and knocked at the door.

"Come in," cried Neaera.

As he entered she made an impatient movement. She was still standing where he had left her.

"Pray pardon me. I forgot to say one thing. Of course I am only interested in this – matter, as one of the family. I am not a detective. If you give up Gerald, my mouth is sealed."

"I will not give up Gerald," she exclaimed passionately. "I love him. I am not an adventuress; I am rich already. I –"

"Yes, you could look higher than Gerald, and avoid all this."

"I don't care. I love him."

George believed her. "I wish to God I could spare you –"

"Spare me? I don't ask your mercy. You are a slanderer –"

"I thought I would tell you," said George calmly.

"Will you not go?" she cried. And her voice broke into a sob.

This was worse than her tragedy airs. George fled without another word, cursing himself for a hard-hearted, self-righteous prig, and then cursing fate that laid this burden on him. What was she doing now, he wondered. Exulting in her triumph? He hoped so; for a different picture obstinately filled his mind – a beautiful woman, her face buried in her white arms, crying the brightness out of her eyes, all because George Neston had a sense of duty. Still he did not seriously waver in his determination. If Neaera had admitted the whole affair and besought his mercy, he felt that his resolution would have been sorely tried. But, as it was, he carried away the impression that he had to deal with a practised hand, and perhaps a little professional zeal mingled with his honest feeling that a woman who would lie like that was a woman who ought to be shown in her true colours.

“I’ll tell uncle Roger and Gerald to-morrow,” he thought. “Of course they will ask for proof. That means a journey to Peckton. Confound other people’s affairs!”

George’s surmise was right. Neaera Witt had spent the first half-hour after his departure in a manner fully as heart-rending as he had imagined. Everything was going so well. Gerald was so charming, and life looked, at last, so bright, and now came this! But Gerald was to dine with her, and there was not much time to waste in crying. She dried her eyes, and doctored them back into their lustre, and made a wonderful toilette. Then she entertained Gerald, and filled him with delight all a long evening. And at eleven o’clock, just as she was driving him out of his paradise,

she said,

“Your cousin George was here to-day.”

“Ah, was he? How did you get on with him?”

Neaera had brought her lover his hat. He needed a strong hint to move him. But she put the hat down, and knelt beside Gerald for a minute or two in silence.

“You look sad, darling,” said he. “Did you and George quarrel?”

“Yes – I – It’s very dreadful.”

“Why, what, my sweet?”

“No, I won’t tell you now. He shan’t say I got hold of you first, and prepossessed your mind.”

“What in the world is wrong, Neaera?”

“You will hear, Gerald, soon. But you shall hear it from him. I will not – no, I will not be the first. But, Gerald dear, you will not believe anything against me?”

“Does George say anything against you?”

Neaera threw her arms round his neck. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Then let him take care what it is. Neaera, tell me.”

“No, no, no! He shall tell you first.”

She was firm; and Gerald went away, a very mass of amazement and wrath.

But Neaera said to herself, when she was alone, “I think that was right. But, oh dear, oh dear! what a fuss about” – she paused, and added – “nothing!”

And even if it were not quite nothing, if it were even as much

as a pair of shoes, the effect did threaten to be greatly out of proportion to the cause. Old Dawkins, and the fussy clerk, and the fat policeman could never have thought of such a coil as this, or surely, in defiance of all the laws of the land, they would have let that nameless damsel go.

CHAPTER IV.

A SERPENT IN EDEN

On mature reflection, Gerald Neston declined to be angry. At first, when he had heard George's tale, he had been moved to wrath, and had said bitter things about reckless talking, and even about malicious backbiting. But really, when you came to look at it, the thing was too absurd – not worth a moment's consideration – except that it had, of course, annoyed Neaera, and must, of course, leave some unpleasantness behind it. Poor old George! he had hunted up a mare's nest this time, and no mistake. No doubt he couldn't marry a thief; but who in his sober senses would attach any importance to this tale? George had done what he was pleased to think his duty. Let it rest. When he saw his folly, Neaera would forgive him, like the sweet girl she was. In fact, Gerald pooh-poohed the whole thing, and not the less because he had, not unnaturally, expected an accusation of quite another character, more unforgivable because not so outrageously improbable and wild.

Lord Tottlebury could not consent to treat what he described as "the incident" in quite so cavalier a fashion. He did not spare his hearers the well-worn precedent of Caesar's wife; and although, after an interview with Neaera, he was convinced of her innocence, it was in his opinion highly desirable that George

should disabuse his own mind of this strange notion by some investigation.

“The marriage, in any case, will not take place for three months. Go and convince yourself of your mistake, and then, my dear George, we will make your peace with the lady. I need not caution you to let the matter go no further.”

