

Farjeon Benjamin Leopold

Great Porter Square: A Mystery. Volume 2



Benjamin Farjeon

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B. L. Farjeon

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CHAPTER XX

THE “EVENING MOON” CONCLUDES ITS NARRATIVE, AND AFFORDS A FURTHER INSIGHT INTO THE CHILD-LIKE AND VOLATILE CHARACTER OF LYDIA HOLDFAST

IN the hope of her husband's return, and looking forward with sweet mysterious delight to the moment when she would hold her baby to her breast, Mrs. Holdfast was a perfectly happy woman – a being to be envied. She had some cause for anxiety in the circumstance that she did not hear from her husband, but she consoled herself with the reflection that his last letter to her afforded a sufficient explanation of his silence. She mentally followed his movements as the days passed by. Some little time would be occupied in settling his son's affairs; the young man most likely died in debt. Mr. Holdfast would not rest satisfied until he had ascertained the exact extent of his unhappy son's liabilities, and had discharged them. With Frederick's death must be cleared away the dishonour of his life.

“Now that he was dead,” said the widow, “I was ready to pity and forgive him.”

Her baby was born, and her husband had not returned. Day after day she looked for news of him, until she worked herself into a fever of anxiety. The result was that she became ill, and was ordered into the country for fresher air. But she could not rest. Her husband's return appeared to be delayed beyond reasonable limits. Could anything have happened to him in the wild part of the world in which Frederick had met his death? She did not dream that in the tragedy which had occurred in the very heart of London, the murder in Great Porter Square, with which all the country was ringing, lay the answer to her fears. In her delicate state of health she avoided the excitement of the newspapers, and for weeks did not look at one. Thus, when her health was to some extent established, and she had returned to her house in London, she had no knowledge of the murder, and was in ignorance of the few particulars relating to it which the police had been enabled to bring to light. She knew nothing of the arrest of Antony Cowlrick, of the frequent adjournments at the police-court, and of the subsequent release of this man whose movements have been enveloped in so much mystery.

It happened during her illness that a friend, who witnessed the anxiety of her mind and sympathised with her, wrote to America for information concerning Mr. Holdfast, anticipating that the reply to his letter would enable him to communicate good news to her; and it also happened, most singularly, after a lapse of time, that it was to this very friend Mrs. Holdfast appealed for advice as to how she should act.

“I felt as if I was going mad,” are the widow's words. “I could endure the terrible suspense no longer.”

She called upon her friend, not being aware that he had written to America on her behalf. On the table was a letter with the American post-mark on the envelope, and as her friend, in a hurried manner, rose to receive her, she observed that he placed his hand upon this letter, as though wishing to conceal it from her sight. But her quick eyes had already detected it.

“I did not know,” she said, after she had explained the motive of her visit, “that you had correspondence with America.”

He glanced at his hand, which still covered the letter, and his face became troubled.

"This," he said, "is in answer to a special letter I sent to the States concerning Mr. Holdfast."

"Ah," she cried, "then I am interested in it!"

"Yes," he replied, "you are interested in it."

Her suspicions were aroused. "Is that the reason," she asked, "why you seek to hide it from me?"

"I would not," he replied, "increase your anxiety. Can you bear a great shock?"

"Anything – anything," she cried, "rather than this terrible torture of silence and mystery!"

"I wrote to America," then said her friend, "to an agent, requesting him to ascertain how and where your husband was. An hour before you entered the room I received his answer. It is here. It will be best to hide nothing from you. I will read what my correspondent says." He opened the letter, and read: "I have made inquiries after Mr. Holdfast, and am informed, upon undoubted authority, that he left America for England some weeks ago."

Mrs. Holdfast's friend read this extract without comment, but Mrs. Holdfast did not appear to realize the true import of the information.

"Do you not understand?" asked her friend. "Mr. Holdfast, some weeks ago, left America for England."

"Impossible," said the bewildered woman; "if he were here – in England – I should not be with you at this moment, asking you to assist me to find him."

Her friend was silent.

"Help me!" she implored. "Do you think he is here?"

"I am certain that he has left America," was the reply.

A new fear assailed her. "Perhaps," she whispered, "the ship he sailed in was wrecked."

"That is not probable," said her friend. "Mr. Holdfast, as a man of the world and a gentleman of means, undoubtedly took passage in a fast steamer. In all human probability your husband landed at Liverpool within nine or ten days of his departure from New York."

"And then?" asked Mrs. Holdfast.

"Who can say what happened to him then? It is, of course, certain that his desire was to come to you without delay."

"He would not have lingered an hour," said Mrs. Holdfast. "An hour! He would not have lingered a moment. He would be only too eager, too anxious, to rejoin me. And there was another motive for his impatience – his child, whose face he has never seen, whose lips he has never kissed! Unhappy woman that I am!"

Her friend waited until she had somewhat mastered her grief, and then he asked her a question which opened up another channel for fear.

"Was your husband in the habit of carrying much money about with him?"

"A large sum; always a large sum. He often had as much as a thousand pounds in notes in his pocket-book."

"It was injudicious."

"He was most careless in money matters," said Mrs. Holdfast; "he would open his pocket-book in the presence of strangers, recklessly and without thought. More than once I have said to him that I should not wonder if he was robbed of it one day. But even in that case – suppose he *had* incited some wretch's cupidity; suppose he *was* robbed – it would not have prevented him from hastening to me and his child."

"Do not imagine," said her friend, "that in what I am about to say I desire to add to your difficulties and distress of mind. The length of time since you have heard from your husband – the fact that he left America and landed in England – make the case alarming. Your husband is not a man who would calmly submit to an outrage. Were an attempt made to rob him he would resist."

"Indeed he would – at the hazard of his life."

"You have put into words the fear which assails me."

“But,” said Mrs. Holdfast, clinging to every argument against the horrible suspicion now engendered, “had anything of the kind happened, it would have been in the newspapers, and would have been brought to my ears.”

“There are such things,” said her friend, impressively, “as mysterious disappearances. Men have been robbed and murdered, and never more heard of. Men have left their homes, in the midst of crowded cities, intending to return within an hour, and have disappeared for ever.”

It is easier to imagine than to describe the state of Mrs. Holdfast’s mind at these words. They seemed, as she expressed it, “to drain her heart of hope.”

“What would you advise me to do?” she asked, faintly.

“To go at once to a lawyer,” was the sensible answer, “and place the matter in his hands. Not an hour is to be lost; and the lawyer you consult should be one who is familiar with criminal cases. I have the address of such a gentleman, and I should recommend you to drive to his office immediately, and lay the whole case before him.”

Mrs. Holdfast took the advice given to her, and drove at once to the lawyer who was recommended to her. He listened to her story, and allowed her to tell it in her own way without interruption; and when she had finished, he put a variety of questions to her, many of which appeared to her trivial and unnecessary. Before she left the office the lawyer said,

“If your husband is in England, we will find him for you.”

With this small modicum of comfort she was fain to be satisfied; but as she rode home she shuddered to think that she had seen on the lawyer’s lips the unspoken words, “dead or alive.” That is what the lawyer meant to express: “If your husband is in England, we will find him for you, dead or alive.” Another of his actions haunted her. At a certain point of the conversation, the lawyer had paused, and upon a separate sheet of paper had made the following memorandum – “Look up the murders. How about the murder in Great Porter Square?” She was curious to see what it was he had written with so serious an air, and she rose and looked at the paper, and read the words. How dreadful they were! “Look up the murders. How about the murder in Great Porter Square?” The appalling significance of the memorandum filled her with terrible forebodings.

But what were the particulars of the murder in Great Porter Square, of which till now she had never heard, and what possible relation could they bear to her? She could not wait for the lawyer; she had placed the matter in his hands, but the issue at stake was too grave for her to sit idly down and make no effort herself to reach the heart of the mystery. That very evening she ascertained that in a certain house, No. 119 Great Porter Square, a cruel murder had been committed, and that the murdered man had not been identified. On the date of this murder she was in the country, endeavouring by quietude to regain her health and peace of mind; her baby at that time was nearly two months old, and for weeks before the date and for weeks afterwards she had not read a newspaper. Now that she learned that the murder might, even by the barest possibility, afford a clue to the mystery in which she was involved, she felt as if it would be criminal in her to sleep until she had made herself fully acquainted with all the details of the dreadful deed. She went from shop to shop, and purchased a number of newspapers containing accounts of the discovery of the murder, and of the accusation brought against Antony Cowlrick. When the lawyer called upon her the following morning he found her deeply engaged in the study of these papers. He made no remark, divining the motive for this painful duty.

“I have not closed my eyes all night,” she said to him plaintively. “Where is Great Porter Square?”

“My dear lady,” he replied, “it is not necessary for you to know the locality of this terrible crime. It will not help you to go there. Remain quiet, and leave the matter with me. I have already done something towards the clearing-up of the mystery. Do not agitate yourself needlessly; you will require all your strength.”

He then asked her if she had a portrait of her husband. She had a photograph, taken at her request the day before their marriage.

“Mr. Holdfast was above these small vanities,” she said, and suddenly checked herself, crying, “Good God! What did I say? *Was* above them! *Is* above them, I mean. He cannot be dead – he cannot, he cannot be dead! I had to persuade him to have the picture taken. It is here – in this locket.”

She gave her lawyer the locket, and he departed with it. When he called upon her again in the evening, his manner was very grave and sad.

“Did your husband make a will?” he asked.

“Yes,” she replied, “and gave it me in a sealed envelope. I have it upstairs, in a safe, in which I keep my jewels. It is dated on the day on which he forbade his son Frederick ever again to enter his house. Would you like to see it?”

“It will be as well,” said the lawyer, “for you to place it in my care. I shall not break the seal until the present inquiry is terminated. It will be very soon – very soon. Are you strong enough to hear some bad news, or will you wait till to-morrow? Yes, yes – it will be better to wait till to-morrow. A good night’s rest – ”

She interrupted him impetuously. It would be death to her to wait, she declared, and she implored him to tell her the worst at once. Reluctant as he was, he saw that it would be the wisest course, and he told her, as tenderly and considerately as he could, that the portrait she had given him exactly resembled the description of the man who was found murdered in Great Porter Square.

“To-morrow morning,” he said, “we shall obtain the order to exhume the body. A most harrowing and painful task awaits you. It will be necessary for you to attend and state, to the best of your belief, whether the body is that of your lost husband?”

Our readers will guess how this painful inquiry terminated. Mr. Holdfast bore upon his person certain marks which rendered identification an easy task; a scar on his left wrist, which in his youth had been cut to the bone; a broken tooth, and other signs, have placed beyond the shadow of a doubt the fact that he is the man who took a room on the first floor of No. 119 Great Porter Square, and was there ruthlessly and strangely murdered on the night of the 10th of July. So far, therefore, the mystery is cleared up.

But the identification of the body of the murdered man as that of a gentleman of great wealth, with a charming wife, and shortly after the strange death of his son Frederick, who was the only person whose life was likely to mar his happiness – the facts that this gentleman arrived in London, and did not return immediately to his home; that he proceeded, instead, to a common Square in a poor neighbourhood, and engaged a room without giving his name; that during the few days he lived there he received only one visitor, a lady who came and went closely veiled – these facts have added new and interesting elements of mystery to the shocking affair. Whether they will assist in bringing the murderer to justice remains to be seen.

Mrs. Holdfast has been and is most frank and open in her communications to our Reporter, who, it will be presently seen, has not confined his inquiries to this lady alone. In other circumstances it would have been natural, on the part of Mrs. Holdfast, that she should have been less communicative on the subject of the domestic trouble between herself and Mr. Holdfast and his son; but as she justly observed,

“Perhaps by and bye something may occur which will render it necessary that I shall be examined. The murderer may be discovered – I shall pray, day and night, that he or she may be arrested! In that case, I should have to appear as a witness, and should have to tell all I know. Then I might be asked why I concealed all these unhappy differences between father and son. I should not know how to answer. No; I will conceal nothing; then they can’t blame me. And if it will only help, in the smallest way, to discover the wretch who has killed the noblest gentleman that ever lived, I shall be more than ever satisfied that I have done what is right.”