To be treated as a well-intentioned but misguided person is the most exasperating thing in the world, and George had hard work to keep his temper under the treatment. But he recognised that he might well have fared worse, and, in truth, he asked no more than a suspension of the marriage pending inquiry – a concession that he understood Lord Tottlebury was prepared to make, though proof must, of course, be forthcoming in reasonable time.

“I feel bound to look into it,” he said. “As I have begun it, I will spare no pains. Nobody wishes more heartily than myself that I may have made an ass of myself.” And he really did come as near to this laudable state of mind as it is in human nature to come.

Before the conference broke up, Lord Tottlebury suggested that there was one thing George could do at once – he could name the date of the trial at Peckton. George kept no diary, but he knew that the fateful expedition had been among his earliest professional journeys after his call to the Bar. Only very junior men went to Peckton, and, according to his recollection, the occurrence took place in the April following his call.

“April, eight years ago, was the time,” he said. “I don’t pledge myself to a day.”

“You pledge yourself to the month?” asked his uncle.

“Yes, to the month, and I dare say I shall be able to find the day.”

“And when will you go to Peckton?”

“Saturday. I can’t possibly before.”

The interview took place on the Tuesday evening, and on Wednesday Gerald went to lay the state of affairs before Neaera.

Neaera was petulant, scornful, almost flippant. More than all this, she was mysterious.

“Mr. George Neston has his reasons,” she said. “He will not withdraw his accusation. I know he will not.”

“My dearest, George is a first-rate fellow, as honourable as the day. If he finds – rather, when he finds – ”

All Neaera said was, “Honourable!” But she put a great deal into that one word. “You dear, simple fellow!” she went on, “you have no suspicions of anybody. But let him take care how he persists.”

More than this could not be got out of her, but she spoke freely about her own supposed misdoings, pouring a flood of ridicule and bitterness on George’s unhappy head.

“A fool you call him!” she exclaimed, in reply to Gerald’s half-hearted defence. “I don’t know if he’s a fool, but I hope he is no worse.”

“Who’s getting it so precious warm, Mrs. Witt?” inquired Tommy Myles’s cheerful voice. “The door was ajar, and your words forced themselves – you know.”

"How do you do, Mr. Myles?"

"As you'd invited me, and your servant wasn't about, the porter-fellow told me to walk up."

"I'm very glad you did. There's nothing you can't hear."

"Oh, I say, Neaera!" Gerald hastily exclaimed.

"Why shouldn't he hear?" demanded Neaera, turning on him in superb indignation. "Are you afraid that he'll believe it?"

"No; but we all thought – "

"I meant Mr. George Neston," said Neaera.

"George!" exclaimed Tommy.

"And I'll tell you why." And, in spite of Gerald's protest, she poured her tale of wrong into Tommy's sympathetic and wide-opened ears.

"There! Don't tell any one else. Lord Tottlebury says we mustn't. I don't mind, for myself, who knows it."

Tommy was overwhelmed. His mind refused to act. "He's a lunatic!" he declared. "I don't believe it's safe to live with him. He'll cut my throat, or something."

"Oh no; his lunacy is under control – a well-trained, obedient lunacy," said Neaera, relapsing into mystery.

"We all hope," said Gerald, "he'll soon find out his mistake, and nothing need come of it. Keep your mouth shut, my boy."

"All right. I'm silent as the cold tomb. But I'm da – "

"Have some more tea?" said Neaera, smiling very graciously. Should she not reward so warm a champion?

When the two young men took their leave and walked away

together, Tommy vied even with Gerald in the loudness of his indignation.

“A lie! Of course it is, though I don’t mean that old George don’t believe it – the old ass! Why, the mere fact of her insisting on telling me about it is enough. She wouldn’t do that if it’s true.”

“Of course not,” assented Gerald.

“She’d be all for hushing it up.”

Gerald agreed again.

“It’s purely for George’s sake we are so keen to keep it quiet,” he added. “Though, of course, Neaera even wouldn’t want it all over the town.”

“I suppose I’d better tell George I know?”

“Oh yes. You’ll be bound to show it in your manner.”

George showed no astonishment at hearing that Neaera had made a confidant of Tommy Myles. It was quite consistent with the part she was playing, as he conceived it. Nor did he resent Tommy’s outspoken rebukes.

“Don’t mix yourself up in unpleasant things when you aren’t obliged, my son,” was all he said in reply to these tirades. “Dine at home?”

“No,” snorted Tommy, in high dudgeon.

“You won’t break bread with the likes of me?”

“I’m going to the play, and to supper afterwards.”

“With whom?”

“Eunice Beauchamp.”

“Dear me, what a pretty name!” said George. “Short for ‘Betsy

Jones,' I suppose?"