We yield to this lady our fullest admiration for the courageous course she has pursued. She has not studied her own feelings; she has laid bare a story of domestic trouble and treachery as strange as the most ingenious drama on the French stage could present – such a story as Sardou or Octave

Feulliet would revel in; and, without hesitation, she has thrown aside all reserve, in the light of the great duty which is before her, the duty of doing everything in her power to hunt the murderer down, and avenge her husband's death. It is not many who would have the moral courage thus to expose their wounds to public gaze, and we are satisfied that our narrative will have the effect of causing a wide and general sympathy to be expressed for this most unfortunate lady.

We now come to other considerations of the affair. The gentleman who was murdered was a gentleman of wealth and position in society. He loved his wife; between them there had never been the slightest difference; they were in complete accord in their views of the conduct of the unhappy young man at whose door, indirectly, the primary guilt of the tragedy may be laid. The reason why Mr. Holdfast did not write to his wife for so long a period is partly explained by the account he gives, in his last letter to her, of the injury he received in his right hand. We say partly, because, a little further on, our readers will perceive that this reason will not hold good up to the day of his death. Most positively it may be accepted that the deepest and strongest motives existed for his endeavour to keep the circumstance of his being in London from the knowledge of his wife. Could these motives be discovered – could any light be thrown upon them – a distinct point would be established from which the murderer might be tracked. Our Reporter put several questions to Mrs. Holdfast.

“Is it an absolute certainty that Frederick Holdfast is dead?” he asked.

She gazed at him in wonderment. “Who can doubt it?” she exclaimed. “There is my husband's letter, saying he had traced his son to Minnesota, and was journeying after him. There is the account in the newspaper of the death of the misguided young man in a small town in Minnesota. The editor of the newspaper, knowing nothing whatever of any of us, could scarcely have invented such a paragraph – though we know they *do* put strange things in the American papers; but this, unhappily, is too near the truth.”

“Certainly,” said our Reporter, “the presumption would be a wild one – but it is possible; and I seldom shut my mind to a possibility.”

Mrs. Holdfast was very agitated. “It is *not* possible – it is *not* possible!” she cried, repeating the asseveration with vehemence. “It would be too horrible to contemplate!”

“What would be too horrible to contemplate?”

“That he followed his father to London” —

She paused, overcome by emotion. Our Reporter took up the cue. “And murdered him?” he asked.

“Yes,” answered the lovely widow, in a low tone, “and murdered him! I would not believe it – no, I would not believe it! Bad and wicked as he is, he *could* not be guilty of a crime so horrible. And, after all, it was partly my fault. Why did I not grow up into the likeness of an ugly old witch – ?”

She paused again, and smiled. There is in this lovely lady so much animation and vitality, so much pure love of life, so much sunlight, that they overcome her against her will, and break out in the midst of the gloomiest fits of melancholy and depression. Hers is a happy, joyous, and impulsive nature, and the blow that has fallen upon her is all the more cruel because of her innate brightness and gaiety of disposition. But it is merciful, also, that she is thus gifted. She might not otherwise have sufficient strength to bear up against her affliction.

“We will, then,” said our Reporter, “dismiss the possibility – which I confess is scarcely to be indulged in even by such a man as myself. As to your being beautiful, a rose might as reasonably complain that nature had invested it with grace of form and loveliness of colour.” Mrs. Holdfast blushed at this compliment. “You are right in saying that such an idea as Frederick Holdfast being alive is too horrible to contemplate. The American newspaper says that his body was identified by a gentleman who knew him in Oxford, and who happened to be travelling through the State of Minnesota. It is a strange coincidence – nothing more – that on the precise day on which Frederick Holdfast ended his career, a friend should have been travelling in that distant State, and should have given a name to the dead stranger who was found near the laughing waters of Minnie-ha-ha.”

Mrs. Holdfast replied with a sweet smile. “Yes, it is a strange coincidence; but young gentlemen now-a-days have numbers of acquaintances, hundreds I should say. And everybody travels now – people think nothing of going to America or Canada. It is just packing up their Gladstone bag, and off they go, as happy as you please. *I* couldn’t do it. *I hate* the sea; I hate everything that makes me uncomfortable. I love pleasure. Strange, isn’t it, for me, a country girl, to be so fond of life and gaiety, and dancing and theatres? But we can’t help our natures, can we? I would if I could, for you must think me a dreadful, dreadful creature for talking in this way just after my husband has been brutally killed! Don’t think ill of me – don’t! It is not my fault, and I am suffering dreadfully, dreadfully, though I *do* let my light heart run away with me!”

“How can I think ill of you?” said our Reporter; “you are child and woman in one.”

“Really!” she cried, looking up into his face with a beaming smile. “Are you really, really in earnest?”

“You may believe me,” replied our Reporter, “for my errand here is not a personal one, but in pursuance of my professional duties; and although you charm me out of myself, I must be faithful.”

“Ah,” said Mrs. Holdfast, “that is the way of you men. So stern, and strict, and proper, that you never forget yourself. It is because you are strong, and wise – but you miss a great deal – yes, indeed, indeed you do! It would spoil the sunshine if one stopped while one was enjoying the light and warmth, to ask why, and what, and wherefore. Don’t you think it would? Such a volatile, impressionable creature as Lydia Holdfast does not stop to do such a wise and foolish thing – we can be both wise and foolish in a breath, let me tell you. No; I enjoy, and am happy, without wanting to know why. There! I am showing myself to you, as if you were my oldest friend. *You* would not do the same by me. You are steadier, and wiser, and not half so happy – no, not half, not half so happy! O, I wish I had been born a man!”

Amused, and, as he had declared to her, charmed out of himself, our Reporter said, somewhat jocosely,

“Why, what would you have done if you had been born a man instead of a woman?”

“I am afraid,” she said, in a half-whisper, and with her finger on her lips, as though enjoining him not to betray her, “I am afraid I should have been a dreadful rake.”

Our Reporter resisted the beguilement of the current into which the conversation had drifted, although he would have been entitled to much excuse had he dallied a little in this vein with the charming and child-like woman.

“You forget your child,” he said; “had you been born a man – ”

Before he could complete the sentence, Mrs. Holdfast rushed out of the room, and in a few moments returned with the child in her arms. She sat in a rocking chair, and fondled the boy-baby, and kissed him, and sang to him. It was a picture of perfect and beautiful motherhood.

“Forget my child!” she murmured. “Forget my baby! You must either be mad or insincere to say such a thing. Ask the darling’s forgiveness immediately.”

“I do,” said our Reporter, kissing the baby, “and yours. You have proved yourself a true woman. But my time is getting short, and I have already trespassed too long upon yours. Let us continue the conversation about Mr. Holdfast.”

She instantly became serious, and with the baby in her arms, said, “Yes! Well!”

“The landlady of the house,” continued our Reporter, “in which he lodged has declared that he had but one visitor – a lady, closely veiled.”

“So I have read in the papers,” said Mrs. Holdfast. “Is nothing known about her – where she came from, where she went to, whether she was a lady or a common woman?”

“Nothing is known,” he replied.

“Are you sure?”

“Quite sure, as far as my information goes. One person says that she was tall, another that she was short; another that she was fair, another that she was dark – though they all agree that she never

raised her veil. There is absolutely not a dependable clue upon which a person can work; nothing reliable can be gathered from statements so conflicting. What I wish to know is, whether you yourself have any suspicion?"

She flushed with indignation. "You do not mean to ask me whether Mr. Holdfast was enamoured of a woman with whom he made secret assignations? You insult me. I thought better of you; I did not believe you capable of harbouring such a suspicion against the dead?"

"You mistake me," said our Reporter; "no such suspicion was in my mind. My thoughts were travelling in a different direction, and I was curious to ascertain whether what has occurred to my mind has occurred to yours."

"About this woman?" asked Mrs. Holdfast.

"Yes, about this woman."

"I did not wish to speak of it," said Mrs. Holdfast, after a pause, and speaking with evident reluctance; "it is the one thing in this dreadful affair I desired to keep to myself. I had a motive – yes; I did not want to do anyone an injustice. But, what can a weak woman like myself do when she is in the company of such a man as you? Nothing escapes you. It seems to me as if you had studied every little incident in connection with the murder of my poor husband for the purpose of bringing some one in guilty; but you are better acquainted than I am with the wickedness of people. You want to know what reason my husband had in taking a common lodging in Great Porter Square instead of coming home at once to me and his child. In my weak way I have thought it out. Shall I tell you how I have worked it out in my mind?"

"If you please."

"Above everything else in the world," said Mrs. Holdfast, looking tenderly at her baby lying in her lap, "even above his love for me, Mr. Holdfast valued the honour of his name. There is nothing he would not have sacrificed to preserve that unsullied. Well, then, after his son's death he discovered something – who can say what? – which touched his honour, and which needed skilful management to avoid public disgrace. I can think of nothing else than that the woman, who was connected in a disgraceful way with his son, had some sort of power over my poor husband, and that he wished to purchase her silence before he presented himself to me and our baby. He came home, and took the lodgings in Great Porter Square. There this woman visited him, and there he met his death. That is all I can think of. If I try to get any further, my mind gets into a whirl. Now you know all; I have concealed nothing from you. It is my firm belief that when you discover this woman everything else will be discovered. But you will never discover her – never, never! And my poor husband's death will never be avenged."

"I will ask you but one more question," said our Reporter. "In what way do you account for the circumstance of your husband not writing to you after his return to London?"

"Do you forget," asked Mrs. Holdfast, in return, "that he had injured his hand, and that he did not wish to disclose his private affairs to a stranger?"

Here the interview terminated; and here, with the exception of the statement of three facts, our narrative ends.

Mrs. Holdfast is mistaken in her belief that her husband did not write to her because he had injured his hand, and was unwilling to employ an amanuensis. Our Reporter, after he left Mrs. Holdfast, had an interview with the former landlady of 119 Great Porter Square, who has left the house, and would under no consideration return to it. The landlady states that, on three occasions, she entered Mr. Holdfast's room when he was in it, and that on every occasion he was writing, and apparently writing freely. It did not appear to her that his hand was injured in the slightest degree. There was no bandage or plaister upon it, and he did not complain. We are in a position also to declare that, at the *post-mortem* examination, no recent injury of the right hand was perceptible.

The whole of Mr. Holdfast's property has been left by him, in a properly attested will, to his widow. When he made this will his son Frederick was alive. Not a shilling, however, is left to the son.

Mrs. Holdfast has offered a reward of five hundred pounds for the discovery of the murderer of her husband.

We have no doubt our readers will appreciate our enterprise in presenting them with this circumstantial account of the latest phase of the Great Porter Square Mystery.

The question that now remains to be answered is – Where is Mr. Holdfast's son?

CHAPTER XXI

RICHARD MANX MAKES LOVE TO “SWEET BECKY.”

ON the morning following the publication of the Supplement to the *Evening Moon*, Becky had occasion to observe that her mistress, Mrs. Preedy, was earnestly engaged in the perusal of a newspaper. A great deal of house-work had to be done on this morning; there was a general “cleaning-up;” floors and stairs to be scrubbed, chairs and tables to be polished, and looking-glasses and windows to be cleaned; and as the greater portion of this work fell to Becky’s share, she was kept busily employed until the afternoon. She was, therefore, in ignorance of the publication of the statement in the *Evening Moon*, and her curiosity was but languidly aroused by Mrs. Preedy’s pre-occupation, until, by mere chance, she caught sight of the heading, “The Murder in Great Porter Square.” She turned hot and cold, and her pulses quickened.

“Is that something fresh about the murder next door?” she ventured to ask.