"Go to the devil," said Tommy. "You ain't going to accuse her of priggish, are you?"

"She kidnaps little boys," said George, who felt himself entitled to some revenge, "and keeps them till they're nearly grown up."

"I don't believe you ever saw her in your life."

"Oh yes, I did – first piece I ever went to, twenty years ago."

And so, what with Eunice Beauchamp, *alias* Betsy Jones, and Neaera Witt, *alias* – what? – two friends parted for that evening with some want of cordiality.

"She plays a bold game," thought George, as he ate his solitary chop; "but too bold. You overdo it, Mrs. Witt. An innocent girl would not tell that sort of thing to a stranger, however false it was."

Which reflection only showed that things strike different minds differently.

George needed comfort. The Serpent-in-Eden feeling was strong upon him. He wanted somebody who would not only recognise his integrity but also admire his discretion. He had a card for Mrs. Pocklington's at-home, and Isabel was to be there. He would go and have a talk with her; perhaps he would tell her all about it, for surely Neaera's confidence to Tommy Myles absolved him from the strict letter of his pledge of secrecy. Isabel was a sensible girl; she would understand his position, and not look on him as a cross between an idiot and a burglar because

he had done what was obviously right. So George went to Mrs. Pocklington's with all the rest of the world; for everybody went there. Mrs. Pocklington – Eleanor Fitzderham, who married Pocklington, the great shipowner, member for Dockborough – had done more to unite the classes and the masses than hundreds of philanthropic societies, and, it may be added, in a pleasanter manner; and if, at her parties, the bigwigs did not always talk to the littlewigs, yet the littlewigs were in the same room with the bigwigs, which is something even at the moment, and really very nearly as good for purposes of future reference.

George made his way across the crowded rooms, recognising many acquaintances as he went. There was Mr. Blodwell talking to the last new beauty – he had a wonderful knack of it, – and Sidmouth Vane talking to the last new heiress, who would refuse him in a month or two. An atheistic philosopher was discussing the stagnation of the stock-markets with a high-church Bishop – Mrs. Pocklington always aimed at starting people on their points of common interest: and Lady Wheedleton, of the Primrose League, was listening to Professor Dressingham's description of the newest recipe for manure, with an impression that the subject was not quite decent, but might be useful at elections. General Sir Thomas Swears was asking if anybody had seen the Secretary for War – he had a word to say to him about the last rifle; but nobody had. The Countess Hilda von Someveretheim was explaining the problem of "Darkest England" to the Minister of the Republic of Compostella; Judge Cutter, the American mystic, was asking

the captain of the Oxford Boat Club about the philosophy of Hegel, and Miss Zoe Ballance, the pretty actress, was discussing the relations of art and morality with Colonel Belamour of the Guards.

George was inclined to resent the air of general enjoyment that pervaded the place: it seemed a little unfeeling. But he was comforted by catching sight of Isabel. She was talking to a slight young man who wore an eye-glass and indulged in an expression of countenance which invited the conclusion that he was overworked and overstrained. Indeed, he was just explaining to Miss Bourne that it was not so much long hours as what he graphically described as the "tug on his nerves" that wore him out. Isabel had never suffered from this particular torture, but she was very sympathetic, said that she had often heard the same from other literary men (which was true), and promised to go down to supper with Mr. Espion later in the evening. Mr. Espion went about his business (for, the fact is, he was "doing" the party for the *Bull's-eye*), and the coast was left clear for George, who came up with a deliberately lugubrious air. Of course Isabel asked him what was the matter; and, somehow or other, it happened that in less than ten minutes she was in possession of all the material facts, if they were facts, concerning Neaera Witt and the pair of shoes.

The effect was distinctly disappointing. Amiability degenerates into simplicity when it leads to the refusal to accept obvious facts merely because they impugn the character of

an acquaintance; and what is the use of feminine devotion if it boggles over accepting what you say, just because you say something a little surprising? George was much annoyed.

"I am not mistaken," he said. "I did not speak hastily."

"Of course not," said Isabel. "But – but you have no actual proof, have you, George?"

"Not yet; but I soon shall have."

"Well, unless you get it very soon – "

"Yes?"

"I think you ought to withdraw what you have said, and apologise to Mrs. Witt."

"In fact, you think I was wrong to speak at all?"

"I think I should have waited till I had proof; and then, perhaps – "

"Everybody seems to think me an ass."

"Not *that*, George; but a little – well – reckless."

"I shan't withdraw it."

"Not if you get no proof?"

George shirked this pointed question, and, as the interview was really less soothing than he had expected, took an early opportunity of escaping.

Mr. Espion came back, and asked why Neston had gone away looking so sulky. Isabel smiled and said Mr. Neston was vexed with her. Could anybody be vexed with Miss Bourne? asked Mr. Espion, and added,

"But Neston is rather crotchety, isn't he?"