“Yes, Becky,” replied Mrs. Preedy, but did not offer any explanation of the contents.

It was not Becky’s cue to exhibit more than ordinary interest in the matter, and she merely remarked,

“I thought it might be something about the houses being haunted.”

She noted that the paper was the *Evening Moon*, and she determined to purchase a copy before she went to bed. She did not until the afternoon get an opportunity to leave the house, and even then, there was so much to do, she had to leave it secretly, and without Mrs. Preedy’s knowledge. There was another reason for her desire to go out. She expected a letter at the Charing Cross Post Office, and it was necessary she should be there before five o’clock to receive it. Mrs. Preedy generally took a half-hour’s nap in the afternoon, and Becky’s plan was to slip out the moment her mistress fell asleep, and leave the house to take care of itself. She felt the want of an ally at this juncture; the impression that she was fated to unravel the mystery of the murder, and thus clear the man she loved from suspicion, was becoming stronger; and to accomplish this it was necessary that she should keep her present situation. She needed help, and she could not take any person into her confidence.

During the day Becky noticed that a great many persons passed through the Square, and stopped before the house. “Now that the houses are haunted,” she thought, “we shall be regularly besieged. But if they look for a year they’ll not see a ghost.”

At four o’clock in the afternoon Mrs. Preedy arranged herself comfortably in an arm chair in her kitchen, and in a few moments was asleep. Now was Becky’s opportunity. She quietly slipped out of the house by way of the basement, tying her hat strings as she mounted the steps, and walked quickly in the direction of Charing Cross. She was so intent upon her mission that she scarcely noticed the unusual number of persons in the Square. At Charing Cross Post Office she received the letter she expected. She did not stop to read it; she simply opened it as she retraced her steps, and, glancing hurriedly through it, put it into her pocket. She heard the boys calling out “*Hevenin’ Moon!* More about the murder in Great Porter Square! Wonderful discovery! Romance in real life! A ‘Underd Thousand Pounds!’” and she stopped and purchased two copies. Although she was animated by the liveliest curiosity, she did not pause even to open the paper, she was so anxious to get back to the house before Mrs. Preedy awoke. Shortly before turning into the Square, she was overtaken, fast as she herself was walking, by their young man lodger, Richard Manx. He touched her arm, and smiling pleasantly at her, walked by her side.

“My pretty one,” he said, “your little feet walk fast.”

“I am in a hurry,” she replied, her nostrils dilating at his touch; but instantly remembering the part she was playing, she returned his pleasant smile.

“You have been – a – out while the amiable Mrs. Preedy sleeps.”

This observation warned her that Richard Manx knew more about the household movements than she expected. "I have no fool to deal with," she thought. "He shall have as much of my confidence as I choose to give him; he will find me his match."

"Yes," she said aloud, with a bright look; "but don't tell Mrs. Preedy; she might be angry with me."

"You speak," he said in a tone of lofty satisfaction, "to a gentleman."

"I wanted to buy a ribbon," said Becky, artlessly, "and it isn't easy to choose the exact colour one would like at night, so I thought I would steal out, just as I am, while Mrs. Preedy took her nap."

"Steal out – ah, yes, I understand – just as you are, charming!"

"And now, although I couldn't match my ribbon – it was a very light pink I wanted – I must get back quickly."

All the while they were talking he was sucking and chewing a sweetmeat; having disposed of it, he popped another into his mouth.

"Quickly," he repeated, bending down, so that his face was on a level with hers. "That is – a – soon. Will you?"

This question was accompanied by the offer of a little packet of acid drops, half of which he had already devoured. She took a couple with the remark that she liked chocolate creams best.

"You shall have some," he said, "to-morrow. I shall walk with you; I myself am on my way to my small apartment. It is the – a – fashion for a gentleman to offer a lady one of his arms. Honour me."

He held out his arm, which she declined.

"I am not a lady," she said demurely; "I am only a poor servant girl."

"And I," he responded insinuatingly, "am a poor gentleman. Ah! If I were – a – rich, I should say to you, accept this ring." He made a motion as if offering her a ring. "Accept this – a – bracelet," with corresponding action. "Or this dress. But I have not – a – money." He took another acid drop. "It is a misfortune. But what can a poor devil do? You do not – a – despise me because I am thus?"

"Oh, no. I hope you will be rich one day."

"It will happen," he said, in a quick, eager tone. "From my country" – he waved his hands vaguely – "shall come what I wait for here. Then shall I say to you, 'Becky' – pardon; I have heard the amiable Mrs. Preedy thus call you – 'Becky,' shall I say, 'be no longer a servant. Be a lady.' How then, will you speak?"

"I must not listen to you," replied Becky, coquettishly; "you foreign gentlemen have such smooth tongues that they are enough to turn a poor girl's head." They were now in Great Porter Square. "What a number of people there are in the square," she said.

"It is – a – remarkable, this murder. The man is – a – found."

"What man?" cried Becky, excitedly. "The murderer!"

"Ah, no. That is not yet. It is the dead man who is – what do you call it? – discovered. That is it. He *was* not known – he *is* known. His name has come to the light. Yesterday he was a beggar – to-day he is rich. What, then? He is dead. His millions – in my country's money, sweet Becky, veritably millions – shall not bring life into his bones. His money is – a – here. *He is*" – Richard Manx looked up at the sky – "Ah, he is there! or" – he cast his eyes to the pavement – "there! We shall not know till there comes a time. It is sad."

"He was a rich gentleman, you say. What could have induced a rich man to live in such a neighbourhood?"

"In such a neighbourhood!" Richard Manx smiled, and shrugged his shoulders. "Ah! he came here not to die, surely – no, to live. It would have been well – for him – that he came not; but so it was. What should induce him here? you ask of me. Becky, I shall ask of the air." He put himself into the attitude of listening. "Ha! ha! I hear perhaps the reason. There was a lady. Enough. We shall not betray more. I propose to you a thought. I live in the amiable house of Mrs. Preedy. It is high, my apartment. Wherefore? I am a poor gentleman – as yet. I am one morning discovered – dead. Startle

not yourself. It will not be – no, it will not be; but I propose to you my thought. You would not be glad – you would not laugh, if so it should be?”

“It would be a shocking thing,” said Becky, gravely.

“It is well. I thank you – your face is sad, your eyes are not so bright. Then when I am thus, as I have said – dead! – from my country comes what I wait for here – money, also in millions. ‘Ah,’ says the amiable Mrs. Preedy, ‘what could induce’ – your word is good – ‘what could induce one who was rich to live in such a neighbourhood?’ Observe me, Becky. I place my hand, on my heart and say, ‘There is a lady.’ Ah, yes, though you call yourself not so, I say, ‘There is a lady.’ I say no more. We are at home. You are beautiful, and I – till for ever – am your devoted. If it were not for so many people – I am discreet, Becky – I should kiss your hand.”

And, indeed, the remark that he was discreet was proved by the change in his manner, now that he and Becky were in closer contact with strangers; the tenderness left his face, and observers at a distance would never have guessed that he was making something very much like a declaration of love to the girl. He opened the street door with his latch-key, and went up to his garret, sucking his acid drops. Becky opened the little gate and went down to her kitchen, where her mind was set at ease by seeing Mrs. Preedy still asleep in her arm chair.

Becky looked at her hand. It was a pretty hand and small, but the work she had done lately rather detracted from its prettiness. There was dirt on it, too, from the scrubbing and cleaning of the day. “He would kiss my hand,” she murmured. “I am afraid our innocent young man lodger is a bit of a flirt. Be careful, young man. You are not in this house without a motive; you are in danger if that motive touches the welfare of the man I love!”

This soliloquy, in which she indulged in the kitchen, might have been of greater length had not Mrs. Preedy stirred in her sleep. The slight movement was sufficient to wake her.

“I do believe, Becky,” she said, opening her eyes, “that I have overslept myself.”

CHAPTER XXII

IN WHICH BECKY GIVES WAY TO HER FEELINGS, AND RENEWS AN OLD ACQUAINTANCE

GREAT PORTER SQUARE had really been in a state of excitement the whole of the day, almost equalling that which raged on the day of the discovery of the murder. The strange revelation made in the columns of the *Evening Moon*— whose account of the identification of the body of the murdered man was presented in a form so attractive that edition after edition was sold with amazing rapidity — invested the murder with features romantic enough to engross general attention. There was love in it, there was a beautiful and fascinating woman in it, there was a baby in it, there were a hundred thousand pounds in it. The newsboys drove a rare trade; it brought so much grist to their mill that, as they jingled the copper and silver in their pockets, they sighed for another murder as good to-morrow.

The public-houses, also, thrived wonderfully; their bars were crowded, and the publicans rubbed their hands in glee. People from all parts of London came to Great Porter Square to look at the deserted house. They stared at the bricks, they stared at the street door, they stared at the window. With a feeling of enjoyable awe, they peeped over and through the iron railings which surrounded the basement. The downlook was not inviting. The ironwork was covered with rust; the paint was peeling off the doors and shutters; watchful spiders, ever ready for fresh murder, lurked in the corners of their webs. There was nothing to be frightened at in these natural signs of neglect and decay; but when a man cried out, “There! there!” and pointed downwards, the people rushed from the pavement into the road. They soon returned, and craned their heads and necks to gaze upon the melancholy walls. Occasionally a man or a woman ascended the three stone steps which led to the street door, and touched the woodwork with open hand, as if the contact brought them closer to the tragedy which had been enacted within.

As night approached, the number of persons who made a point of passing through the Square decreased; but up till ten o’clock there were always about a dozen sightmongers lingering in the roadway before No. 119, and, among these dozen, generally one who appeared to be acquainted with the construction and disposition of the rooms, and who described the particulars of the murder with gloating satisfaction. The police did not interfere with them, the entertainment being one which a free people was privileged to enjoy.

During the whole of the evening Becky had not found time to read her letter or the newspaper. “They’ll burn a hole in my pocket, I am sure,” she thought, “if I keep them there much longer.” But when the clock struck ten a period was put to her state of suspense.

“I’ve been in the ’ouse all day, Becky,” said Mrs. Preedy; “and what with the state of my feelings and the excitement in the Square, I’m quite worn out. I shall run round to Mrs. Beale’s for arf-an-hour; take care of the place while I’m gone.”

Becky nodded, and the moment she heard the street-door close, she sat down at the table, and pulled from her pocket the letter and the copies of the *Evening Moon*. She read the letter first, kissing it as she drew it from the envelope. It ran as follows: —

“My Darling Girl, — Your letter has surprised and startled me, and I do not know whether to be alarmed or pleased at the strange news it contains. That you have placed yourself in a perilous position for my sake would make it all the harder for me to bear should anything happen to you. You would do anything, I know, rather than cause me sorrow or add to my anxieties, and I am satisfied that the strange fancy you have carried into execution sprang from a heart full of love. I have reason to know how firm you can be in any task you undertake, and I am not hopeful that I shall succeed in turning you from your purpose. If, until I return to London, you still continue in service, I implore

you to be careful, to run no risk, and never to forget that the whole happiness of my life is in your hands. For if the mission upon which I am at present engaged should fail (although filial love and duty will not allow me to relinquish it until I see no possibility of bringing it to a successful issue), the opportunity of our living happily together in another part of the world will always be open to us. But first to perform a son's duty, then to offer you a husband's love and care. All that a man *can* do shall be done to hasten the day on which I shall be privileged to call you wife.

"You have placed such trust and confidence in me, you have so firmly relied upon my truth and honour, that I often reproach myself for having kept from you some of the most important incidents in my life. But I was pledged to secrecy. I had given my solemn word never to speak of certain matters without the sanction of my father. Thus much you know, and you know, also, that I am now in search of that father for whose mysterious disappearance I am unable to account. When I find him he will release me from a vow I made to him under the most painful and distressing circumstances; then I can offer you the name which is my own, and which I renounced; then I can unfold to you the sad and painful story of my life; then I can hold up my head with honour once more, and take my place among men – the place I lost.