“Why do you say that?” asked Isabel.

“Oh, I don’t know. Well, the fact is, I was talking to Tommy Myles at the Cancan – ”

“Where, Mr. Espion?”

“At the theatre, and he told me Neston had got some maggot in his head – ”

“I don’t think he ought to say that.”

But need we listen longer? And whose fault was it – Neaera’s, or George’s, or Isabel’s, or Tommy’s, or Mr. Espion’s? That became the question afterwards, when Lord Tottlebury was face to face with the violated compact, – and with next day’s issue of the *Bull’s-eye*.

CHAPTER V.

THE FIRST PARAGRAPH

– AND OTHERS

Under pressure of circumstances men very often do what they have declared they cannot possibly do; it happens with private individuals no less than with political parties. George declared he could not possibly go to Peckton before Saturday; but he was so disgusted with his position, that he threw all other engagements to the winds, and started early on Thursday morning, determined not to face his friends again without attempting to prove his words. Old Dawkins was dead, but the clerk was, and the policeman might be, alive; and, on his return to town, he could see Jennings, the clerk's son, who had settled down to conveyancing in Lincoln's Inn, and try to refresh his memory with materials gathered on the spot. For George had already seen Mr. Jennings, and Mr. Jennings remembered nothing about it – it was not his first brief, – but was willing to try to recall the matter if George would get him the details and let him see a picture of the person wanted – a request George did not wish to comply with at the moment.

So he went to Peckton, and found out perhaps as much as he could reasonably expect to find out, as shall in due course appear. And during his absence several things happened. In

the first place, the *Bull's-eye* was published, containing what became known as the "First Paragraph." The "First Paragraph" was headed "Strange Charge against a Lady – Rumoured Proceedings," and indicated the Neston family, Neaera Witt, and George, in such a manner as to enable their friends to identify them. This paragraph was inserted with the object of giving Neaera, or George, or both of them, as the case might be, or anybody else who could be "drawn," an opportunity of contradicting it. The second event was that the Nestons' friends did identify them, and proceeded to open the minds of everybody who did not.

Then Mr. Blodwell read the *Bull's-eye*, as his custom was, and thoughtfully ejaculated "Peckton!" and Lord Tottlebury, being at the club, was shown the *Bull's-eye* by a friend, who really could not do less, and went home distracted; and Tommy Myles read it, and, conscience-stricken, fled to Brighton for three days' fresh air; and Isabel read it, and confessed to her mother, and was scolded, and cried; and Gerald read it, and made up his mind to kick everybody concerned, except, of course, Neaera; and, finally, Neaera read it, and was rather frightened and rather excited, and girt on her armour for battle.

Gerald, however, was conscious that the process he had in his mind, satisfying as it would be to his own feelings, would not prove in all respects a solution of the difficulty, and, with the selfishness which a crisis in a man's own affairs engenders, he made no scruple about taking up a full hour of Mr. Blodwell's

time, and expounding his views at great length, under the guise of taking counsel. Mr. Blodwell listened to his narrative of facts with interest, but cut short his stream of indignant comment.

“The mischief is that it’s got into the papers,” he said. “But for that, I don’t see that it matters much.”

“Not matter much?” gasped Gerald.

“I suppose you don’t care whether it’s true or not?”

“It’s life or death to me,” answered Gerald.

“Bosh! She won’t steal any more shoes now she’s a rich woman.”

“You speak, sir, as if you thought – ”

“Haven’t any opinion on the subject, and it wouldn’t be of any importance if I had. The question is shortly this: Supposing it to be true, would you marry her?”

Gerald flung himself into a chair, and bit his finger nail.

“Eight years is a long while ago; and poverty’s a hard thing; and she’s a pretty girl.”

“It’s an absurd hypothesis,” said Gerald. “But a thief’s a thief.”

“True. So are a good many other people.”

“I should have to consider my father and – and the family.”

“Should you? I should see the family damned. However, it comes to this – if it were true, you wouldn’t marry her.”

“How could I?” groaned Gerald. “We should be cut.”

Mr. Blodwell smiled.

“Well, my ardent lover,” he said, “that being so, you’d better do nothing till you see whether it’s true.”

“Not at all. I only took the hypothesis; but I haven’t the least doubt that it’s a lie.”

“A mistake – yes. But it’s in the *Bull’s-eye*, and a mistake in the newspapers needs to be reckoned with.”

“What shall I do?”

“Wait till George comes back. Meanwhile, hold your tongue.”

“I shall contradict that lie.”

“Much better not. Don’t write to them, or see them, or let anybody else till George comes back. And, Gerald, if I were you, I shouldn’t quarrel with George.”

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.