"You say that you have something to communicate to me which bears upon the murder in Great Porter Square. It is, of course, of the greatest importance to me that I should be cleared of the suspicion which must still attach to me; the police have sharp eyes, and although I gave a false name – as true however, as the charge brought against me – it is quite possible that some person who was in the Police Court might recognise me, and cause me fresh trouble. Therefore I shall scarcely ever feel myself safe in the London streets until the murderer is discovered and punished. But above even this in importance I place the strange disappearance of my father. To find him is my first and paramount desire.

"The picture you have drawn of Mrs. Bailey, the bedridden old lodger, and her deaf and nearly blind old sister, with the languid linnet, and the moping bullfinch, is most amusing. I shall not be at all surprised if, in your next letter, you inform me that the old lady's mattress is stuffed with bank notes.

"How highly I value your true womanly attempts to cheer and comfort me! To read your letters is almost to hear you speak, you write so feelingly and earnestly. My fullest love is yours, and yours only. What a loving grateful heart, what willing hands can do, to make you happy when the clouds have cleared, shall be done by me. Rely upon me; have faith in me; and believe me to be,

*"Your faithful lover,
"FRED."*

Becky read the letter slowly, with smiles and tears; then kissed it repeatedly, and placed it in the bosom of her dress.

Before turning her attention to the newspaper she had bought in the afternoon, she ran upstairs to Mrs. Bailey. The old woman was awake, staring at her birds. She asked Becky to rub her side with the liniment, and the girl – to whose heart Fred's affectionate letter had imparted fresh happiness – did so in a blithe and cheerful manner.

"You're better than a doctor, Becky," said the old woman, "a thousand times better. I was as young and merry as you once – I was indeed. Pretty – too – eh, Becky?"

"That's to be seen," said Becky, rubbing away. "You have the remains now."

"Have I, Becky, have I – eh?"

"Indeed you have – you're a good-looking old lady."

A gleam of vanity and delight lit up the old creature's eyes for a moment.

"Am I, Becky – eh? You're a good girl – listen; I shall leave you something in my will. I'm going to make one – by and bye, but I don't want any lawyers. You shall do it for me. I can trust you, eh, Becky?"

“Indeed you can,” replied Becky, tucking the old woman in; “you feel more comfortable now, don’t you?”

“Yes, your soft hands rub the pain away. But it comes again, Becky, it comes again.”

“So will I, to rub it away again. I must go down now, I have so much to do.” She patted the old woman’s shoulder, and reached the door, when she stopped and asked, in a careless tone,

“Have you heard any more mice to-night scratching at the wall in the next house, Mrs. Bailey.”

“Not a sound, Becky. It’s been as quiet as a churchyard.”

As she left the room, Becky heard the old woman mumbling to herself, with the vanity of a child,

“I was pretty once, and I’ve got the remains now. I’m a good-looking old lady – a good-looking old lady – a good-looking old lady! Becky’s a clever girl – I won’t forget her.”

As Becky descended to the kitchen, she heard a newsboy calling out a new edition of the *Evening Moon*. Becky went to the street door and asked the boy if there was anything fresh in the paper about the murder.

“A lot,” replied the boy; “I’ve only two copies left, and I thought I could sell ’em in the Square.”

Becky bought the two copies, and the boy, whose only motive for coming into the Square was to look at No. 119, refreshed himself by running up and down the steps, and then, retreating to the garden railings, almost stared his eyes out in the endeavour to see the ghost that haunted the deserted house.

Once more in the kitchen, Becky sat down, and with a methodical air, opened last evening’s paper, and read the “Romance in Real Life” which had caused so much excitement. The writer of the narrative would have been gratified had he witnessed the interest Becky took in his clever manipulation of his facts. The most thrilling romance could not have fascinated her as much as this story of to-day, formed as it was out of what may be designated ordinary newspaper material. Not once did she pause, but proceeded steadily on, column after column, every detail being indelibly fixed upon her mind. Only when she came to the concluding words did she raise her head, and become once more conscious of her surroundings.

She drew a long breath, and looked before her into the air, as though endeavouring to obtain from invisible space some connecting links between the new ideas formed by this romance in real life. The dominant thought in her mind as she read the narrative was whether she would be able to obtain from it any clue to connect Richard Manx with the murder. Her desire lay in this direction, without reference to its justice or injustice, and she would have felt better satisfied had such a clue been supplied. But she was compelled to confess that, as far as her knowledge of him went in their brief personal intercourse, he was not in the remotest way connected with the crime. Say that this *was* so – say that he was as little implicated in it as she herself, what, then, was his motive in making his way secretly into the room in which the murder had been committed? Of the fact that he had done so, without having been an eye-witness of it, Becky was morally convinced. What was his motive for this proceeding?

But Richard Manx did not entirely monopolise her thoughts. With the threads of the story, as presented in the Supplement of the *Evening Moon*, she wove possibilities which occasioned her great distress, for in these possibilities she saw terrible trouble in the future. If there was a grain of truth in them, she could not see how this trouble was to be avoided.

Of the name of the murdered man, Mr. Holdfast, she was utterly ignorant. She had never heard of him, nor of Lydia Holdfast, his second wife, who, living now, and mourning for the dead, had supplied the facts of the case to the Special Reporter of the *Evening Moon*.

“Had I been in her place,” thought Becky, “I should, for very shame’s sake, if not out of consideration for the dead, have been less free with my tongue. I would have run every risk rather than have allowed myself to be the talking-stock of the whole country. Lydia Holdfast must be a poor, weak creature. Can I do nothing, nothing?”

Becky's lips quivered, and had she not been sustained by a high purpose, she might have sought relief in tears.

"Let me set down my thoughts in plain words," she said aloud. "I shall then be able to judge more clearly."

She produced pen, ink, and paper, and wrote the names:

"Mr. Holdfast.

"Lydia Holdfast.

"Frederick Holdfast."

She gazed at the names and said,

"My lover's name is Frederick."

It was as though the paper upon which she was writing represented a human being, and spoke the words she wrote.

She underlined the name "*Frederick*," saying, as she did so, "For reasons which I shall one day learn, he has concealed his surname."

The next words she wrote were: "Frederick Holdfast was educated in Oxford."

To which she replied, "My Frederick was educated in Oxford."

Then she wrote: "Between Frederick Holdfast and his father there was a difference so serious that they quarrelled, and Frederick Holdfast left his father's house."

"My Frederick told me," said Becky aloud, "that he and his father were separated because of a family difference. He could tell me no more, he said, because of a vow he had made to his father. He has repeated this in the letter I received from him this evening."

Becky took the letter from her dress, kissed it, and replaced it in her bosom. "I do not need this," she said, "to assure me of his worth and truth."

She proceeded with her task and wrote: "Frederick Holdfast went to America. His father also went to America."

And answered it with, "My Frederick went to America, and his father followed him."

Upon the paper then she wrote: "Mr. Holdfast and his son Frederick both returned to England."

"As my Frederick and his father did," she said.

And now Becky's fingers trembled. She was approaching the tragedy. She traced the words, however, "From the day of his return to England until yesterday nothing was heard of Mr. Holdfast; and there is no accounting for his disappearance."

"Frederick's father also has disappeared," she said, "and there is no accounting for *his* disappearance."

These coincidences were so remarkable that they increased in strength tenfold as Becky gazed upon the words she had written. And now she calmly said,

"If they are true, my Frederick is Frederick Holdfast. If they are true, Frederick Holdfast is a villain." Her face flushed, her bosom rose and fell. "A lie!" she cried. "My lover is the soul of honour and manliness! He is either not Frederick Holdfast, or the story told in the newspaper is a wicked, shameful fabrication. What kind of woman, then, is this Lydia Holdfast, who sheds tears one moment and laughs the next? – who one moment wrings her hands at the murder of her husband, and the next declares that if she had been born a man she might have been a dreadful rake? But Frederick Holdfast is dead; the American newspapers published the circumstances of his death and the identification of his body. Thousands of persons read that account, and believed in its truth, as thousands of persons read and are reading this romance of real life, and believe in its truth." Contempt and defiance were expressed in Becky's voice as she touched the copy of the newspaper which had so profoundly agitated her. "Yet both may be false, and if they are false – " She paused for a few moments, and then continued: "Lydia Holdfast is Frederick Holdfast's enemy. She believes him to be dead; there is no doubt of that. But if he is alive, and in England, he is in peril – in deadlier peril than my Frederick was, when, as Antony Cowrick, he was charged with the murder of an unknown

man, and that man – as now is proved – his own father. What did I call Lydia Holdfast just now? a poor weak creature! Not she! An artful, designing, cruel woman, whose safety, perhaps, lies in my Frederick's death. If, without the suspicions which torture me, so near to the truth do they seem, it was necessary to discover the murderer of the poor gentleman who met his death in the next house, how much more imperative is it now that the mystery should be unravelled! Assist me, Eternal God, to bring the truth to light, and to punish the guilty!"

She fell upon her knees, and with tears streaming down her face, prayed for help from above to clear the man she loved from the shameful charges brought against him by his father's wife. Her prayers comforted her, and she rose in a calmer state of mind. "I must look upon this creature," she thought, "upon this woman in name, who has invented the disgraceful story. To match her cunning a woman's cunning is needed. Lydia Holdfast, I declare myself your enemy!"

A noise in the street attracted Becky's attention, and diverted her thoughts. She hurried from her kitchen, and opened the street door. Twenty or thirty persons were crowding round one, who was lying insensible upon the pavement. They cried, "Give her air!" and pressed more closely upon the helpless form.

"A glass of water!" "Poor child!" "Go and fetch a little brandy!" "Fetch a policeman!" "She's shamming!" "Starving, more likely!" "Starving? she's got three boxes of matches in her hands!" "Well, you brute, she can't eat matches!"

These and other cries greeted Becky as she opened the door, and looked out into the Square.

"What's the matter?" she asked, striving to push her way into the crowd, which did not willingly yield to her.

It was a poor child, her clothes in rags, who had fainted on the flagstones before the house.

"She's coming to!" exclaimed a woman.

The child opened her eyes.

"What are you doing here?" asked a man, roughly.

"I came to see the ghost!" replied the child, in a weak, pleading little voice.

The people laughed; they did not see the pathetic side of the picture.

But the child's voice, faint as it was, reached Becky's heart. It was a voice familiar to her. She pushed through the crowd vigorously, and bent over the child.

"Blanche!" screamed the child, bursting into hysterical sobs. "O, Blanche! Blanche!"

It was Fanny, the little match girl.

"Hush, Fanny!" whispered Becky. "Hush my dear!"

She raised the poor child in her arms, and a shudder of pain and compassion escaped her as she felt how light the little body was. Fanny's face was covered with tears, and through her tears she laughed, and clung to Becky.

"I know her," said Becky to the people, "I will take care of her."

And kissing the thin, dirty face of the laughing, sobbing, clinging child, Becky carried her into the house, and closed the street-door upon the crowd.

"Well, I'm blowed!" exclaimed the man who had distinguished himself by his rough words. "If this 'ere ain't the rummiest Square in London!"

CHAPTER XXIII

“JUSTICE” SENDS A LETTER TO THE EDITOR OF THE “EVENING MOON.”

CLOSER and closer did the little match girl cling to Becky, as she was carried through the dark passage and down the narrow stairs to the kitchen. Then, and then only, did Becky clearly perceive how thin and wan her humble little friend had grown. Fanny's dark eyes loomed out of their sunken sockets like dusky moons, her cheeks had fallen in, her lips were colourless; her clothes consisted of but two garments, a frock and a petticoat, in rags. Becky's eyes overflowed as she contemplated the piteous picture, and Fanny's eyes also became filled with tears – not in pity for herself, but in sympathy with Becky.

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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